Josep M. Fradera & Christopher Schmidt-Nowara (eds.)

*Slavery and Antislavery in Spain’s Atlantic Empire.* New York: Berghahn, 2013. 328 pp. (Cloth US$120.00)

This collection of essays explores the history of antislavery in the Spanish Atlantic Empire. Josep M. Fradera and Christopher Schmidt-Nowara argue that a closer look at the particular history of slavery and antislavery in Spain and its Atlantic territories is critical, as it invites historians to rethink the boundaries of abolitionist histories, and redefines the actors and goals generally included in the narratives of nineteenth-century antislavery. The book also shows that Spain and its Empire were central to antislavery developments as much as to the culture and politics of the “second slavery” in the nineteenth century. The editorial effort is commendable for publishing translations of Catalan authors whose work is less known to English-speaking audiences.

As Emily Berquist has noted (2010:183), the historiography on Spanish antislavery and abolitionism has been dominated by Anglocentric paradigms and has largely focused on Cuba, limiting the scope to the nineteenth century. The book under review challenges these trends by expanding the study of Spanish slavery and antislavery into the sixteenth century. Three chapters stand out in this respect. Josep Delgado Ribas’s essay looks at the particular history of the African slave trade within the Spanish imperial system between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries and departs from the Slave Trade Database conclusions, which he argues have been insufficient for understanding Spain’s peculiar link to the Atlantic slave trade—first avoiding direct involvement in Africa and then entering very late into the trade, and largely in illegal terms. Luiz Felipe de Alencastro’s essay about Jesuit pro- and anti-slavery activism in the early modern period is an excellent example of how we can, and why we should, de-center the study of antislavery from the nineteenth century. As his study suggests, these critiques of slavery are part of an early history of antislavery among a variety of actors in the Iberian Atlantic, exemplified by the confrontations within the Jesuit order. Juan Carlos Garavaglia’s essay on the River Plate offers evidence of the centrality of slavery in the region from 1750 to 1860 and highlights the relevance of going beyond the Caribbean in the study of the decline and abolition of Atlantic slavery.

Continuing with this nuanced view of the specific history of slavery in the Spanish Atlantic, the chapters by Alejandro de la Fuente, Ada Ferrer, Schmidt-Nowara, and Michael Zeuske and Orlando García Martínez return to the crucial nineteenth-century years marked by Spain’s opening of the slave trade to free trade, its later entrance into slave trafficking, and the rise of Cuban plantation slavery. Spain’s dogged attempt to maintain Cuba as an expanding sugar
producing economy meant that Madrid dismissed its 1817 treaty with Britain to end slave trading into the Caribbean. At the moment when most of the Spanish American mainland territories declared independence, the Spanish Caribbean turned into the heart of the Spanish empire with slavery emerging as its core economic system. Ada Ferrer considers that understanding this process requires an emphasis on connections rather than comparison. Regarding Cuba’s rise to being the world’s first sugar producer during the antislavery century, she argues that “slavery's expansion [in Cuba] must be viewed as part and parcel with its decline elsewhere” (pp. 135–36). And she reminds us of “the insufficiency of examining such events from a purely national or imperial focus” (p. 151), showing that these seemingly opposing or disconnected processes are actually linked.

Several of the essays grapple with the complex coexistence during the nineteenth century of Spanish/Catalan abolitionist activism and involvement in the underground slave trade. Zeuske and García Martínez as well as Martín Rodrigo y Alharilla, for instance, dig into the obscure and hidden Atlantic world of slave trading to Cuba in the nineteenth century. Albert García Balañà and Schmidt-Nowara, on the other hand, delve into the antecedents of the better-known 1860s Spanish abolitionism. Schmidt-Nowara discusses the importance of abolitionist stances in the 1810s, during the Cádiz debates, and García Balañà focuses on antislavery in the critical years of the Liberal Revolution in Spain, noting that “the separation of ideology and strategy in part explains the inability of this incipient [antislavery] tradition to become institutionalized and political, because of its extremely limited critical mass” (p. 231). Most significantly, by recovering the relevance of abolitionism in the Spanish Empire even in the context of the rise of the illegal slave trade, García Balañà and Schmidt-Nowara explain how it was framed within the Hispanic tradition of empire and, further, how it was transformed as a result of both the revolutionary cycle that began in 1780 and the emergence of Spanish liberalism after 1810.

The book’s final essay, by Seymour Drescher, synthesizes the current state of Atlantic antislavery studies. Drescher compares French, British, and Spanish abolitionism, arguing that the defining feature of British abolitionism—the rise of a civic movement that succeeded in making the cause political—did not consolidate in Spain, in spite of the presence of some activists since early on. Going beyond the longstanding assumption that this is a result of Spain’s traditionalism, Fradera and Schmidt-Nowara write that “the weakness of abolitionism was not the result of a failure of liberalism but because of the broad support for Antillean slavery in Spanish society and the metropolitan state” (p. 9).