

What Americans Should Know about Brazil's Dual Legacy of Slavery and the Monarchy

by Norman Berdichevsky (August 2016)



Brazilian Royal Banner, 1822

What do most Americans know about Brazil and what should they know? – a very pertinent question in the light of much recent headline news in the media regarding worries about the country's ability to stage the Olympic games, the dangers of the Zika virus, and the scandal of an impeached woman president (Dilma Rousseff).

As an instructor in English at a language school in Orlando, home to one of the largest Brazilian communities in the United States (signs in Portuguese abound at the airport, Disney Parks and all major shopping centers), I can testify to the profound frustration of most Brazilians over how little most Americans know about the history, geography, and social conditions of Latin America's largest nation (205 million, twice as many as Mexico), and historically, our strongest

ally in the region. After all, Brazilians became the number one country sending visitors to Orlando in 2013, surpassing longtime leader UK for the first time which means that, in 2013, almost 777,000 Brazilians came to Central Florida, a number that has exploded 900 percent since 2004!

Probably, the things that immediately come to mind which are shared as conventional wisdom by most Americans are the samba, the homeland of rich strong coffee, bossa nova music, the great soccer star Pelé and the recent turmoil of the 2014 World Cup when favorite Brazil was defeated in an embarrassing final match 7-1. Perhaps a very few older Americans recall gaudy singer and actress Carmen Miranda and military veterans may know that Brazil was the only Latin American nation to actually send combat troops to Europe to participate in World War II.

There is also the still popular notion among many Americans that Brazil has been the most successful multi-racial society with none of the problems associated with the heritage of slavery, as in the United States. The truth however, lies far from this idyllic view.

Brazil was the largest slave holding nation in the world until its very late abolition in 1888, by the heiress apparent to the ruling Emperor Dom Pedro II. The American experience of slavery, its abolition, violent slave revolts, manumission, civil war, reconstruction, regional animosity between North and South and segregation have all been burned into the consciousness of our citizens. Elsewhere, all of these aspects of slavery were present to some degree, but what is more striking especially in the Brazilian case is their remarkable differences.

Slavery's very different course in Brazil and its eventual abolition offers much food for thought of what might have been. It lasted longer than anywhere else in the Americas, but the eventual outcome proved to be less traumatic than in the United States. Nevertheless, Brazilian apologists often paint an all too idyllic portrait of the country as a multiracial society far removed from the reality of strife and tension along racial lines in the United States.

Violent slave revolts there were sporadic and largely involved those slaves with a distinct African and Muslim culture known as Malês. In court testimonies, the slaves bore witness to the suppression of their culture and religion. As in

future violent slave mutinies, very few native-born nominally Christian Portuguese speaking Brazilians (both blacks and mulattos) participated.

The comparatively bloodless Brazilian history of slavery stands in dramatic contrast to Haiti, where a bloody revolution and the expulsion of the entire white population (1795-1805) was achieved by a war of epic proportions that resulted in the defeat of two powerful French armies. In the United States, a horrific civil war was the inevitable result of the failure to achieve an eventual emancipation proclamation by peaceful reform.

Pre-European Society

Long before Europeans came to Brazil and began colonization, indigenous Indians enslaved captured members of other tribes. The same was true in much of North America. Those captured became trophies to the tribe's martial prowess as well as performing needed manual labor. Although some slaves eventually escaped, they could not reacquire their previous status in their own tribe because of the strong social stigma against slavery.

Slave Labor Economy Based on Primary Materials

Slave labor was the main reason behind the growth of the sugar economy in Brazil, and sugar was the primary export of the colony from 1600–1650, followed by gold and diamonds from deposits discovered in 1690. This led to a huge demand for the importation of African slaves to mine the mineral wealth and build the roads for the mining infrastructure much as was the case with cotton in the United States.

