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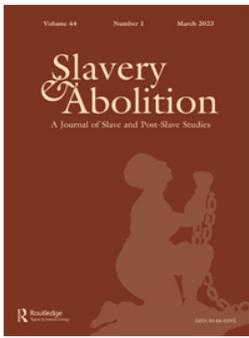
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The Abolition of Slavery in the South American Republics

Natalia Sobrevilla Perea 

ABSTRACT

This article studies how slavery was finally abolished in the Spanish-speaking republics of South America and how these processes were connected. Although slavery was not as important in these countries as it was in Brazil or Cuba, it remained relevant in certain regions, even after the slave trade was abolished and free-womb laws and state manumission policies were implemented. In Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, slavery did not legally end until mid-century when civil wars pitted progressive liberals against conservatives who wanted to retain slavery. Parliamentary means secured abolition north of the continent, while further south abolition was achieved as ideologically charged civil wars necessitated slave recruitment. Just as at independence, this need for soldiers brought free-womb laws and the end of the slave trade. For thirty years the enslaved sought to change their situation through manumission, legally challenging slavery and by fleeing and rebelling. But it was not until the tension between freedom and slavers' right to property became an issue for liberals at mid-century that slavery ended in these republics in the space of four years.

KEYWORDS

Abolition; Spanish South America; Argentina; Colombia; Ecuador; Peru; Uruguay; Venezuela; nineteenth century; liberalism

*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*¹

Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, January 1849

Introduction

This article aims to contribute to the discussion of abolition in those several countries of Spanish-speaking South America where it had remained important, although not as central as in those described as 'slave societies'. Debates on abolition in the Americas tends to focus on the experiences of the United States, Cuba and Brazil where slavery remained hugely important for much longer. Slavery nevertheless played a big part in the economy of many other countries in South America that are better characterized as 'societies with slaves'. In Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, slavery had been in decline since independence and gradual abolition was

CONTACT Natalia Sobrevilla Perea  n.sobrevilla@kent.ac.uk

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being attempted, but slavery only ended and in the space of just four years at mid-century. This was in large part because liberals believed that independence-era promises had not been honoured, and that it was unacceptable to maintain slavery in the newly created states and thus clashed with conservatives, many of whom were slaveowners. During the wars of independence, the slave trade formally ended, and free-womb laws were enacted promising no one would be 'born a slave'. Yet legal trading resumed in the Argentine Confederation and briefly in Peru, while the illegal trade continued everywhere. Trade within the national borders did remain legal and people continued to be bought and sold until the very day of abolition. Even for children who were now born 'free', slaveowners treated them as if enslaved, buying and selling them and appropriating their labour.

Until very recently abolition in South America was studied mostly from national perspectives that paid less attention to the linkages to wider regional and global events.² Marcela Echeverri and Celso Castillo's 2019 dossier presented a novel transnational perspective that builds on Peter Blanchard's pioneering study on the impact that the wars of independence had on slavery, and took a continental perspective while still focusing on the linkages to the wider Atlantic World.³ As his work shows, slaves joined both loyalists and patriots in the wars, either voluntarily in exchange for freedom or had been conscripted, often to punish their owners.⁴ Independence has therefore been reconceptualised as an integrated and interconnected process that led to the creation of new nations. Echeverri builds on this perspective by challenging the notion that slavery was unimportant in the Spanish American mainland during the period known as the 'Age of the Second Slavery' because it was not as dominant as in Cuba or Brazil.⁵ Although her main focus is on what she describes as 'Old Colombia' (usually known as 'Gran Colombia') which until 1830 included the present day republics of Colombia, Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela, she also makes reference to the processes taking place in Peru and Argentina. Another addition to this literature is Lloyd Benton's article on how black male and female activists from the Caribbean and South America made key contributions to the US abolitionist movement in the 1830s and 40s.⁶ These approaches make it possible to place slavery and abolition in a wider geopolitical context.

Gradual abolition in the South American republics stalled, even though some of the enslaved managed to obtain freedom: their actions were extremely important, it was through self-purchase, rebelling and running away that the enslaved challenged and undermined slavery but despite all these efforts it nevertheless endured. Abolition was achieved when progressive liberals took power with varying degrees of force and just as in the United States, slavery ended through civil war. Intense conflict became an incentive for abolition as army enrolment of the enslaved became crucial. A notable exception was Chile where there were very few slaves, so abolition came early and was

accomplished right after independence in 1823. Further north in Mexico abolition also came soon after the creation of the republic and it was not gradual. As soon as the empire fell in 1824, individual states began to abolish slavery in their constitutions, following the United States pattern of having slave states and free states. By 1829 complete abolition was enshrined in Mexican law.⁷ Paraguay is another exception as slavery endured until 1869 when it was abolished during the war of the Triple Alliance amidst the need for slave recruitment.⁸ Brazil, the only empire in the hemisphere, did not face the same kinds of pressures to end slavery for military purposes even during the external and internal wars nor did it need to rely on the republican rhetoric of freedom. As Keila Grinberg has shown, the Empire sought to ensure its slaves would not be freed upon crossing borders using diplomatic channels to protect slaveowners' property.⁹

