

Lara, Silvia Hunold, Joseli Maria Nunes Mendonça, orgs. *Direitos e justiças no Brasil: Ensaios de história social*. Campinas: Editora Unicamp, 2006. 543 pp.

For many decades now, social historians have used legal documents to shed light on the lives of men and women who produced precious few written documents of their own. As scholars became more adept at “reading against the grain,” the voluminous court records surrounding criminal procedures, inheritance disputes, civil suits, and other legal entanglements became critical windows through which historians glimpsed the daily activities, beliefs, and struggles of slaves, workers, and other non-elite actors within Brazilian society.

While this creative use of legal documents will continue to pay dividends, a more recent trend in the Brazilian historiography is the attention paid by scholars to the related concepts of law, rights, and justice. Rejecting older notions that the legal system and the institutions of justice were simply mechanisms for elite domination, these newer studies are rooted in a belief that the arena of law was itself a site of continual conflict and contestation, an arena in which political action by elite and non-elite actors not only influenced the content of legislation, but also shaped how laws and legal rights were interpreted and applied. In 2003, a group of Brazilian and U.S. scholars interested in understanding the dynamics and implications of this conflict over law and rights gathered for a multi-day seminar at UNICAMP, an event that eventually led to the publication of the edited collection under review here.

Although the development of law, legal practices, and rights are central features of each essay, the fourteen contributions in this volume are extremely wide ranging in theme and chronological coverage. The collection opens with Patrícia Melo Sampaio’s essay examining Portuguese/indigenous relations in the 18th century and closes with Beatriz Kushnir’s exploration of censorship during the military government. In between, the chapters examine corporal punishment in the Brazilian navy, various legal struggles related to slavery, conflicts surrounding land ownership and property rights (one essay each for the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries), and the actions of free workers to achieve rights and protections over the late 19th and 20th century. Given the volume’s broad chronological parameters, as well as its eclectic thematic coverage, potential readers are only likely to find one or two articles that really peak their interest. At the same time, *Direitos e Justiças no Brasil* reminds historians of the importance of looking well beyond the text of laws when thinking about the effective rights and protections afforded a nation’s inhabitants.

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