Brett Rushforth


This superbly researched work sets a new standard for scholarship on Indian slavery in the French colonial world. The main focus is on one corner of the French empire, Canada—more precisely on the Pays d’en haut (Great Lakes and Upper Mississippi). By drawing on many sources (state correspondence, notarial, judicial, and church documentation, French-Indian dictionaries), Brett Rushforth highlights Indian slavery in new ways, addressing an aspect of French colonialism that has usually been neglected by historians of New France. In reconstructing indigenous and colonial forms of slavery, he combines ethnohistory (new Indian history) with both Atlantic history and Imperial history. Legal pluralism, he argues, was a characteristic of French Atlantic colonialism, and Indian slavery in the Pays d’en haut was the product of two traditions—one indigenous, one Atlantic.

The first chapter offers an excellent discussion of Central Algonquians and Siouan peoples’ practices of enslavement. It is judiciously based on the use of Jesuit dictionaries which compiled and translated thousands of pages of Algonquian phrases. In Indian societies, slavery was conceptualized through metaphors of domestication and mastery, as enemy captives were reduced to the status of dogs and other domesticated animals. The Algonquian term *awakan,* for example, means “captive,” “dog,” or “animals kept as pets” (p. 35). (Some anthropologists have argued that the analogy between taming and adoption was widespread in the Americas.) Rushforth shows that unlike the slave system that was expanding in the Atlantic world, slave labor in the Pays d’en haut was “not central to the economic and social organization” (p. 65). Indigenous slaves tended to be assimilated and did not pass their status on to the next generation. I would add that the French term *esclave* sometimes referred to captives in a very neutral sense: French colonists would even write of *esclaves* that were *adoptés.*

In a brilliant exercise of transatlantic history (Chapter 2), Rushforth then studies the Atlantic background of New France slavery, especially the tension between the legal principle of French free soil and the demand for enslaved laborers in the colonies. He analyzes the discussions in seventeenth-century France about the morality and legality of slavery, and stresses the fact that the French made a subtle distinction between enslavement and slavery. In French thinking, the enslavement of Africans was justified by the Law of Just War, as the French traded with “black Kings” who sold their war captives in accordance with the Law of Nations. Rushforth argues that “Nigritie” (the vague
and vast interior of Africa) functioned in the French geographic imagination as a resource-base for slaves. He then moves on to study Indian slavery in the Caribbean, where the French acted more as protectors than predators of the Indians, in contrast to the Spanish mode of colonization.

Chapter 3 brings us back to Canada, analyzing the Raudot ordinance of 1709, which confirmed the legality of Pani (a synonym for Indian slave) as well as African slavery. At the end of the seventeenth century, French colonists in Saint Lawrence imagined fitting slavery into a Caribbean-African mold: Indian slaves were “Like Negroes in the Islands” in that they were legally enslaved (according to the Law of Nations) and were supposed to supplement the labor force. (Indian slaves of Montreal, Québec and the western posts worked mostly as domestic and farm laborers, or in the fur trade.) Chapter 4 argues that New France’s slavery was a product of both war and alliance, as captured enemies could be offered as gifts. After 1712 (at the beginning of the Fox Wars), one of the characteristics of the French empire and continental expansion was the centrality of slavery. Thus, Rushforth offers a new reading of the Fox Wars, by concentrating on the enslavement issue. Thanks to the use of notarial, parish, and judicial records, he reconstructs the importance of Fox slaves in Saint-Lawrence society.

Chapter 5, which concentrates on the status of slave women in New France’s western posts, addresses the question of sexual violence by fur traders, as well as the possibility for slave women to be fully accepted into French colonial society. The final chapter studies the specificity of Indian slavery in Canada during the eighteenth century, particularly in Montreal. According to Rushforth, it was a “thing of its own,” and not “an incomplete or failed version of French slavery in the Caribbean” (p. 300). By focusing on the itineraries of particular individuals, he shows how much slaves’ legal standing remained uncertain in the context of the geopolitical importance of French-Indian alliances. The difficulty of clearly distinguishing between allies and enemies (or potential slaves) was in tension with the process of racializing the Indians. Thus, the book shows that alliance building in New France created a singular, non-racialized, slave system.

Minor problems. In Chapter 1, the overall argument—the link between war and enslavement—is undermined by Rushforth’s insistence that “the raids [were] designed to weaken a threatening enemy” (p. 37). Also, he seems to establish an uncertain link between war and territoriality (pp. 17, 24) though he later admits that “territorial conquest was extremely rare” (p. 39). And the proposed dichotomy between one period of “relative balance [between trade and war] for at least two centuries prior to French arrival” and another (the eighteenth century) characterized by “chaos” is questionable. The level of violence before European colonization might not have been as low as Rushforth
suggests (pp. 244, 247). Besides, reference to “métis communities” (p. 285) in the Great Lakes during the eighteenth century should have been substantiated. Finally, Rushforth’s discussion of Indian and particularly Illinois populations (p. 246, see especially note 89) makes no reference to Joseph Zitomersky’s 1994 book, *French Americans-Native Americans in Eighteenth-Century French Colonial Louisiana. The Population Geography of the Illinois Indians, 1670–1760*. But none of these remarks alter the overall excellence of this very stimulating book.

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