This article examines the abolition of slavery in several republics of South America. Firstly, by assessing the impact of the wars of independence; then by looking into how owners sought to reassert their control over the enslaved in some places by reinstating the trade and everywhere by treating those born free as enslaved; and, finally, it studies how radicalized liberals initiated civil wars that had abolition as an aim and required slave enlistment, and how these two things combined eventually led to constitutional change that enshrined abolition in law. Although these civil wars were deeply embedded in each national reality, they were also linked to wider global trends. The article discusses how gradual approaches and attempts by the enslaved to obtain freedom through legal and illegal means were an extremely important part of the abolition process, but it was these mid-century civil wars that gave the final push needed for abolition. Despite the progressives' best intentions to bring real change, the slave owners' financial situation was preserved as they were compensated while their former slaves often had to remain in their service. These cases share such similarities that studying them together provides a panorama of the regional and global trends that led to abolition.

Slavery in the South American Republics

Although not as important as either in Brazil or on the sugar producing Caribbean islands, the only places where slave arrivals had not increased exponentially by 1800 were Mexico, Central America and Chile. Coincidentally in all these new nations, slavery was abolished outright during the wars of independence or shortly after.¹⁰ In the rest of the continent slave importation continued growing during the age of revolution. As Alex Borucki has shown 'from 1777 to 1812, slave ships carried nearly 70,000 captives to the Río de la Plata', although most of these (42,000) did not come directly from Africa but indirectly through Brazil.¹¹ According to George Reid Andrews, by 1800 more Africans were arriving in Spanish America than ever before.¹² This was the case even as abolitionist efforts increased during the French Revolution due to the wars that led to the

independence of Haiti, and then gained huge momentum with the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807.¹³ Andrews provides some numbers that help gauge slavery's relative importance by 1800. Venezuela had 61% African-descendants, by far the largest black population (after Brazil and Cuba), but only 12% (112,000 people) were enslaved. In what corresponds to present-day Colombia, Andrews places the numbers of enslaved at 61,000 or 8% of the population, while the free Afro-descendants were 245,000 or 31%. In Peru, some 40,000 enslaved made up 3% of the population, with roughly the same number of free African-descendants, while in Ecuador only 5000 slaves remained, alongside 28,000 free African-descendants.¹⁴ It is important to remember, however, that even though the numbers were small, slave labour was crucial in specific regions and economic activities.

The wars of independence brought deep change, as those fighting on both sides saw slave enlistment as essential to bolster their armies. In some regions, loyalists were more successful in gaining slave support. This was because the enslaved did not trust the promises made by freedom fighters such as Simón Bolívar who were themselves slaveowners, even though they used the rhetoric of liberation and the metaphor of breaking chains to characterize their plight against Spain.¹⁵ In contrast in the southern part of the continent, the enslaved were much more likely to join the ranks of those fighting for liberation and due to the vicissitudes of war, it was in the Río de la Plata the slave trade was first abolished and the free-womb law first passed, both in 1813.¹⁶ In 1821 leaders in Peru and Colombia (then including Ecuador, Venezuela and Panama) passed similar laws expressing their ambition to bring a gradual end to slavery. These laws were a compromise needed to give an appearance that lawmakers were working towards ending slavery while at the same time maintaining the support of the slave owners; crucially, this also allowed slaves to become soldiers.

As soon as the wars of independence were over, efforts began to bring the enslaved back into their master's service: their children, who after 1821 had been born free, were brought up and treated as slaves, in fact frequently being bought and sold. Sarah Washbrook's recent study clearly shows how slavery was re-established in the province of Mérida in Venezuela.¹⁷ In this region 'rights to slave property were preserved during the insurgency and reinstated afterwards through Iberian slave law and republican manumission legislation'.¹⁸ This began, according to John Lombardi, from when the free-womb law was enacted in 1821, as it stipulated that the slave master had to raise and feed the child of their slaves for eighteen years, but that these 'man-umitted' children had to work for their parents' masters until that age.¹⁹ This legislation, similar to post-manumission British apprenticeship, also applied after 1830 in the former members of the Colombian union, Venezuela, Ecuador and the Republic of New Granada (present day Colombia and Panama). The pattern was repeated all over the continent and, as late as the

