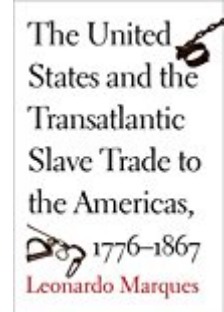


**Leonardo Marques.** *The United States and the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the Americas, 1776-1867.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. 328 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-21241-9.



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**Commissioned by** David M. Prior (University of New Mexico)

This important and carefully argued book challenges the idea held by many historians that the 1807–20 anti-slave trade legislative maneuvers in the United States were a “dead letter.” Even though the Atlantic slave trade of the nineteenth century continued to flourish in spite of increasing legal restriction, its forms changed substantially. Against many scholars who have assumed that a US hegemon was in control of illegal forced passages of hundreds of thousands of Africans to Cuba and Brazil as late as the 1850s, Leonardo Marques shows that we must think of two very different generations of US-based slave traders. The first, rooted in Rhode Island in the late eighteenth century, was very much in charge of operations up until 1820. But the writing and enforcement of stricter laws prohibiting the slave trade transformed US participation. The next generation of US citizens involved in shipping African captives to the Americas was composed mostly of functionaries and employees of major Spanish, Portuguese, and Brazilian backers. The ultimate fall guy symbolic of this shift was Nathaniel Gor-

don, a New York captain of a US-flagged slaving vessel who was hanged in 1862 after Abraham Lincoln declined to pardon him. The wealthy organizers of the voyage escaped with scant punishment. This is not how we have come to think of US slavers’ relationship to Cuba and Brazil in the 1850s. On the contrary, recent scholars have tended to accentuate the United States as a controlling force of proslavery foreign policy.

The 1810s was a transformative decade. The desire to secure coastwise trade from imperial rivals as well as non-state actors led southern states to support the aggressive prosecution of slave-smuggling privateers. Actions taken against the slave trade were more than mere pretext for the assertion of imperial control, but suppression must nevertheless be understood as one element of Andrew Jackson’s violent pacification and re-ordering of the Gulf coast, which also included the Creek and Seminole wars, the Adams-Onís Treaty, the taking of Florida, and the legalization of the domestic slave trade into the territories of the Louisiana Purchase. The same government-led

processes that made the new Southwest safe for the cotton plantation system stamped out maritime slave trading. It was legally categorized as piracy in 1820, while the domestic slave trade gained legitimacy and legal standing.

Not coincidentally, Bristol traders' direct involvement ended in the year that US participation in the external slave trade was declared an act of piracy punishable by death. Thus, anti-slave trade legislation in the United States was far from a "dead letter." In fact, Marques makes clear that these laws shaped the structure of the trade and encouraged many former traders to decline to participate altogether. US citizens no longer directly financed voyages or took the lion's share of the profits. Spanish Cuban, Portuguese, and Brazilian merchants clearly controlled the system. North Americans acted as brokers, agents, and captains, but not as capitalists or bosses. After the 1810s, less powerful US actors settled into a number of key auxiliary roles in the contraband slave trade to Cuba and Brazil: first, they shared and transferred their expertise. All participants in the trade became masters of subterfuge, passing around hints on how to create a "sham owner" to disguise the true backers of a voyage. The construction and brokerage of sailing vessels was by far the most significant form of US participation in the contraband slave trade to Brazil. Anglo-American merchant companies outfitted ships with cargo that could be sold in African markets. These kinds of indirect participation were in fact illegal but hard to prosecute because the intent of the accused to profit from slave trading had to be established. Both British and US merchants continued to supply slave traders with the goods and ships they needed and the credit they depended on, largely with impunity.

Marques ably explains the context for US persistence in a booming but legally dubious slave trade. A sugar boom in Cuba, along with a later coffee boom in Brazil, ensured high demand for enslaved people. Rapid industrial growth and con-

sumerism in certain nodes of the Atlantic World also ensured continuing demand for slave-made goods as well as a supply of manufactured goods to exchange for them in Africa.

