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Estas ponencias –y el conjunto de comunicaciones, de gran calidad–, variadas en su temática y en sus propuestas, son un ejemplo más de las investigaciones y preocupaciones actuales, así como de la viveza

de la práctica de la historia agraria en España en los siglos modernos.

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Robin Law, Suzanne Schwarz y Silke Strickrodt (Eds.)
Commercial Agriculture, the Slave Trade and Slavery in Atlantic Africa

Woodbridge, James Currey, 2013, 272 páginas

Commercial Agriculture, the Slave Trade and Slavery in Atlantic Africa is a collective volume edited by three well-known historians of African History: Robin Law, Suzanne Schwarz and Silke Strickrodt. The book, containing eleven chapters plus introduction, gathers a selection of papers presented at a conference held in London in September 2010, sponsored by the German Historical Institute London, on the topic of «Commercial Agriculture in Africa as an alternative to the slave trade». This conference was a follow-up of a previous meeting held in Stirling in 1993 devoted to the introduction of «legitimate commerce» in Africa after the abolition of the slave trade. Both meetings engaged with a long-standing debate concerning the role of slave trade as hindering factor to the economic development of Africa, and the transformations brought about by the abolitionist movement in Europe with the suppression of the slave trade and the introduction of «legitimate commerce» in Africa, leading to a what Tony Hopkins called the *commercial transition* in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The chapters included in the volume explore multiple aspects of agricultural development and trade in African commodities in the periods pre- and post-Abolition. Together, they put forward four main innovative ideas. First, it is showed that the development of commercial agriculture in Africa had its roots in the pre-colonial period. In some regions, its rise preceded the opening of the Atlantic trade routes with Europe, as African markets located in specific areas (e.g. Upper Guinea) were producing and catering to the needs of the trans-Saharan slave trade circuits and caravans since earlier periods and later provided similar services to the European slavers, as shown by Green.

Secondly, it is demonstrated that the opening of the African commerce with Europe and the Americas contributed to further develop commercial agriculture in certain regions, either under the initiative of Africans and/or of Europeans. European presence and activities on the Atlantic African coast stimulated the development of commercial agriculture in two main ways. On the one hand, Europeans made

efforts to promote export agriculture in Africa. The first initiative dated from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when Portuguese and other Europeans settling in São Tomé, started growing sugar cane for export, as explained by Seibert. In the two following centuries other European projects to foster agriculture were tried in the Upper Guinean and Gold Coasts, analysed in detail in the chapters by Kriger and Law. On the other hand, the development of the transatlantic slave trade also contributed to the expansion of commercial agriculture in Atlantic Africa. The findings presented in the chapters by Eltis and Green make clear that the development of commercial agriculture went hand-in-hand with the slave trade. European and African producers, slavers and merchants often combined investments in both activities.

Thirdly, the evidence analysed in various chapters demonstrate that African commercial agriculture in pre- and post-Abolition periods have more continuities than scholars have ever imagined. The introduction of «legitimate commerce» in the early nineteenth-century should be, therefore, regarded as part of a process rather than as moment of rupture with the past. These continuities are visible, at least in three main ways: the failures and difficulties encountered by Europeans in their efforts to promote agriculture in the continent, the role of African farmers in the effective development of commercial agriculture, and the use of forms of slave labour in commodity production, as shown in the case studies authored by Hernaes, Everill, Olabimtan, Ferreira and Austin.

The fourth innovative idea in this volume is put forward by Gareth Austin. In the closing chapter of the book, Austin argues that the development of commercial agriculture in certain regions of Atlantic Africa, namely West Africa, appears to have resulted from a response of African farmers to changes in local markets triggered by endogenous factors closely linked with an internal decline in slave raiding and slave trade activities due to various reasons, rather than by European efforts to introduce «legitimate commerce».

Overall, by showing the early roots of commercial agricultural development in Atlantic Africa, the key role of African farmers in this process and the relationship between agricultural expansion and slave trade, the findings presented in this collection do, to a certain extent, contest the idea put forward by nineteenth-century abolitionists, and later expanded by development economists, social scientists and historians that the slave trade hampered the development of economically viable activities in Africa. Moreover, by demonstrating that the development of commercial agriculture and the «commercial transition» in Africa was a long process and a rather uneven one with multiple geographical and chronological variations, the ideas put forward in this volume open a new set of research questions in African History and will inspire further comparative analyses across time and space.

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