1860s, some *libertos* (those born free) were still treated as if enslaved in Buenos Aires.²⁰

The main aim of this legislation was to ensure that even as freedom was endorsed in principle, property was protected, and to that effect, in the countries that had been part of Colombia Manumission Juntas were set up to promote abolition. These aimed to raise cash through taxes to purchase slaves but were 'crippled from the start by financial insolvency and the resistance of local slaveowners'.²¹ In the regions where slavery played an important role in the economy, Manumission Juntas were hardly used. From the gold producing jungles of the Chocó where, as Yesenia Barragán has shown, women slave-owners and miners bought and sold slaves and their 'freed children', similarly in the highlands of Neiva where Russell Lohse has identified how 'areas with a large investment in slave property showed the greatest resistance to manumission; [while] where the institution of slavery already showed precipitous decline, emancipations were more likely'.²² This is also what happened in the province of Esmeraldas in Ecuador, where Rocío Rueda Novoa has shown that by 1846 very few slaves had been manumitted due to the region's poverty.²³

As there were no Manumission Juntas in Peru, some slave owners in New Granada attempted to recoup the value of their slaves by exporting them south of the border.²⁴ This led to an international incident in 1847 when there was a failed attempt to ship 500 slaves from the port of Barbacoas to Peru. Despite this, as Echeverri illustrates, smaller numbers were sold in local markets and many enslaved were transported to the Isthmus to build the railway.²⁵ Blanchard has shown how Peruvian slaveowners vigorously responded to attacks on the institution by linking slavery to the survival and restoration of the agricultural sector and claimed that slaves, having been brutalized for years, should not be freed until they were 'civilized', which was slightly contradictory as the other notion they promoted, was that slavery in Peru was benevolent.²⁶ One of the most popular assessments of the end of slavery has been proposed by Carlos Aguirre who argued that it was slaves themselves who gained their freedom either by running away or by purchasing manumission for family members and for themselves.²⁷ But as successful as this was at undermining slavery it remained an individual strategy as several laws were passed to extend the age until which the 'free' children of the enslaved had to continue serving their masters, reaching the age of fifty in Peru and Venezuela.²⁸ As not enough slaves managed to obtain manumission or run away, slavery did not become irrelevant, neither in places with large plantation systems nor in those where the enslaved lived in an urban setting mixed amongst the free African descended populations.

Conditions in the River Plate were quite different with great variations between provinces. In Buenos Aires, 30% of the population was African descended, but this meant only some 300,000 people.²⁹ Proximity to Brazil resulted in continued slave arrivals, even if officially the trade had been abolished. A

gradual approach was also taken and the 'freed' children of slaves were seen as 'pupils' that had to serve their masters until the age of fifteen or twenty (depending on the province and gender) and could be separated from their mothers and sold as commodities from the age of two.³⁰ The law also stated that a peso had to be paid per month and deposited with the police for when they were to become free, although this rarely happened.³¹ In 1831 slaves recently brought to Buenos Aires had to be registered with the police and could be sold as servants.³² In Uruguay between 1832 and 1834, it was actually the local government that contracted Brazilian merchants to bring 'African colonists', under the age of sixteen and once arrived they were sold to cover the expenses of the trip and were put to work as slaves.³³ In the province of Buenos Aires governor Juan Manuel de Rosas became the benefactor of both Blacks and slaves. Although he had allowed slave trading to resume in 1831, eight years later he abolished it just as in 1836 he had overturned legislation to draft all male free men over the age of fifteen.³⁴ But as Ricardo Salvatore has shown, this was just to enhance his position with the African descended populations in Buenos Aires, because in reality slavery still continued, even though its importance continued to diminish.³⁵

Slave owners gained the upper hand in the first couple of decades after independence and reasserted their control over the enslaved by reinstating the slave trade and by treating those born free, *libertos*, as enslaved, but soon enough the spectre of war reopened the possibility of ending slavery. Magdalena Candiotti has explored this in detail calling the thirty years between 1813 and 1853 the 'time of the *libertos*'.³⁶ In the province of Popayán in present day Colombia, local chieftains clashed for the control of power between 1839 and 1842 and one side enlisted slaves to their army in exchange for freedom. This continued to undermine slavery, but not end it.³⁷ Where army recruitment really did become interlinked with the end of slavery was in Uruguay with the Reserve Army created in December 1842. The legislation introduced in the context of war recognized the free-womb law of 1813 and falsely asserted that no slaves had been imported since 1830, when, in fact, the last arrivals had continued up to a year before this abolition decree.³⁸ The law's main aim was to recruit as many former slaves as possible so they would defend the city of Montevideo from invasion, while slave owners claimed a 300-peso compensation per slave taken by the army. As war continued, the other side decided to implement their own abolition law in 1846: this version did not include any provision demanding freed slaves to enlist but did maintain the promise of compensating slave owners.³⁹

