Book Channel Essay | The US Civil War Era and Latin America

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It would be incorrect to argue that scholars have never considered the international dimensions of the US Civil War Era. However, the vast majority of the tens of thousands of books written about the antebellum US, the war, and Reconstruction usually foreground the domestic elements. In addition, the scholars who considered the international implications tended to focus on the relationship between the US and European powers. Recent studies, however, have begun to pay more attention to Latin America. This is particularly important because, as the author discusses in this essay, historians of the US Civil War Era and of Latin America have a great deal to say to each other. Being more attentive to Latin America also has important contemporary relevance in light of the persistent tensions among the nations of the Western Hemisphere. Chase McCarter is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at the University of New Mexico and resource editor for H-CivWar. He studies the Civil War-era South with particular focus on the postwar migration of ex-Confederates to Latin America. --Book Channel Guest Editor Evan Rothera
In the late 1960s, US historians became increasingly interested in internationalizing the history of the US Civil War era. In his essay for C. Vann Woodward’s 1968 anthology, *The Comparative Approach to American History*, David M. Potter argued that the turmoil of the US Civil War era and the European revolutions of 1848 were both the product of nationalist struggles and were equally critical in the survival of liberal nationalism around the globe. Ian Tyrrell’s call in 1991 for a new history that decentered exceptionalist narratives in American historical writing gave birth to the transnational turn in US history and further influenced historians of the US Civil War era to explore the impact of the period’s major events outside the confines of US national borders. For example, Robert E. May’s anthology *The Union, the Confederacy, and the Atlantic Rim* (1995) brought together studies by Howard Jones, R. J. M. Blackett, Thomas Schoonover, and James M. McPherson to reveal the impact of the US Civil War on European and Latin American nations. Since the mid-1990s, scholars like Enrico Dal Lago, Peter S. Onuf, Andre Fleche, Timothy M. Roberts, Patrick J. Kelly, and a wave of others have deepened historical understanding of the US Civil War era by thinking about this period through a transnational framework.
But historians still have more ground to cover. The role of Latin America in the ideologies, debates, and events that transpired in the United States during the Civil War era has been relatively understudied by historians. Historians have directed much more attention to European happenings and their impact on the United States during this period than to Latin American ones. But there is a growing interest in the role of Latin America in the coming of the Civil War, the war itself, and Reconstruction.
New histories of the US sectional crisis frame the prospect of slavery’s expansion in Latin America as a central issue of contention between proslavery advocates and abolitionists in the 1840s and 1850s. Matthew Karp’s *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of America Foreign Policy* (2016) argues that Latin America was most certainly in the sights of proslavery advocates in the US government during the antebellum period. Karp contends that southern slave-owning elites were not an isolated class of individuals who clung to the dying institution of slavery in the US South. Rather, they were globally minded people and kept a close eye on threats to slavery across the Americas, especially in Cuba and Brazil, whom they saw as allies in an international fight against the forces of abolition. They also believed that the continuity of slavery in the Americas was key to the future prosperity and power of the United States (p. 2).
The mind-set of southern slaveholders Karp depicts in his study was related to the emergence of what Dale Tomich labels “the second slavery” in his book, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (2003). “Second slavery” describes the remaking of slavery in concert with the expansion of industrial capitalism and the creation of new, highly profitable slave-based zones of commodity production throughout the Americas during the early nineteenth century. Throughout the book, Karp details how proslavery advocates within the US government sculpted foreign policy and the US military in efforts to strengthen and preserve this new form of slavery in the United States and Latin America. For the most part, proslavery advocates were successful at doing so until the institution collapsed with the defeat of the Confederacy during the Civil War (p. 3).
Robert E. May’s book *Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Future of Latin America* (2013) is his latest addition in a forty-plus-year career of thinking about the transnational dynamics of the US Civil War era. In this study, May asserts that the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates featured a clash of ideas over slavery’s expansion in Latin America. Lincoln and Douglas’s feud over this topic also embodied a larger breakdown in relations between the North and South, which contributed to the outbreak of Civil War. Throughout the text, May traces the ideological evolution of both men on the issue of slavery’s expansion in Latin America. For Douglas, the acquisition of territory in Latin America was necessary for the growth and progress of the United States. Under his philosophy of popular sovereignty, Douglas argued that future US colonists in Latin America should have the right to establish slavery in their territories if they desired. Contrary to Douglas, Lincoln held an explicitly anti-expansionist position toward Latin America and believed that the prospect of slavery’s expansion there, where it did not yet exist, would put the Union in mortal danger. In fact, May explains that throughout Lincoln’s presidency he maintained an anti-expansionist attitude toward Latin America. Lincoln also favored exporting African Americans to colonies in Latin America where he believed that they could obtain a level of freedom and equality unavailable to them in the United States. Lincoln’s articulation of this position on Latin America
during the Lincoln-Douglas debates informed Southerners that a Lincoln victory in the election of 1860 would destroy any hopes they had of expanding slavery southward. May suggests that the desire to preserve future prospects of expanding slavery into Latin America heavily influenced Southerners’ choice to secede in the wake of Lincoln’s victory. Overall, May’s analysis of the Lincoln-Douglas debates adds a transnational dimension to the sectional crisis and the outbreak of the Civil War by centering the future of slavery’s expansion in Latin America as a leading issue that contributed to the breakdown between North and South.

