Brazil: Five Centuries of Change (review)

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Brazil: Five Centuries of Change. By Thomas Skidmore (New York, Oxford University Press, 1999) 254 pp. $30.00

In the preface to his fine new survey of Brazilian history, Skidmore writes, "Brazilians see themselves as very different from all other New World societies and claim to have produced their own civilization. Yet the inequalities and vulnerabilities remain" (xiv). The concerns behind this dualism lie at the heart of the book: On the one hand, Skidmore seeks to introduce readers to Brazil's unique cultural patrimony; on the other, he seeks to analyze the historical roots of the vast gulf between elite and underprivileged that continues to haunt the nation.

Skidmore gives far more concentration to the latter concern, and in this area, his work truly shines. Throughout his narrative, the author emphasizes key moments and phenomena that reveal the evolving structure of social control and economic inequality. His analysis of the 1910 naval revolt, for example, shows a Brazil hampered in its attempt to bargain on an equal footing with European economic powers by a legacy of slavery and deep-seated racism. The enlisted men of the Brazilian navy, almost all of them black and of mixed race—and most of them virtually pressed into service—had long resented their corporal punishment at the hands of an all-white officer corps. In 1910, this resentment blossomed into outright rebellion, embarrassing the Brazilian government and revealing the precarious nature of its bid for first-world cosmopolitanism. Naval officers, in turn, struck a false bargain and then betrayed their promises, imprisoning and torturing the rebels. Confronted with evidence belying an image of peace and progress, Brazilian authorities responded with force in order to bolster endangered control.

Explanation of this mechanism becomes a theme for Skidmore. His analysis of the military dictatorship of 1964 to 1985, for example, describes the pervasive torture of dissidents that characterized the regime and asks rhetorically, "If military rule should end, would the Brazilian elite recognize that torture was in fact the latest expression of a repressive system sustaining the social hierarchy that had benefitted them for so long?" (176). Discussing the upper class's tacit acceptance of the murder of street children by death squads in the 1980s and 1990s, Skidmore argues that the Brazilian elite's image of the lower class had mutated "from the *trabalhador* (the worker who had a job and was contributing to society) to the *marginal* (the hustler who lived by his street smarts)" (200). This shift, he suggests, strengthened persistent images of the poor as dangerous rather than deserving, and served as a justification for oppressive measures.

This theme is provocative and persuasive, but is sometimes overstated. The analysis of the Estado Novo of 1937 to 1945, for example, overestimates the control exercised by Getúlio Vargas' government over fractious interest groups. "The corporatist structures for labor and industry effectively took both sectors out of the active political process," argues Skidmore, ignoring the extent to which labor and industrial

leaders negotiated the terms of their inclusion in the New State (117). Emphasis on the historical continuity of social control makes the current structure of inequality seem inevitable. By Skidmore's account, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, beholden to both a fickle investment market and elite political players, had no choice but to neglect education and social welfare in favor of neoliberal reform. This account is incisive and enriched by deep historical understanding, but lets Cardoso's government off the hook too easily.

The general treatment of political economy in this volume is authoritative and presented with remarkable clarity. As in previous works, Skidmore skillfully explains complex historical passages by dividing the population of Brazil into sectors that compete and occasionally collaborate in a tumultuous arena. His explication of the Paraguayan War of the late 1860s, for example, synthesizes volumes of secondary material into an intelligible and illuminating capsule. (The colonial era, unfortunately, gets short shrift: Skidmore treats three centuries of colonial history in about thirty pages, less space than he gives to the last fifteen years.) His cultural analysis is less consistent, and is made to seem tangential to the real story. Brief discussions of intellectual trends, popular cultural phenomena, and evolutions in gender relations are treated as mere asides. As a result, this volume is strong at revealing those facets of the political economy that make Brazil similar to other Latin American industrial nations, and less so at explaining those cultural facets that make it unique.

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Montpelier, Jamaica: A Plantation Community in Slavery and Freedom, 1739–1912. By B. W. Higman (Kingston, The Press-University of the West Indies, 1998) 384 pp. $35.00

Higman's latest book on Caribbean slavery, which has been long in the making, is interestingly different from his three previous books. In *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica* (Cambridge, 1976) and *Jamaica Surveyed* (Kingston, 1988), he established himself as the premier analyst of the Jamaican slave system in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean* (Baltimore, 1984), he drew upon slave registration data collected by the British government to present a comprehensive account of slave demography in all of the British colonies on the eve of emancipation. Now Higman gives us a much more particularistic discussion of plantation life during and after slavery on three adjacent Jamaican estates—Old Montpelier, New Montpelier, and Shettlewood—situated close to Montego Bay.

This is not the first case study of a Jamaican plantation in action, and it will not be the last. But Higman's approach is distinguished by his close correlation of documentary evidence with archaeological in-