Although slavery in these countries was not as central as it was in Brazil, Cuba or the United States, it was still important and local elites were willing and able to fight against the processes set in motion during the wars of independence to provide gradual freedom. Both the enslaved and their masters employed all the tools at their disposal to obtain freedom or to maintain

slavery. Legislation differed widely and the Manumission Juntas seen in Colombia were not reproduced in either Peru or the River Plate where the slave trade was reinstated. The strategies used to appropriate the labour of those who had been born free was, however, generalized. The children of slaves were treated just as their parents for as long as the slave-owners were able to get away with it. The enslaved ran away, joined the armies and used the law to obtain freedom, but while slavery remained as a legal category collective action was limited. Slavery had to officially end and, for this to happen, there had to be an ideological push for abolition and wars requiring further slave recruitment.

Mid-century Progressive Liberals

After independence as conservative ideas regained strength, a new generation came of age convinced that it was time to end colonial institutions such as slavery. In the South Atlantic liberals took refuge in Montevideo in the newly created Republic of Uruguay from where they opposed Rosas, who was recognized as the head of a loose confederation of provinces in Argentina. Rosas courted trouble with France as he decided to enforce the law mandating that foreigners join local militias.⁴⁰ After months exchanging tense correspondence, the French Navy blockaded the Port of Buenos Aires in 1838. France and Britain competed over markets in this region, and both sought to secure anchorage in the South Atlantic. France sided with the Montevideo regime and, even if Britain had taken the Malvinas in 1830, it still managed to sign a new decree abolishing the slave trade with Rosas in 1839. When news of its ratification reached the other side of the River Plate at the end of 1840, the newspaper *El Constitucional* decried the hypocrisy and the self-interest motivating the governor.⁴¹ Tension increased when, in 1842 after defeat in battle, Montevideo was placed under siege. This led leaders in the city to abolish slavery, so enlistment could grow. A variety of anti-Rosas forces coalesced in Montevideo and, although fighting was not constant, the siege was long and draining, bringing together foreign mercenaries, exiles from Buenos Aires and recently manumitted slaves. As evidence for this, when explaining why the regime had decided to end slavery, the main newspaper *El Nacional* made it clear that the reason could be summarized in one word – *necessary*.⁴² The press is an ideal source to show how elites began to think about the ending of slavery and how ideas penetrated the public sphere.

Montevideo became the epicentre in the fight to maintain revolutionary values. The heading of the newspaper *El Nacional* depicted a phoenix flying with open wings while holding a ribbon inscribed with the words ‘equality, liberty and humanity’. James E. Sanders has described how people in the Americas held on to this notion of ‘fraternity between people and nations, abolition as a marker of freedom and progress, and – most importantly – an equating of republicanism and liberty with civilization’.⁴³ A new generation of liberals were

convinced that the wars of independence had failed to bring real change and at mid-century, some of these liberals gained ground through elections and uprisings. In Ecuador liberals took over the government in March 1845 when General José María Urvina ousted the conservative president and brought down the constitution enacted in 1843.⁴⁴ According to Juan Maiguashca, the ‘marcista revolutionaries’ (because they rose in March) created a party they called ‘democratic’ and argued that ‘equality’ was ‘a principle without which there could be no republic’.⁴⁵ Liberals controlled both the presidency and congress, and foreigners described them as being of mixed-ethnic origin and members of the middle-classes. The ‘marcistas’ enacted laws that fostered ‘the principles of equality and fraternity of citizens’.⁴⁶

Venezuela’s presidential election in 1847 brought former independence-era hero General José Tadeo Monagas to power with the support of conservatives and their historic leader. Monagas decided to veer over to the liberals who had been campaigning for several years in the press against what they described as the oligarchy. Newspapers such as *el Liberal* (1836–1848), *el Republicano* (1844–1852) and *el Venezolano* (1840–1846) expressed the vision of a new generation of political actors who wanted to bring change.⁴⁷ On 24 January 1848 Monagas decided to shut down Congress, and while conservatives condemned the move, liberals rejoiced seeing this as an opportunity to move their agenda forward. In his address to Congress, Monagas highlighted the importance of progress.⁴⁸ In 1849 in New Granada, liberals wanted to prevent the election of conservative candidates to the presidency, so they set up newspapers such as *El meteoro* expressly to tell people they should not vote for conservatives because this would bring blood and desolation instead of ‘progress, liberty, order and peace’.⁴⁹ Progressive forces grew in strength first publishing *El Progreso* in Bogotá on 9 April 1848. This weekly began with a quote in French by Dupunloup: ‘the peace we want is peace in freedom, peace in justice’.⁵⁰ They distributed their newspaper widely, including in areas with large slave populations such as Barranquilla, Barbacoas, Cartagena, Cali, Mompox, Panamá, Popayán, Quibdó and Santa Marta. Its pages were filled with constitutional analysis and reflections on the best form of government.