Rethinking the coming of the US Civil War in a transnational context has also pushed historians to explore the interconnections of the war itself with concurrent conflicts of the 1860s. Don H. Doyle has been at the center of scholarly efforts to do so. Most notably, his book *The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the American Civil War* (2014) categorizes the US Civil War as part of a broader struggle for democracy throughout the Atlantic world. His latest contribution, an edited anthology, *American Civil Wars: The United States, Latin America, Europe, and the Crisis of the 1860s* (2017), takes a more direct look at the role of the US Civil War in Latin America. Specifically, *American Civil Wars* demonstrates that the 1860s was a decade of multiple civil wars, separatist
rebellions, slave uprisings, and emancipations throughout the Americas. Furthermore, democratic republics throughout the Americas defeated the attempted reconquest of the hemisphere by European monarchies.

For example, Stève Sainlaude’s essay, “France’s Grand Design and the Confederacy,” argues that the US Civil War neutralized the United States in Latin America as it dealt with the Confederacy. The war presented Napoleon III with an opportunity to reassert France’s former colonial empire in the Americas, which he tried and failed to do in the Second French Intervention in Mexico. This largely resulted from the Union’s victory in the Civil War and the US federal government’s financial and military aid to Benito Juárez’s republican army.

The victories of democratic republics throughout the Americas in the 1860s also prevented the destruction of the international antislavery movement. Rafael Marquese and Matt D. Childs’s respective contributions to this anthology show that the defeat of the Confederacy and abolition of slavery in the United States paved the way for the institution’s demise in Cuba and Brazil. Childs
maintains that the US Civil War was the crisis that placed the possibility of abolition on the political horizon for Cuban slaveowners. Likewise, Marquese uses the analogy of a “protective wall” to describe the relationship of US slavery to Brazilian slavery. When this wall came down, it energized an already present and potent antislavery moment in Brazil, which would be vital to the passing of gradual emancipation laws in the 1870s and the final emancipation law in 1888.

In sum, this anthology reframes the US Civil War as a mere chapter in a hemisphere-wide and decade-long struggle between the forces of republicanism and monarchism and between proponents of slavery and emancipation. The Latin American conflicts of the 1860s that scholars have entangled with the US Civil War show that the war was anything but exceptional. Yet this study also emphasizes that the outbreak of the war was a critical factor in the eruption of conflicts in Latin America and that the outcome of the war was essential to the preservation of republicanism in the region.

