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Alida C. Metcalf, Family and Frontier in Colonial Brazil: Santana de Parnaíba, 1580-1822

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Family and Frontier in Colonial Brazil: Santana de Parnaíba, 1580-1822. By Alida C. Metcalf. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. xvi + 280 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00 cloth.)

This work by Alida Metcalf helps fill an important void in our understanding of the history of the Brazilian family. While most of the published studies focus on primary communities such as Salvador, São Paulo, or Rio de Janeiro and their rural surroundings, she concentrates on the small, rural community of Santana de Parnaíba in São Paulo. Her examination traces this small frontier community through its settlement, its emergence as a part of São Paulo's commercial agricultural development, and its decline.

Each of these stages had unique characteristics. The first stage, beginning with the town's founding in the late sixteenth century, witnessed a blending of Portuguese and Indian cultures to produce a "fluid" society. Particularly useful is Metcalf's description of the treatment of the Indian population as coerced labor. The second, beginning in the eighteenth century, saw the emergence of a more complex community based on commercial agriculture and involvement in mining and commerce. African slavery supplanted Indian labor and a planter class emerged and consolidated its position using, among other things, various family strategies. The final stage examined by Metcalf began in the early nineteenth century, and encompassed the movement of the coffee frontier further west, the loss of direct ties to the frontier, and the decline of the community. Over time, wealth and power became even more concentrated and the society was characterized by increasing inequality.

The central concern of this book is the development and use of family strategies by the region's three main social classes: planters, peasants, and slaves. Each of these groups is examined within the context provided by the frontier and the economic stages through which the community moved.

According to the author, the planters were able to develop strategies which ensured their status. She describes a complicated process by which these families saw their sons move on to newly opening areas of the frontier and their property in Parnaíba pass through their daughters to sons-in-law. To accomplish this, the planters had to find ways of modifying the Portuguese legal requirement for equitable inheritance among children. These practices included dowry, excluding natural children, increasing wealth, and the out-migration of children. In the end, it was the family rather than the individual which mattered. The process of preferring certain children over others also helped produce a peasant class.

Her treatment of the slave family is particularly illuminating. In general, it supports the conclusions of recent research arguing for the existence of nuclear slave families as a common feature of Brazilian life. Marriage tended to involve slaves of the same master and was as common for African slaves in Parnaíba as it was for creole slaves. Because of the nature of her sources, Metcalf is able to show the extensive fluidity in the family as children were sold or died.

She raises a fundamental issue in her discussion of the powerful impact of the combination of family strategies, especially those of the planter class, and of the mechanisms used to exploit the frontier on the development of a social system characterized by inequality. This is compared to Frederick Turner's view that the frontier in the United States helped shape the development of a more egalitarian social order. Metcalf has clearly documented the process by which the social disparity grew through the formation of the planter class and then its ability to monopolize an increasing share of the resources, land, and labor. This in itself is an important contribution. However, the issue of causation must await further study. It is equally valid to see these family strategies as instrumentalities of an elite class, and family structure and choices as a dependent rather than an independent force. We are indebted to her for raising this important issue.

One of the many effective aspects of this book is Metcalf's use of individual families and people to illustrate the social processes underway. A crucial part of this personalization is her discussion of the clothing, homes, and household furnishings, which adds texture and human qualities to this work. This attention to the people who lived in Santana de Parnaíba enhances the book's readability. Coupled with the many important insights it provides, *Family and Frontier* is an significant contribution to the literature, not solely of family history, but to social history in general.

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