The civil war of the late 1830s and early 1840s had set the tone for the discussion of what changes were desirable and a decade later, liberals continued to debate them in the ‘Democratic societies’ they set up all around the country. Afro-Colombians sought through their political participation in them equality, which according to Sanders denoted first emancipation from slavery, but secondly the guarantee that the poor and people of colour would have the same rights as the rich and the whites, and finally it also meant social equality.⁵¹ In regions where slavery remained important such as Popayán, this resulted in political unrest and increasing violence as the question of abolition gained momentum. According to Eduardo Posada-Carbó, ‘electoral competition forced both parties to widen their appeal’ with followers of the liberal candidate

promising that 'the chains with which the oligarchy has oppressed the people will be broken'.⁵² Newspapers such as *El Progreso* published on a variety of issues, including possible constitutional reform and the development of socialism.⁵³ The election was finally resolved in March 1849 when the liberal candidate General José Hilario López was elected amid accusations of intimidating congressmen.⁵⁴

Peru also faced electoral strife in 1850 and 1851 which led to a fully-fledged civil war in 1853, even as the country had just experienced its most peaceful period since independence, as the export of the bird-dung fertilizer, guano, had ensured some stability. Congress met regularly to debate constitutional change and, specifically, whether those who were illiterate should still be allowed to vote given they had only been granted that right on a temporary basis, but no proposals to abolish slavery were ever made.⁵⁵ Liberals emerged victorious from this debate and all throughout 1848, the press across the country reported on a variety of international events in newspapers such as *El Democrata Americano* published in the city of Cuzco. In July 1849, in preparation for the presidential election, a new political club appeared aptly named *el Club Progresista* and they published a weekly called *El Progreso* to promote their ideas and the changes they wanted to see implemented.⁵⁶ After months of campaigning, the *progresistas* finally presented their candidate who also happened to be one of the country's largest slaveowners, but he was not elected.⁵⁷

Instead, a conservative became Peru's president after an election that lasted months because just as in New Granada, Venezuela and in Ecuador, it was carried out indirectly through electoral colleges established over vast territories. Free African-descendants had the right to vote, but even so and in contrast to New Granada, Peruvian liberals were unable to reach power through the ballot box. In Ecuador they did so because of the 1845 revolution, whereas in Venezuela the elected president had made it to power with the support of the conservatives only to oust them from Congress. In New Granada, López had been elected by Congress, although his enemies argued this had been achieved due to threats. The fact that all presidents at that time were generals is evidence that power was still held firmly by men of the sword, even if influenced by liberalism.

An exception to this experience of presidential elections and the rise of liberalism was seen in Buenos Aires. Rosas was a landowner, not a general, even if he commanded important militias. He had no ambition to rule over the whole of Argentina but remained at the helm of the Province of Buenos Aires through a system of controlled elections where he did not face real opposition. All those who were against him had been forced into exile and many had sought refuge in Montevideo, which was why he placed the port city under siege. Rosas ruled without any opposition and elections were plebiscites on a single slate of candidates, which allowed him to claim legitimacy both internally and externally.⁵⁸ This meant that in the 1840s there was no real scope for liberalism to develop in

Buenos Aires, so instead it grew in importance in other provinces and most specifically in Montevideo which in 1850 was on the verge of falling to Rosas. Fearing a possibly devastating war, Justo José de Urquiza, governor of the province of Entre Ríos and a former ally of Rosas, decided to challenge him in early 1851. This brought an end to the long period when the governor of Buenos Aires had comfortably remained in power with support from Afro-descendants in the province, even though he had actually done very little for them.

At mid-century all the countries in South America where slavery was still an important, albeit declining institution, found a new generation of liberals fighting for progress in the ballot box, in the press or in open rebellion. From Venezuela to the Río de la Plata liberals tried to move their agenda forward. This coincided with new capitalist developments that brought American and European economies closer together. The 1848 revolutions that had abolition amongst its main goals, and also took place in this period, increased the importance of the ideas of equality, liberty and fraternity. Constitutional debates occupied the press all around the western world and a cursory examination of the ideas being debated in South America shows how prevalent they had become. Although slavery was surely an institution in decline, and many steps had been taken to achieve gradual abolition, it nevertheless endured.