This turn in the literature has naturally led scholars of US Reconstruction to branch out toward Latin America as well. United States Reconstruction across the Americas (2019), edited by William A. Link, establishes that post-Civil War global political, social, and economic developments entangled and
influenced the central elements of Reconstruction (i.e., emancipation, nationalism, and the spread of market capitalism). Additionally, the emergence of the United States in the post-Civil War period as a global power was contingent on developments in several nations throughout the Americas.

Chapter 1, “The Cotton and Coffee Economies of the United States and Brazil, 1865-1904,” by Rafael Marquese, argues that the seemingly disparate transitions from slavery to free labor in Brazil and the US South were quite related. In the aftermath of US emancipation, planters in both nations sought a means by which to transition from slavery to free labor while maintaining the same level of exploitation. Brazilian planters, who saw the end of Brazilian chattel slavery on the horizon after the US Civil War, viewed sharecropping and tenancy in the South as a loss of planters’ power over laborers and the system of production. As an alternative, Brazilian planters instituted the colonato system, which preserved planter power over “the organization of labor and landscape management” (p. 29). Effectively, Brazilian planters were able to maintain some key exploitative elements of slavery under this labor system. Through this example, Marquese shows how the reconfiguration of capitalism during Reconstruction in the United States precipitated change in Latin American countries like Brazil.

From a different direction, Edward B. Rugemer’s essay, “Jamaica’s Morant Bay Rebellion and the Making of Radical Reconstruction,” illustrates the impact of the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion on Reconstruction policymaking. The reports of the violent rebellion in Jamaica back in the United States, and fears that the same could occur in the South, influenced Congress to enact legislation and enforcement measures (e.g., the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and Reconstruction Acts of 1867) that would ensure political rights for black men and a future for them in the post-emancipation United States. Rugemer emphasizes the great consideration that Republicans gave to the meaning of the rebellion in terms of its implications for the course of Reconstruction, which further shows the direct impact the rebellion had on the shaping of Reconstruction policy.

In terms of diplomacy, Don H. Doyle’s essay, “Reconstruction and Anti-Imperialism: The United States and Mexico,” examines US foreign policy in the aftermath of the US Civil War. Doyle focuses on the US role in expelling the French from Mexico in 1867 as an indication of “spirit of republican camaraderie” that was inherent to US foreign policy in Latin America during the Reconstruction Era (pp. 6-7).
The transnational framing of US Reconstruction literature has also contributed to further scholarly interest in the ex-Confederate migration to Latin America. Todd W. Wahlstrom’s book *The Southern Exodus to Mexico: Migration across the Borderlands after the American Civil War* (2015) argues that the desire to create surrogate Souths in Mexico was not the driving force behind the migration of a few thousand ex-Confederates to the nation between 1865 and 1866. Rather, it was the pursuit of economic prosperity, which they hoped could be obtained through the creation of agricultural and commercially driven colonies and the exploitation of Mexico’s transborder economic opportunities. For these Southerners, remaining in the US South was not the sole focus of their vision for life after the Civil War. Wahlstrom explains that they believed their future was contingent on the creation of an “entrepôt of southern commerce” through the colonization of Latin America (p. xvii). This dream inevitably died with the failure of Southern colonization in places like Mexico, Brazil, Belize, and Venezuela, but Wahlstrom argues that it marked an important stepping stone in US efforts to “bridge economic borders” in Latin America during the second half of the nineteenth century (p. xxvii).

The literature review in this essay reflects the efforts of scholars of the US Civil War era to incorporate Latin America into what historians have traditionally described as the exceptional history
of the United States. Taken together, these studies present strong evidence for the argument that the ideologies and events most identified with the coming of the US Civil War, the war itself, and Reconstruction were deeply entangled with occurrences and ideologies present in Latin America at the same time. More broadly, they demonstrate that US economic, social, and political development during the nineteenth century was internationally interdependent.

Notes


Suggested Readings


