

The United States And The Transatlantic Slave Trade To The Americas, 1776-1867

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Review

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Marques, Leonardo *The United States and the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the Americas, 1776-1867*. Yale University Press, \$40.00 ISBN 9780300212419

An Odious Commerce: U.S. Slave Traders and the Persistence of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

This book focuses mostly on the trade in enslaved Africans to Brazil and Cuba and the role of the U.S.—including traders in this odious commerce.

“By the 1850s,” the author writes on page 5, “the traffic to Cuba had U.S. elements all over it: most ships were not only built in the United States but flew the U.S. flag, voyages were frequently outfitted at New York and American citizens actively participated in them as captains, crews and agents.” He acknowledges later on page 61 that U.S. diplomats in the Americas also had intimate ties to slave traders. (Perhaps a future scholar can examine more closely the political economy of this flesh peddling: e.g. what towns, insurance companies, banks, individuals in the U.S. were buoyed as a direct result of the misery inflicted upon Africans—and what form of reparation is due as a direct result? For example, it is well-known that Baltimore was the site for construction of numerous ships deployed to transport manacled Africans.)

The author says that about five million enslaved Africans were disembarked in the Americas between 1776 and 1867 with about a 100,000 of this number arriving in the U.S.; this occurred, he says, mostly before 1808, when this malodorous business from Africa was abolished—officially. Of course, smuggling of enslaved Africans from independent Texas to the U.S., from Cuba to Key West and from other sites, has to be taken into account when seeking to estimate how many bonded laborers entered the U.S. after 1808.

The author observes on page 248 that prior to the execution of a U.S. slave trader in 1862 under pressure of civil war, in the previous two decades “at least eight individuals had been granted presidential pardons for their involvement in

the slave trade.”

The U.S., he says, was also the major consumer of the produced by these enslaved laborers, who arrived mostly in Brazil.

During a good deal of this period, London was the cop on the beat and the U.S. was the scofflaw, which is not exactly the situation one would expect from the former, which presided over a sprawling empire and the latter, which purportedly had executed a trailblazing “revolution.” The author seems to adopt the viewpoint of the U.S. at that moment when he writes on page 158 of the “failure of emancipation” in the British Caribbean though the reader is frustrated by a lack of explication of this controversial assertion.

Of course, even the Monroe Doctrine was invoked—in addition to misleading rhetoric—to obstruct London’s efforts to block U.S. slave trading, with foreign nationals involved in this commerce considering U.S. nationality in order to gain protection from the “interference” of Great Britain.

On page 183 the author further seems to accept antebellum U.S. arguments when he apparently sympathizes with the purported dilemma of “how to enforce anti-slave trade legislation in a free market environment.” After all, enslaving Africans was not against the law and it did propel capitalism.

Subsequently, despite the eager efforts of those at the time who pointed the finger of accusation at U.S. slave traders as the foremost miscreants during this era—and despite what was cited above—the author writes on page 188 that “Spanish, Cuban and Portuguese” nationals were the primary culprits in this grimy business. Of course, the author acknowledges subsequently that some of these alleged foreign nationals were actually residing in New York City and, most likely, had U.S. citizenship.

The book is well-researched and contributes to the literature on the slave trade and the U.S. role in it. Primary sources are in Portuguese, Spanish and English, though I would direct future scholars to the Huntington Library in San Marino, California and the Portuguese Foreign Ministry in Lisbon for subsequent studies.

Gerald Horne is the John and Rebecca Moores Professor of History at the University of History. He is the author of numerous articles and books including

Race to Revolution: The U.S. and Cuba During Slavery and Jim Crow (2014)
and The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the
United States of America (2014).