Abolition

Even as many of the enslaved obtained freedom through legal and illegal means, slavery remained and the same newspapers that carried ideas promoting equality, freedom and fraternity published paid advertisements in search of runaways as well as adverts for buying and selling enslaved people. So how did the cascade-like process that finally led to abolition happen? Ecuador and Bolivia started in 1851, New Granada followed in 1852, Argentina in 1853 and finally Venezuela and Peru abolished slavery in 1854. Although each abolition happened because of its own internal reasons, it is no coincidence it happened in such a short space of time at mid-century. Global economic and ideological factors led to further armed confrontation which ended slavery.

It is no surprise that abolition happened first in Bolivia and Ecuador where there was the smallest number of slaves. Although in the former freedom had been declared in several constitutions, it was only in the 1851 charter that slavery was explicitly abolished by liberally inclined Manuel Isidoro Belzu upon defeating his conservative foe José Ballivián in a civil war. In Ecuador armed struggle was also required, even though liberals had achieved success as early as 1845. General Urvina manoeuvred himself into power in July 1851. Originally from Guayaquil, he had the backing of cacao producing elites in that region, who having seen their revenues increase exponentially during the 1850s, decided it was time to manumit their slaves, claim

compensation and hire workers.⁵⁹ Urvina, whose guard of honour was made up of freed slaves, proclaimed abolition as soon as he deposed his predecessor, but the Manumission Law was not passed until 1852. The National Constituent Assembly ratified it, after long debates between the members of the highland and lowland oligarchies. The former wanted slavery to remain, while the latter wanted to have salaried workers in their cacao producing estates.⁶⁰ Urvina also counted on the support of the 'democratic societies' created in Quito by artisans who proclaimed the importance of liberty and equality and felt slave labour was unfair competition.⁶¹

Despite having all this support and absolute control over government, manumission was still gradual, and protection was still granted to the slave owners who were compensated for their loss of property. As Rueda Novoa details, the law had fifty-one articles that specified every aspect of freedom and sought to control it. The political leaders of each region were in charge of assessing the price of each slave, registering their name and that of their owners, and if this step was not taken, the enslaved would be free and no indemnity granted. Those who were old or infirm were to be free but could stay in the house of their former owners if they so wished. Immediate freedom was also granted to all those born after 21 July 1821 when the free-womb law had been passed. The law established that after certain number of months some slaves would be freed, with a final date set for 6 March 1854. Local governments organized ceremonies where former slaves received their freedom papers and their former masters would get bills of exchange worth the value of the freed slaves. According to official sources during these ceremonies, former slaves 'shed tears of joy, tearing their clothes, dragging themselves through the vestibules and pronouncing words of high significance'.⁶² Alongside this display of emotion rejoicing over freedom, it is important to consider as Rueda Novoa notes, that the former slaves became 'freed' but not 'free': they could not become citizens with voting rights.⁶³

When the government of New Granada abolished slavery in 1852, the tensions between the right of the slaves to freedom and the right of their masters to their property also surfaced. The election of General José Hilario López to the presidency in 1849 led to the rise to power of a coalition of 'artisans, peasants, and freedmen as well as merchants and intellectuals' who, as in Ecuador, organized 'democratic societies' which in Bogotá boasted more than 4000 members.⁶⁴ As Lohse notes, artisans were interested in the abolition of slavery because they wanted to eliminate the economic competition of enslaved workers, peasants and freedmen hoping that breaking up slave-owners properties would provide them with access to land, while merchants wished for more consumers, and radical intellectuals believed in the idealism of the 1848 French Revolution. Once in the presidency, López treaded water carefully assuring slaveowners that 'abolition would proceed only with indemnification, as the authors of the law of Cúcuta in 1821 had intended'.⁶⁵ In spite of this,

conservatives in the Cauca valley found gradual manumission so intolerable that they rose in rebellion in April 1851 to fight against what they perceived to be the terror imposed by former slaves. A prominent slaver owner 'railed that Liberals had filled the heads of "blacks" with the ideas of communism'.⁶⁶