From 1700 to 1800, 1.7 million slaves were brought to Brazil from Africa and the rise of the coffee plantation industry in the 1830s only increased the demand for slave labor. The death rate among African slaves was so high that importation of new slaves was insufficient in Brazil to replace the labor force and expeditions were launched to acquire Indian slaves. These indigenous enslaving expeditions were known as bandeiras and their commanders called Bandeirantes, adventurers who penetrated steadily westward in their search for Indian slaves. The adventurers came from a wide spectrum of backgrounds, including plantation owners, traders, members of the military, as well as people of mixed ancestry and previously captured Indian slaves. Mixed descendants of European-Indian unions were called mamelucos, a distinct type, largely absent in

North America.

By 1819, the population of Brazil was 3.6 million, almost one-third of whom were slaves. By the late 1840s, the figure may have exceeded one-half. By the time slavery was abolished, in 1888, an estimated four million slaves had been imported from Africa to Brazil, 40% of the total number of slaves brought to the Americas.

More so than in the United States or Haiti, the prospect of running away into the expansive interior presented an attractive alternative in Brazil rather than enduring slavery or fomenting a revolt. News of the Haitian Revolution and the establishment of an "African Republic in the Western hemisphere" and its associated ideals of liberty and freedom spread to both the United States and Brazil. Nevertheless, Brazil achieved a degree of political stability, vibrant economic growth, constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech under a monarchy, and respect for civil rights that was the envy of the new republics in South and Central America (and the United States) but faced a long ideological conflict between the emperor and a sizable parliamentary faction over the role of the monarch in the government.



Brazilian Royal Banknote

The Empire and Royal House

Brazil became an empire due to the exile of the Portuguese Royal House. The royal family fled to Brazil to escape the Napoleonic occupation of their homeland and avoid serving as French puppet rulers. Following the defeat of Napoleon and restoration of the Portuguese monarchy, Prince Pedro was left

behind in Brazil to act as regent by his father in 1821. The young prince regent had to deal with threats from revolutionaries and insubordination by Portuguese troops, all of which he overcame. He then chose to support demands for independence rather than return to Portuguese rule and defeated all armies loyal to Portugal. Pedro proclaimed himself king of Portugal and Brazil in 1826, but abdicated in favor of his eldest daughter and departed for Europe.

His successor was his five-year-old son, still a minor, and a weak regency was created. The resultant power vacuum led to regional civil wars between local factions. Nevertheless, to much surprise, Pedro II, once declared of age, successfully managed to bring peace and stability to the country and remained on the throne as "Emperor" for the next fifty-eight years! With regards to immigration, the role of the church and slavery, Pedro II encouraged a liberal policy welcoming European immigration, including Protestants and Jews, and limited slavery by successive legislation. Such a mediating role of a supreme monarch and royal house was totally absent in the United States and a colossal failure when tried by the French in Mexico.

Peace and Prosperity

The period from 1853 onward was one of prosperity for Brazil. The political system functioned smoothly, civil liberties were maintained and a start was made on the introduction into Brazil of railroad, telegraph and steamship lines. The country was no longer troubled by the disputes and conflicts that had racked it during its first thirty years. Military victories over Uruguay in 1865, followed by the successful conclusion of the war with Paraguay in 1870, marked the beginning of a "golden age" of the Brazilian Empire. The Brazilian economy grew rapidly; railroad, shipping and other modernization projects were started; immigration flourished. The Empire became known internationally as a modern and progressive nation, second only to the United States of America, it was a politically stable economy with good investment potential.

This wise ruler knew that the days of monarchy in the Western hemisphere were limited and would not survive him. The next in line to the throne was his daughter Isabel, but neither Pedro II nor the ruling classes considered a female monarch acceptable. Lacking any viable heir, the Empire's political leaders saw no reason to defend the monarchy when it had disappeared from every "advanced" and "civilized" nation by 1888.

The Infant Heir Pedro Afonso

“Dom Pedro Afonso” (19 July 1848 – 10 January 1850) was the Prince Imperial and heir apparent to the throne. He was the second son and youngest child of Emperor Dom Pedro II and thus a member of the Brazilian branch of the House of Braganza. Pedro Afonso was seen as vital to the future viability of the monarchy, already in doubt due to the death of his older brother almost three years earlier. Pedro Afonso’s early death from fever at the age of one devastated the Emperor. The imperial couple had no further children. His older sister, Dona Isabel, became heiress, but Pedro II was reluctant for the prospects of a female heir. He did not believe that a woman could ever be accepted as monarch by the ruling elite. He excluded Isabel from matters of state, and failed to provide training for her possible role as empress.

