

**Book review. Alessandro Stanziani. Labor on the Fringes of Empire: Voice, Exit and the Law. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018**

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ALESSANDRO STANZIANI. *Labor on the Fringes of Empire: Voice, Exit and the Law*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. Pp. xiii, 334. Cloth \$109.00.

Alessandro Stanziani is a prolific scholar with an amazing record of publications, covering a wide field from economic history and law to Indian Ocean studies and the history of slavery and labor. The pervading theme in *Labor on the Fringes of Empire: Voice, Exit and the Law* is the relationship between “unfree” and “free” labor. The book consists of five separate studies, which are framed by an introduction, “Progress and (Un)Freedom,” and a conclusion, “Voice, Exit and the Law in Historical Perspective.”

In the first study, “Coercion, Resistance and Voice,” a theoretical platform is outlined—placing political institutions and law as important frameworks for the transition from forms of unfree to free labor. In the context of both British and French colonialism, legal provisions like the Masters and Servants Acts—placing labor contracts under criminal law legislation—were essential instruments for the recruitment and disciplining of labor, ensuring that violence, coercion, and unequal rights persisted in spite of the abolition of slavery. In the studies that follow, Stanziani demonstrates how such dynamics acted themselves out in colonial state practices in India, Mauritius, Réunion, and French Equatorial Africa.

The study of India—“Utilitarianism and the Abolition of Slavery in India”—is the central chapter in the book. Stanziani discusses an extensive literature debating the differences between Atlantic and Indian Ocean slavery, and the ideas of abolitionism that emerged in the two settings. His main focus is on British debates and sources documenting the ambiguities of British East India Company policy, which incorporated both a civilizing mission of “freedom” and also—through institutions of indirect rule—a relativist respect for local political cultures and hierarchies. This is a field to which research by scholars like

Richard Eaton, Indira Chatterjee, and Andrea Major has made important recent contributions. Stanziani introduces a multinational perspective, comparing British colonial practices with servitude and export of slaves from the French colonies in Pondicherry and on the Malabar Coast. He argues that both British practices of indenture and the French recruitment of *libres engagés* for the Mascarene Islands facilitated a transition from “status” to “contract,” within which the rights of laborers were drastically limited. Such a multinational and comparative approach has many promises and should also be made to include Portuguese, Dutch, and Danish colonial actors in India.

Stanziani’s chapters on Mauritius and Réunion—“Slavery, Abolition and the Contractarian Approach in the Indian Ocean: The Case of Mauritius” and “How Do You Say ‘Free’ in French?”—follow logically on his discussion of India and bring French debates around abolitionism to the fore. Mauritius is a particularly interesting case, since British and French colonial interests interacted, and their legacies have been important for the clashes surrounding citizenship aspirations by descendants of slaves and indentured laborers, which have been prominent in the postcolonial period. Comparing Mauritius and Réunion, Stanziani shows that the struggle for rights of unfree laborers more generally faced more violent opposition in Réunion, which continued to be a formal part of the French Empire.

In both the British and French cases, abolitionism and battles for the eradication of slavery in the late nineteenth century became banners for imperialist expansion. British antislavery campaigns aimed to delegitimize the competing imperial ambitions of the Portuguese and the French in particular. Discourses of a “civilizing mission” in France served a similar purpose. At the same time, violence, coercion, and forced labor continued to be prominent in both British and French colonial contexts, though with different ideological underpinnings. In the British case, these were often “Orientalist” and culturally relativist, while in the French African Empire, varieties of more direct racist classification were

prominent, when differentiations were made between the colonial subjects who might qualify for imperial citizenship, and the great majority who would not.

In the final study in the book—“The Welfare State and the Colonial World, 1880–1914: The Case of French Equatorial Africa”—Stanziani discusses how different notions of law and much more adverse conditions for labor applied in the so-called “heart of darkness” of Congo than in the Indian Ocean islands or even in French West Africa. While democratic rights, trade unionism, and labor contracts became common in France at the beginning of the twentieth century, this was rarely seen to conflict with the ways in which in the same period “inferior races” in Africa were systematically deprived of legal rights. In Congo, working through company concessions, “French colonialism showed its worst features” (291), and its atrocities matched those of King Leopold II’s neighboring Belgian colony. This was concealed from memory by French historiography right up to 1972, when Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch’s book *Le Congo au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires, 1898–1930* (Congo at the Time of the Large Concessionary Companies) was published (270). In terms of abolition, slavery was only “declared illegal” in French Equatorial Africa in 1905, while collaboration with local chiefs and toleration of slavery and the slave trade continued until World War II.

*Labor on the Fringes of Empire* is a tantalizing volume to engage with. It draws on a wealth of important material and discusses major issues of current international research interest regarding abolitionism and unfree and free labor. It is also a difficult book, whose language is often unidiomatic and challenging for the reader. The book has an enormous number of references, but they are mostly without page numbers, which means that it is difficult to trace the polemic of Stanziani’s discussion with positions in the literature, and to see exactly what it is that is specific and original about his own contribution. The connection between the five studies in the book and its overall conclusion could also have been made

more clear. What are the continuities and what are the breaks demonstrated in them between slavery, indenture, and more recent forms of contract labor? What is the outcome of the comparison between British and French practices of colonialism in this field? And were similarities or differences predominant?

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