The story of British policing of other countries' involvement in the Atlantic slave trade is well known, but Marques offers a novel interpretation. He rightly places Great Britain's anti-slave trade activism in the context of its assertion of dominance in the post-Napoleonic interstate system. This Pax Britannica created contradictory forces both acting against the transatlantic slave trade and creating certain kinds of shelters within which traders could act profitably. Due to the British Empire's dedication to free trade ideology, and the increasingly liberalized and multinational interpenetration of commodity flows, large numbers of Britons and Americans lived on a spectrum of complicity, which ranged from the consumption of slave-grown coffee all the way to the small number of British and US citizens who financed voyages to the African coast. Moreover, anti-slave trade agreements took the form of disconnected bilateral treaties between Britain and other states (as opposed to a single comprehensive effort) because it conformed to the pattern of "diplomatic efforts that accompanied [Britain's] global economic and political expansion" (p. 92). Pro-slavery powers like Brazil and the United States also resented British maritime dominance. After the Conservative Party took power in Brazil in 1831, the slave trade had vocal, powerful defenders in the Brazilian political classes, who tied mixed commissions to British aggression and made resistance to policing of the slave trade a nationalist cause. One of the key reasons that British-led slave trade suppression took so long is because the United States would not concede to the British the right to search vessels flying its flag.

The widespread use of the stars and stripes as cover for the slave trade has led many scholars to conclude mistakenly that New England merchants

continued to be the dominant force in the illegal slave trades to Cuba and Brazil in the 1830s and 1840s. Marques demonstrates convincingly that “the Brazilian slave trade remained entirely under the control of Portuguese and Brazilian individuals ... [who made] strategic use of the American flag as one among many tactics.” The author thus launches an important critique of historians’ frequent conflation of “radically different forms of US participation” (p. 142).

It is easier said than done to clarify the shadowy relationships of power and profit in an illegal business of the nineteenth century, and it is to the author’s credit that he does so magnificently well. Marques also carefully distinguishes the Cuban case from the Brazilian one. In the Caribbean sugar island, proximity to and intimacy with the United States made the British tread more lightly; for a time, the United States also stationed ministers friendly to the slave trade like Nicholas Trist, and the slave trade actually expanded in the 1850s, by which time its suppression had been very successful in Brazil. In spite of the more significant role played by US actors in Cuba, they were still auxiliaries. Joint stock organization had become common practice in Cuba, and Marques discovers that Spanish and Portuguese investors remained the major shareholders. Collaboration between Portuguese and Spanish merchants was crucial. Spaniards lacked influence in Africa, making Portuguese assistance indispensable; on the other hand, the notable lusophone merchants relied on Spanish traders of long residence in Cuba to disembark captives surreptitiously in out-of-the-way places on the island, to hand out the bribes, to collect payments, and so forth. One of Marques’s major discoveries is the extent of interpenetration between Brazilian and Spanish commercial networks, how they made use of US personnel, politics, and international power for their own ends, and how their brutal economic dynamism contributed to the fracturing of the North American republic.

While the financial and organizational role of US citizens in the contraband slave trade was negligible by mid-century, the very existence of the United States as an assertive proslavery nation-state abetted the survival of the business. The 1861 loss of the United States as the most fearsome proslavery presence on the world stage altered a delicate balance of power whose internal tensions had enabled the continuing slave trade throughout the nineteenth century. Among other things, the United States finally conceded a British right of search and began to collaborate with the British much more actively. The anti-slavery turn of the Union, and its military successes in the summer of 1863, finally showed many elites in Brazil the writing on the wall. They began seriously to consider the end of slavery. While the transatlantic slave trade to Cuba lasted longer, by the 1860s even proslavery reformers in the Spanish Empire sought to stamp out the slave trade. Five years after Appomattox, the first law toward gradual abolition in Cuba was passed. So it turns out that even though US individuals and firms were bit players in the contraband slave trade to Cuba and Brazil after 1820, North American diplomacy, ideology, and military power helped maintain an Atlantic geopolitical system that sheltered the rapid growth of slavery in particular places.

I have two hesitations regarding this well-wrought, deeply researched, and important book. Whereas in Marcus Rediker’s *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2007) shipboard rebellions were central to the late eighteenth-century movement against the slave trade in British realms, there is no analogy in Marques’s narrative. In fact, few if any enslaved people appear in the book. Second, the author never mentions the supply side of the Atlantic slave trade. West African merchant elites’ willingness and ability to supply a steady stream of captives at low prices was probably the most important factor making the system run. Marques has little to say on this issue, perhaps because it is

being tackled with increasing depth and sophistication by other scholars.

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