By 1860, the number of slaves in the United States and Brazil was approximately the same, close to three and a half million. In Brazil, slaves easily comprised from forty to fifty per cent of the population, and if we add all those of mixed blood, the “colored population” constituted a majority of the population while they were only about 14% of the total population of the United States (approximately the same as today) at the same time. By looking at the regional breakdown however, the ratio of black to white in the American South was one to two, whereas in the Free States of the North, it was only one to more than sixty-five, or less than 2% of the population!

In Brazil, the growing expectation was that the institution would inevitably have to be abolished within a generation. Widespread manumission (much easier in Brazil than in North America), had changed the balance between free and slave Afro-Brazilians.

By 1860, approximately three quarters of blacks and mulattoes in Brazil were free! By contrast, only 11% of Afro-Americans were free men and women of color prior to the Emancipation Proclamation.

The End of Slavery and the Empire

What then provoked the final conflict over slavery and brought down the empire? In 1870, few Brazilians opposed slavery and even fewer openly condemned it but knowledge of the Emperor’s position and eventual hope in abolition, far-sighted owners provided for the freeing of their slaves (manumission) rather than will

them to their children. By the end of the American Civil War, public opinion in Europe was now firmly against the institution. Pedro viewed the death of his two sons as an omen that the monarchy would not survive him.

Social Conditions of Slavery in the Two Countries

Most observers familiar with slavery in the two countries agreed that slaves on the large plantations were more harshly treated in the United States where those working in the fields toiled from sunrise to sundown and women and children, were often compelled to do their share in the fields. In Brazil, conditions generally were more lenient.

Moreover, Brazilian slaves occasionally exercised the right to change masters. The master set a price upon his slave and the slave possessing a note, declaring his master's intentions, might then seek out some neighboring planter with a good reputation, and if the desired new master decided to pay the price set, the old master, often felt obliged to sell the slave. Although the practice had drawbacks and might not have been agreed upon, it was a further indication of slave rights in Brazil that were unknown in the United States.

The Last Years of the Empire

After 1885, European immigration to Brazil increased dramatically and the new immigrants replaced much slavery on the coffee plantations in the south. Expectations that the emperor would leave behind an edict of liberation following his death or free the slaves unilaterally were widespread and promoted mass flights, growing armed clashes and the fear of a breakdown of the social and economic order.

An exhausted Emperor who no longer cared for the throne, and an increasingly discontented ruling class who were dismissive of the Imperial role in national affairs and unwilling to accept a female heir as "Empress" all presaged the monarchy's impending doom. Nevertheless, "Republicanism" as an ideal had never really been popular outside of elitist circles. Among these were an officer class that believed a republic would be superior to the liberal democratic monarchy.

Angered over the prospect of liberation of the slaves without compensation, planters who had opposed abolition now joined the Republican Party. A

significant sector of army officers that strongly identified with the radical new philosophy of "Positivism" sympathized with the Party, stressing "progress," science, the ideal of a dictatorial republic, and in spite of lip service to the notion of "modernism," still distrusted the masses. They opposed any reform of land tenure and class relations. The new government established a secular state and civil marriage and two years later adopted a federal constitution for the country.

While Pedro II was receiving medical treatment in Europe in 1888, the parliament passed, and Princess Isabel signed the "Golden Law," completely abolishing slavery in Brazil. It was adopted on May 13, 1888: "From this date, slavery is declared abolished in Brazil." Princess Isabel's decree eventually led a few months later to the proclamation of the Brazilian Republic on November 16, 1889, following a revolt by the army chief of staff. Pedro II dismissed any suggestion put forward by politicians and military leaders for quelling the rebellion and the Emperor and his family were sent into exile on November 17, 1889.

Although there were expressions of monarchist support afterwards, they were thoroughly suppressed. The lack of any heir apparent doomed any future restoration. Isabel's children were also discounted. Pedro II had not raised them as possible successors to the throne, but rather in hopes that they would become worthy citizens.

