

Family and Frontier in Colonial Brazil: Santana de Parnaíba, 1580–1822. By ALIDA C. METCALF. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. Plates. Maps. Tables. Figures. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. xvi, 280 pp. Cloth. \$40.00.

Family and Frontier is a substantially revised and updated version of the author's 1983 dissertation. Focusing on Santana de Parnaíba, a township near São Paulo steeped in the *bandeirante* tradition, Alida Metcalf studies the intrinsic relationship between family strategies and economic imperatives as this region underwent the transformation from wilderness to permanent settlement. In developing her arguments, Metcalf marshals an impressive array of published and archival sources, covering probate records, notarial and parish registers, and manuscript census lists. Frontier, family, class, and community provide broad conceptual categories that cut across the periods and social groups under scrutiny, drawing out important parallels and distinctions in the wider context of colonial Latin American family history.

The book's main strengths lie in Metcalf's solidly documented discussion of family strategies and inheritance practices. The core chapters, 4, 5, and 6, retain the essence of the original dissertation, analyzing three social "classes" in rural Parnaíba: planters, peasants, and slaves. In dealing with the first, elite group, Metcalf offers an innovative treatment of property rights and notions, forging beyond the usual legal perspective and showing how inheritance could become an instrument of inequality, in spite of essentially egalitarian laws. Her discussion of the peasantry sheds important light on this much-neglected segment of colonial society, while her detailed analysis of African slavery in this basically nonexport economy constitutes another interesting contribution. Though readers familiar with colonial São Paulo may feel skeptical when presented with the conclusion that the slaves "had successfully established a stable community" (p. 194), they should welcome new evidence on the always polemical issue of the slave family.

Metcalf's rich discussion of the family stumbles, however, on her almost mechanical, tripartite division of Parnaíba's social strata. The three "classes" appear to be determined by the late eighteenth-century census reports rather than by any dynamic, historical process; indeed, Metcalf fails to define convincingly what she understands to be planters, peasants, and even slaves, if we are to include native bondsmen. Not all readers may agree that a constellation of relatively isolated *sitiantes*—rural smallholders or squatters, with or without slaves—constituted a peasantry, or that all slaveholders were planters. Furthermore, the projection of these classes in the early chapters, which has been radically updated since the dissertation, raises several thorny problems. For example, seventeenth-century cash-crop agriculture and Indian slavery, which both achieved a significant scale and complexity in Parnaíba, seem to have exerted no significant effect either on spatial organization or on class formation. Thus, Metcalf's *bairros rurais* take shape only in the late colonial period (p. 150), while the relationship between Indian slavery

and the formation of a peasantry is oversimplified: by the eighteenth century, “the Indians in Parnaíba had clearly become part of the peasant class” (p. 83).

This is a crucial issue in colonial Brazilian studies. Rather than seize the opportunity to recover the historical dimension of peasant formation in the context of economic and social development and change, Metcalf reinforces the conventional view of a changeless, timeless peasantry whose first rendezvous with history occurs only with the penetration of a market economy. Thus, when illustrating the *mutirão*, or collective work party, she combines evidence from the sixteenth, eighteenth, and twentieth centuries in a seemingly comfortable manner (p. 127); yet she does not resist the temptation to decree the end of an independent peasantry as a result of a rising cash-crop economy in the eighteenth century (p. 139).

For the most part, *Family and Frontier* is not very successful in establishing a fruitful dialogue with Brazilian historiography. For example, when casting the frontier concept in comparative perspective, Metcalf ignores Capistrano de Abreu, Frederick J. Turner’s contemporary, who was the first influential historian to emphasize the significance of the *sertão* in Brazil’s national formation. Though she makes a fleeting, uncritical reference to Sérgio Buarque de Holanda’s relevant works, it is the Turnerian image that prevails: at one point we find the Tupinikin Indians beset by “epidemics that swept across the plains,” an image difficult to visualize on the Paulista plateau (p. 37). More serious, perhaps, is Metcalf’s assertion that “for decades, the portrayal of Brazil’s colonial past has been dominated by the work of one anthropologist, the late Gilberto Freyre” (p. 19). Brazilian historians, brought up on steady diets of Caio Prado, Jr., Celso Furtado, and more recently Fernando Novais, certainly would disagree; except the limited circle of family historians, who have adopted sociologist Freyre’s patriarchal “model” as a favorite straw man.

In spite of these drawbacks, or perhaps because of them, *Family and Frontier* deserves the attention of scholars interested in the origins and early formation of colonial societies. As traditional actors increasingly have had to share the stage with a cast of upstarts in studies of the colonial Brazilian world, adding increasing complexity to the all-but-abandoned classic master-slave paradigm, a wider discussion of the internal dynamics of Brazilian society and economy also comes into focus. A renewed interest in the role of native labor and the emergence of the peasantry in regional, nonexport economies not only challenges the dominant model for colonial Brazil—characterized by export activities and weak internal articulations—but also forces a reconsideration of the significance of works by such authors as Abreu, Prado, and Holanda.

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