

however, may feel his arguments are nonetheless held back by his ambitious claims. To situate his thesis about the decline of the nation-state, Savage criticizes towering historians and historical sociologists such as E.P. Thompson and Barrington Moore for “their weak conception of temporality and duration” (p. 284). Savage himself is reluctant to offer his own theory of change other than noting that capital accumulation inherently incorporates the past. That is true, but how accumulation has changed goes unmentioned. Indeed, it is striking Savage avoids the extensive research and debates about declining inequality between 1945 and 1973 and then massive rise in the neoliberal era.

By constantly invoking the “weight of the past” as an inexorable force rearing its head without explaining how and why, Savage’s book comes off teleological. In his discussion on the return to “visceral” inequality by race and gender, he notes that history is “back with a vengeance” but then immediately says, “[o]f course, history never went away” (p. 197). Why did inequality return, and in what ways is it different than before? Walling off the present from history is an issue he is right to flag. Yet, without differentiating how the present is different *within* history is also problematic. Put differently, for a book foregrounding Marx, the reader will not find anything about dialectical change.

MATTHEW SOENER, Assistant Professor, University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign, Urbana-Champaign, IL, USA

Professor Soener studies political economy, inequality, and climate change.

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Wage-Earning Slaves: Coartación in Nineteenth-Century Cuba. By *Claudia Varella* and *Manuel Barcia*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020. 236 pp. Hardcover, \$85.00. ISBN: 978-1-68340-165-0.

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Reviewed by Cyrus Veeseer

The title of this excellent study may be somewhat misleading to non-specialists. Rather than examining all slaves who earned wages—Cuban law allowed enslaved people to earn and keep money of their own—it focuses on a special legal category known as *coartados*. These slaves, having agreed with their owners on a purchase price for their freedom, had made a down payment and thus begun a legal process known as *coartación*. The literal meaning of that word is “restriction” or “limitation” since, under Cuban law, slave owners were not permitted to sell or raise the price of a slave with *coartado* status. *Coartación*, or

gradual self-purchase, seemed to open an avenue toward manumission for slaves able to fully pay their appraised value. As this volume demonstrates in painful detail, however, in nearly all cases, *coartación* was in fact “nothing but a chimera” (p. 33).

The authors examine the nineteenth century, as Cuba grew into the world’s largest producer of cane sugar with a parallel increase in enslaved workers. At first *coartación* remained a private agreement between slave and owner, but after 1842 the state intervened with regulations—and taxes. Much of the story told here revolves around the efforts of slave owners to avoid formalization of the *coartación* status that their slaves had a right to demand. Owners made verbal agreements that were later impossible to verify or evaded registration of written contracts, leaving *coartados* in a legal limbo when disagreements arose, as they often did. The sheer number of laws and regulations in play and the diverse officials involved—from *síndicos*, supposedly defenders of the slaves, to notaries, scribes, bailiffs, state attorneys, police, and even mayors—multiplied the opportunities for delay, fraud, and bribery that worked against slaves.

What seemed to be a narrow but viable path to freedom thus became a nightmare for most *coartados*. Their special legal status encouraged owners to avoid the promised protections by enlarging an “unofficial, underground market” (p. 18). When *coartados* appealed to authorities to defend their rights, they often found themselves placed in the custody of a “benevolent” institution, the *depósitos judiciales*, or public shelters. Without clear documentation of their status, “the *depósito* became a place where slaves’ rights simply vanished” (p. 84). While awaiting adjudication of their claims, *coartados* were leased out in a way not unlike convict leasing in the US. The *depósitos* then confiscated their wages, filling their coffers with the income *coartados* needed to complete their self-purchase.

Not surprisingly, the authors faced evidentiary obstacles in attempting to shed light on the shadow world of *coartación*. “The difficulty of obtaining certain basic sources of data has been extremely limiting,” they note, making quantification impossible (p. 11). That said, the book offers glimpses of the lives of enslaved individuals working to buy their freedom. Havana and other towns offered more chances to earn wages than plantations, and *coartados* strongly preferred cities to the countryside. Women took jobs as domestics, seamstresses, laundresses, and cooks, and probably outnumbered male *coartados*, in Havana at least. Presumably, the goal of freedom overcame the “incentive problem” Adam Smith famously identified: “a person who can acquire no property, can have no other interest but to eat as much, and to labour as little as possible.” We learn, for example, that the

*coartada* Desideria Granados saved the significant sum of 612 pesos “through privations,” and that another, Blas Cagigal, worked as a drover and stevedore to attain “in just a few months . . . one-third of what he had attained in his twenty-eight years” toiling on a sugar plantation (pp. 72, 76–77). Slaveowners and government officials left a more robust paper trail than the enslaved, however, and the authors have more to say about the legal limbo that embroiled *coartados* than their daily lives and labors.

In places, the text is so faithful to the complexity and ambiguity of *coartación* and its administration that details overwhelm the narrative’s through lines. That said, readers interested in business history will find much to appreciate in the explanation of the power struggle between the private sector—that is, slaveowners—and a colonial government striving to direct economic growth. The planters’ evasion of taxes, fees, and regulation is a central theme throughout.

Early on in Cuba’s first war of independence (1868–1878), rebels declared a qualified emancipation, and Madrid responded with the Moret Law of 1870, liberating older slaves and young children. The writing may have been on the wall for the slave system, but the colonial government and planters found in *coartación* a way to delay the inevitable. In 1880 slavery was reborn as the *Patronato*, with former slaves still bound to work for former owners, but now with payment of modest wages. “For Spain, channeling slaves toward freedom via *coartación* eventually became the key to postponing the dismantling of slavery” (p. 128). Even so, by 1886 the *Patronato* collapsed, and slavery in Cuba ended.

While the authors do not speculate about the percentage of *coartados* who actually succeeded in purchasing their freedom, they conclude that “*coartación* became, almost without exception, false manumission” (p. 146). In the end what emerges in this slim volume is a social and economic horror story, in which the legal possibility of freedom through *coartación* begets a parallel system ensuring that freedom could never be attained.

CYRUS VEESER, *Professor, History, Bentley University, Waltham, MA, USA*

*Professor Veese’s research interests include modernization in colonies and less-developed countries (LDCs), Caribbean and Latin American history, and US foreign economic policies in the interwar period.*

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