The uprising lasted only for four months, as conservatives soon realized that liberals had wide backing whereas they were unable to mobilize support for their cause. The civil war had devastating effects on the once powerful slave-owning elite in southwest New Granada, and many Afro-Colombians were persuaded to fight because they wanted to ensure that slavery would end for good.⁶⁷ While conflict was still raging, a law was issued on 21 May 1851 announcing that all slaves would be free on 1 January 1852. In provinces unaffected by war, slave owners intensified their efforts to receive payment from Manumission Juntas. To achieve this, they had to produce papers showing the dates of birth and proof of legal ownership, and some found this difficult. But legislation favoured slaveowners admitting 'supplementary proofs' of ownership in lieu of documents if the Junta was convinced of the veracity of the claim.⁶⁸ Studies of particular regions show that the majority of slaveowners sought compensation and many waited until the last moment to manumit their slaves, some even managing to delay emancipation until after the official date of 1 January 1852. Just as in Ecuador, ceremonies which included music were organized to celebrate slaves receiving their official papers.⁶⁹ The new constitution of 1853 enshrined this freedom and adopted direct elections enfranchising all men.⁷⁰

Ideological radicalization also fuelled war in the Río de la Plata leading to final abolition. Uruguay had led the way with the partial abolition of 1842 and the final one in 1846. Montevideo received many exiles who opposed Rosas, but the coalition against him grew in scope when Urquiza joined the forces fighting against the governor of Buenos Aires in 1851. An alliance against Rosas brought his enemies together, and this included the armies of the provinces of Entre Ríos and Corrientes, the besieged city of Montevideo and the Brazilian Empire.⁷¹ The main battle was fought at Caseros, just outside Buenos Aires where Rosas' forces were defeated without much of a fight; after this, troops were in total disarray and the urban plebs went out to pillage.⁷² Once Urquiza was installed in Buenos Aires, governing was difficult as port-city elites were suspicious they would be forced to accept unfavourable conditions. Similarly to the experiences seen in New Granada and Peru, the newly created official government newspaper in Buenos Aires was called *El Progreso* which shows how important this concept had become. Elections were organized and candidates close to Urquiza were chosen for a National Convention that would sanction a constitution.⁷³ The main issue in contention was not slavery, but the balance of power between Buenos Aires and the provinces. In spite of not being considered the most important issue, slavery was nevertheless abolished in the 1853 constitution, as article fifteen announced that 'there are

no slaves in Argentina, and those that exist will cease to be slaves once this constitution is sworn, and a special law will regulate the compensation to the owners'.⁷⁴ Slavery had finally been abolished, but when Buenos Aires rejected the constitution and rose in rebellion against Urquiza in September 1853, slavery continued to be legal in that province until it too finally accepted the constitution in 1861.⁷⁵ This was after the notion of 'free soil' was reintroduced in 1860 so slaves running away from Brazil would not be returned.⁷⁶

So even if Venezuela and Peru were the last countries to legally abolish slavery, it did in fact linger in Buenos Aires for longer. In Venezuela, ever since President José Tadeo Monagas shut down Congress at the start of 1848, the desire to abolish slavery had often been expressed. In 1849 the governor of the province of Apure asked the newly elected Congress to enact abolition, but his proposal did not garner enough votes.⁷⁷ A year later the liberal deputy for the province of Cumaná made another attempt to abolish slavery, and this time it was rejected due to lack of funds to cover the cost of the payments that had to be made to the slave-owners. Renewed attempts were made in 1851 and 1852 with proposals by deputies from Caracas and Barquisimeto that were still rejected.⁷⁸ As its neighbours and former members of the Colombian union had finally abolished slavery, the desire to reach an agreement through discussion in Congress increased to such a degree that in March 1854, the president himself sent a legal proposal in which incumbent José Gregorio Monagas (brother of the former president) stated that 'slavery is as the great Bolívar said an infraction of all laws and a violation of all rights, Venezuela must not appear to the whole world with the terrible stain of slavery'.⁷⁹ In spite of this, Monagas was very clear that his intention was to provide compensation to the slave owners.

The law in Venezuela had sixteen articles: the first one simply declared slavery abolished, and the second made it clear that those who had been born free or had been manumitted had no legal obligation to work for their former masters. The third article stated that any slave arriving in Venezuela would be free and the fourth that slave owners would receive an indemnity. To pay for the cost of freeing slaves, new taxes would be raised from alcohol distilling.⁸⁰ More details on the repayment process were given, but most interestingly the system would be very similar to the Manumission Juntas that had existed since 1821.⁸¹ Some 12,093 slaves were freed, and 11,285 manumitted people were released from obligations to their former owners. On 25 March 1854, a ceremony was organized in Caracas reminiscent of the ones seen in New Granada and Ecuador, with music, flags and plenty of people who gathered to celebrate freedom.⁸² Although Venezuela was the only country where abolition was achieved without a civil war, this did not mean it was unopposed. Compensation helped with acceptance as slaveowners received around 190 pesos for each of their former slaves and the state acquired a debt of around 443,000 pesos.