The Legacy of Slavery

Brazil did not suffer through a similar period of reconstruction, sharp regional antagonism as in the United States between North and South, Jim Crow laws, segregation, laws forbidding inter-racial marriage and the American civil rights campaigns. Brazilian Mulattoes were generally regarded as a social class rather than one based on racial ancestry and many came to be regarded as white.

It has been said of Portuguese America that the race problem was allowed to "solve itself." The slave in Brazil was looked down upon as a menial laborer, rather than as an offshoot of a lower race. Marriages between the lower classes of either race were not scorned by society. Inter-racial marriages were legal, Brazilian society favoring the marriage of the higher type of the white to the lighter type of Negro.

Consequences of the Monarchy

What were the important consequences of Brazil not becoming a republic until 1889? Most likely, it insured that the huge nation was not fragmented into more than a dozen states as occurred to the Spanish possessions in South and Central America. It also meant that as long as the Emperor was the center of loyalty, the abolitionist movement preferred to postpone its demands until this old bond of loyalty had been severed. Manumission eventually came to be regarded as a humane and civilized Christian duty even for those who did not attend church regularly but wanted to consider themselves fit for their role as responsible citizens in the new republic.

Racial Issues in Modern Brazil and the United States

Contemporary Brazil, like the United States, has tried to provide some form of compensation for the descendants of the slave population. The legislature passed an "affirmative action type" law in an attempt to directly fight the legacy of slavery and policy makers have forced state universities, to have a certain quota of Afro-Brazilians. In 2012, Brazil's Supreme Court unanimously held the law constitutional, although as in the United States this has alienated part of the white population. The officially stated expectation of almost all politicians is that the prospects for Afro-Brazilians in education, political representation, and overall quality of life, will continue to increase in spite of growing resentment in some quarters.

In spite of these aspirations, the last several decades have witnessed the growth of a Black separatist movement centered on the state of Bahia and focused on celebration of the Carnival festivities. A group known as Ilê Aiyê launched a series of protests in the 1970s and aims at uniting Afro-Brazilians. The expression originates from the Yoruba language (ilê – home; aiyê – forever) and seeks to raise the consciousness of the Bahian black community and identify with Africa. It was actively persecuted at its start by the police, and is still controversial for allowing only blacks to parade with the group during carnival. It persisted even after the fall of Brazil's military government and antagonized many whites who view it as a racist movement opposed to the ideals of Brazil's multi-racial character and its Portuguese heritage. Among more conservative whites, it has even provoked a repressed longing for the "glory" and lost "prestige of the Empire."

Longing for the Restoration of the Empire?

The chaotic conditions of the Republic, numerous, crises, coups and the most recent impeachment of President Rouseff and the low approval ratings for her successor, interim President Michel Temer, have increased a nostalgic attitude toward the “Empire” among a growing number of mostly white Brazilians. Temer is 75 years old, conservative and his cabinet is all white and male causing some Afro-Brazilians to charge it is a regressive throwback.

In 1993, the country held a plebiscite after the resignation of President Fernando Affonso Collor de Mello following the threat of impeachment, and the monarchist party pledged to a restoration of the royal house, received 13% of the vote! Nowhere else in the Americas, does a monarchist movement have any such support and some observers believe that a similar referendum today would increase its support, Critics respond that the monarchist movement derives its overwhelming support from the white population of European descent in the South of the country and traditional Catholic values and that it would only intensify regional and racial rivalries.

In the meantime, Emperor Dom Pedro II’s great-great-great-grandchildren are waiting. They are the descendants of Isabel’s three male children. She lived the last thirty years of her life as an exile in France with her French husband and since 1891 the different branches of the “royal family” have disputed the right of succession should Brazil restore a monarchy.

No other state in Latin America preserved a monarchy in its critical period of transformation from colony to sovereign nation. In Brazil, its historic contribution to the sense of nationhood was profound even though it can never be resurrected and is inextricably mixed with the painful legacy of slavery and racial conflict.

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