

Slavery And War In The Americas: Race, Citizenship, And State Building In The United States And Brazil, 1861-1870

Enrico Dal Lago

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Review

Dal Lago, Enrico

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Izecksohn, Vitor *Slavery and War in the Americas: Race, Citizenship, and State Building in the United States and Brazil, 1861-1870*. University of Virginia Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780813935850

A Novel Comparative Perspective on the American Civil War

Placing the American Civil War in its international dimension has now become common in courses, papers, and conferences, thanks to an increasingly larger body of scholarship -- epitomized by Don Doyle, *The Cause of All Nations* (2015) -- which has emphasized transnational links and connections between the nineteenth-century U.S.A. and other regions of the world, starting from Europe. Yet, despite the opening of possibilities for the implementation of wider approaches that this important scholarship clearly represents, studies that look at the American Civil War not only transnationally, but also, or especially, through a comparative lens, are still very few, as Peter Kolchin had noted in his seminal *A Sphinx on the American Land* (2003). Indeed, aside from articles and chapters by David Potter, Thomas Bender, Carl Degler, and a few other scholars, there is only a handful of examples of comparative histories of the United States in the Civil War Era with other countries in either contemporaneous or different periods. Among the older and more recent studies, particularly worthy of mention are Stig Forster's and Joerg Nagler's edited *On the Road to Total War* (1997) on the American Civil War and the Wars for German National Unification, and Paul Escott's *Uncommonly Savage* (2014) on the memory and legacy of the American Civil War and of the Spanish Civil War.

Now, with *Slavery and War in the Americas*, Vitor Izecksohn has written the first comparative monograph of the United States in the Civil War (1861-65) with another country roughly at the same time, specifically Brazil at the time of the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-70). Izecksohn starts his book by contextualizing his specific study as a comparison of challenges to "national unity" and "internal political cohesion" faced by the "Western Hemisphere's two

largest countries" (p. 1), which, in 1860, were also the two largest slaveholding nations: Brazil and the United States. For the sake of consistency, however, we might note that this particular comparison would be reinforced if we considered the American Civil War not as an internecine struggle, but rather as a war between the two nation-states of the Union and the Confederacy, similarly to the War of the Triple Alliance, which was a war between the empire of Brazil and its allies against the republic of Paraguay. Izecksohn never makes this point explicitly, but it is implicit in his treatment, which focuses exclusively on the Union and its policies in comparison with the Brazilian Empire. In the Introduction to the book, in providing the necessary background to those policies in comparative perspective, Izecksohn highlights especially the difference in the approaches to military service -- with its connection to the rights and duties of citizenship in the United States in contrast to its negative and oppressive connotations in Brazil -- and the equally important differences in relation to race and recruitment -- with the high number of free blacks in the Brazilian army in stark contrast with the highly segregated Union army. Despite these clear differences, though, Izecksohn points out, perceptively, that, in both the United States and Brazil, strong traditions of local power were similarly responsible for suspicious attitudes towards any attempt at increasing centralization carried out by the national governments.

Izecksohn, then, provides the core of his analysis in four consecutive chapters, in which the treatment of two specific issues alternate between a chapter on Brazil and a chapter on the United States in an exercise in juxtaposition, more than sustained comparison. The first half of the book includes two chapters that focus on the relationship between the nation-state and the civilian population in the United States and Brazil at the time of the major crisis brought by the American Civil War and the War of the Triple Alliance, specifically through the lens of conscription, which in both cases followed a brief initial phase of enthusiastic voluntary enlistment for the national army. As a result, on one hand, a similar experience of military mobilization forced two decentralized state systems, as both the United States and Brazil were at the start of the two wars, to increase the pace of their centralization. On the other hand, these two parallel processes affected the lives of millions of people in comparable ways, as, both in the Union and in Brazil, resistance to conscription became widespread very rapidly and took several different forms, but, ultimately, "waging war placed enormous burdens on the poor and unprotected in both countries" (p. 59).

Yet, if this is the subject of the comparison drawn in the first half of the book, the subject of the comparison drawn in the second half of the book is even more compelling as a justification for this comparative study. In fact, the following two chapters focus on the crucial issue of how the war necessities led in both cases to a mass recruitment of people of African descent in the nation-state's armed forces, i.e., of both free and enslaved blacks in the Union army and in the Brazilian army. In the Union, the recruitment of African Americans was part of a legislation designed to end slavery, and many of the almost 185,000 black soldiers in the Union army were runaway slaves and freedmen recruited after the 1863 *Emancipation Proclamation*. Conversely, in Brazil, where already a relatively large number of free blacks were enlisted in the imperial army, slaves were recruited only in times of crisis as during the War of the Triple Alliance; yet, even though the government was willing to free its slaves to recruit them in the imperial troops, most slaveholders were unwilling to do the same, and the number of recruits remained relatively small, only 4,000.

Most of all, the effects of these parallel and comparable policies were very different in the two case-studies, especially in terms of the institution of slavery and ongoing perceptions of race and citizenship. Here, to a certain extent at least, Izecksohn follows in the footsteps of illustrious scholars such as Carl Degler, who, in *Neither Black Nor White* (1971), was the first to compare systematically the historical record on race in the United States and Brazil. However, the fact that Izecksohn focuses exclusively on the Civil War Era United States, rather than providing a long-term perspective, necessarily leads him to opposite conclusions from Degler, according to whom Brazil's looser racial barriers provided more opportunities for social inclusion to blacks there than in the United States. Instead, with regard to the period at the heart of his study, Izecksohn shows how the effects of the American Civil War were immensely beneficial to African Americans in the United States, aside from the momentous change represented by the end of slavery, since recruitment in the Union army provided the first step toward recognition of citizenship rights, in contrast to the continuing presence of slavery and the unchanged status of blacks in Brazil after the War of the Triple Alliance. In the long concluding chapter, which is the most significant part of Izecksohn's book, the author carefully analyses the similarities and differences between his two case-studies in a complex investigation, which is a brilliant example of sustained comparison. Lastly, in reflecting on the wider significance of his comparison, he puts forward an important claim when he states that, if "we take social and political transformations into account and

compare the extent and nature of these transformations, the American Civil War must now be considered a Total War", while in the case of Brazil with the War of the Triple Alliance, "changes were more gradual and not as substantial" (p.171). It is a fitting summary of Izecksohn's innovative comparative study; with his book, he has broken new ground in more than one way, none the least also by utilizing several archival repositories, especially in Brazil, in order to engage fruitfully with this complex and worthwhile comparison.

Enrico Dal Lago is Lecturer in American History at the National University of Ireland, Galway, and author, most recently, of The Age of Lincoln and Cavour: Comparative Perspectives in Nineteenth-Century American and Italian Nation-Building (Palgrave, 2015).