The last country to abolish slavery at mid-century was Peru and it did so during a civil war that pitted liberals against conservatives. The process there took slightly longer as liberals had failed to take over the presidency in the 1851 elections.⁸³ Although in decline, slavery was still important, even as Chinese indentured workers became a new source of labour.⁸⁴ Liberals were convinced that slavery should end, and radicals from Chile, who had sought refuge in Lima and included Francisco Bilbao, animated the youth to think about abolition. Conservatives from Colombia such as the brothers Julio and Sergio Arboleda, slaveowners from the Cauca valley, had also ended up exiled in Lima after their failed revolution in 1851.⁸⁵ Discussion of what was happening in New Granada and Ecuador led some to fear that 'communism was coming' as an advertisement in *El Correo de Lima* stated in 1851 saying that as in the north: 'soon they will not want us to have them [slaves] here in Peru'.⁸⁶

In contrast to the countries that used to be part of Colombia, where slavery was abolished through Congressional means perhaps given their common experience with Manumission Juntas, in Peru there were no parliamentary proposals to end slavery and abolition happened in circumstances like Uruguay's. In 1853 civil war broke out when prominent liberal Domingo Elías, a slaveowner, the main importer of Chinese workers and failed presidential candidate in 1851, accused the president of corruption and of not using the god-sent resources of guano to improve people's lives. Unable to organize, liberals called upon former president Ramón Castilla, who had been in power from 1845 to 1851 to fight for their side. Cornered, incumbent president José Rufino Echenique offered freedom to all the slaves who joined his army, but the response from the other side was quick and on 3 December 1854, Castilla decreed freedom for all slaves and compensation to all owners.⁸⁷ Castilla had no real interest in abolition; in fact, the brief attempt to reopen the slave trade with New Granada in 1847 to allow rich landowner Julio Arboleda to export some of his slaves for profit took place during his previous administration, and even if this ultimately did not happen, it shows Castilla did not care much about abolition. The National Convention installed to enact a new constitution was elected with direct suffrage allowing all former slaves to vote, while those who had fought with the Echenique regime were barred. Each slaveowner received 300 pesos in compensation in a process marred by corruption, as many claimed for slaves that were already free or dead.⁸⁸

Abolition was finally accomplished under very similar circumstances in all these South American republics. At mid-century the rise of progressive liberalism led to new thinking that highlighted freedom and equality. Artisans who thought slavery was unfair competition supported them, as did some slaveowners who wanted to modernize their business. Oligarchs from Guayaquil and land-owning politicians like Elías in Peru saw manumission as a possibility to capitalize and to get hold of better sources of labour. Liberals fought to gain

power and influence the agenda and abolition was undoubtedly one of their main objectives, partly because the institution was already so battered but also in response to the global condemnation of slavery emerging from the 1848 revolutions. Formal abolition was still needed, and compromises were made to appease slaveowners whose interests were still upheld; despite the progressive rhetoric, then, slaves were still understood as property, a right which liberals sought to protect by providing compensation to slaveowners.

Conclusion

The tension within liberalism between the ideals of equality and liberty against the notion of protecting property explains why slavery endured for so long in these republics. In contrast to Mexico, Chile and Central America where slavery came to an end earlier, in Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela, slavery continued to be important enough to prevail for longer. In all these countries slavery was strengthened after independence, and in some like Uruguay, Argentina and Peru, new slaves were imported as the slave trade was reinstated, however fleetingly. In all these republics the children of slaves who had been given freedom upon birth were treated as if enslaved, until they reached their majority. They were bought and sold like commodities and in some places like Venezuela and Peru, the age until which they had to serve was extended. The Manumission Juntas created to gradually end slavery in Colombia were ineffective and failed in their aim to substantially reduce the numbers of slaves, while laws to force owners to provide money and land in Argentina to those born free were disregarded. All these strategies meant that slavery endured despite the initial onslaught brought by independence and explains why abolition was only achieved in the context of confrontation when more men were needed to fight. This coincided with the rise of progressive liberalism, that found powerful allies in artisans and even some slaveowners who wanted to modernize. Uruguay was the first place where this came to head, but at mid-century, liberals became emboldened all over the continent pressing for abolition, convinced they were ushering in a new age of progress. Property, however, had to be protected so, unsurprisingly, payment of compensation to slave-owners was widespread.

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Notes on contributor

Natalia Sobrevilla Perea is Professor of Latin American History at the University of Kent, Cornwallis North West, Canterbury CT2 7NZ, UK. Email: natalia.sobrevilla@kent.ac.uk

ORCID

Natalia Sobrevilla Perea  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9592-7551>