

The Plantation System throughout Jamaica and the Early Caribbean: An Epoch of Exploitation Ushers in Neoliberal Economics

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Introduction

The focus of this analysis is to explicate the historical developments of the Caribbean — specifically analyzing how the historical narrative and influence of colonialism transformed not only the topography, but also the psychology of Caribbean peoples. The analysis pertains to a survey of the plantation system, concentrating on the obvious economic advantages gained by the colonist over the colonized. This dichotomy, i.e., the demarcation between those who control the means of production and those who are disenfranchised by such means, constitutes an epoch of exploitation. As such, one must understand (1) how the ideology of superiority was propagated, (2) the importance of slavery for economic reformation and finally (3) the constant and necessary association between the church, on the one hand and the European politics on the other.¹

The Mandate to Civilize

Westerners and Europeans alike have romanticized the Caribbean and its people as exotic and adventurous, their lands are as fertile as their women — resources ripe for the taking. The alleged “discovery” and subsequent exploitation of the Caribbean serves — *prima fasciae* — as a template or prototype for colonial conquest. For colonizers, be they English, Portuguese, Spanish, French or other, the economic advantages gained from “exploration” were too great to ignore. Ships left port; explorers, accompanied by missionaries traversed “wild” and traitorous terrain to “civilize” the “savages”. The guise of religious beneficence served to cloak the greed,

¹ Chinua Achebe writes in his book, *Things Fall Apart*, “stories were already gaining ground that the white man had not only brought a religion but also a government” (Achebe, 1959, p. 155).

which would generate unimaginable wealth for colonizers. Justification, however, was required prior to the establishment of the plantation system, prior to the enslavement of a people — and that justification came from the church. With that justification, Europe had divine authority for conquest.

The means for economic expansion and development was buttressed by the inhumanity and indignity of the European colonizers for the Caribbean and Caribbean people. Clive Thomas writes,

The newly installed system of production was, from the outset, oriented almost exclusively toward serving the needs of European expansion and development. This ultimately became possible through killing off large numbers of indigenous people and destroying their culture.

The possibility for the unmitigated exploitation of a peoples' land, their values, and social norms was fostered by the blinding and all-encompassing greed, which facilitates atrocities of the most deplorable forms. The plantation system, firmly established within the Caribbean, serves as an example, *par excellence*. Sixteenth century Jamaica, for the sake of argument, served as a primary sugarcane exporter to Europe, despite the fact that sugarcane was not indigenous to the island of Jamaica.²

The introduction of sugarcane into the fields of Jamaica offset or displaced indigenous consumption crops. This process of introducing non-indigenous “cash-crops” for European consumption creates a fourfold disadvantage for the native Jamaicans and their island. First, as a leading exporter of sugarcane to Europe during the 16th century, the fields of Jamaica were depleted of necessary nutrients, which resulted from a lack of crop rotation. Second, as a leading exporter of sugarcane to Europe, Jamaicans, themselves, were not privy to the raw material or

² Thomas, Clive. *The Poor and the Powerless: Economic Policy and Change in the Caribbean*. (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1988). p.16.

the products of their labor. Hence as laborers, Jamaicans working on sugarcane plantations, were disenfranchised insofar as they had no right to the agricultural crops they planted, weeded and harvested. Third, the instrumentality of slavery meant that the cost of production, viz., sustaining the lives of the slaves, was the only expenditure other than the cost associated with hiring overseers. The surplus capital generated from slave labor could then be used to purchase additional laborers or used to generate even more capital. That is to say, the capital generated by the sale of sugarcane in Europe could be used to buy a variety of commodities, which would then be sold for profit and thereby generate even more capital. Thus, for example, capital that is initially generated from the Jamaican sugarcane plantations would yield additional capital after commodities exchange. This Marxist account of the plantation system holds true both in matters of compounding capital and in matters of alienating Jamaican people from the means of production. Finally, the fourth disadvantage inherent to the colonial plantation system pertains to the establishment of economic dependency. Intuitively, one may suspect that the colonizers are economically dependent on the resources produced by those colonized and ultimately on the labor of the natives. This, however, is incorrect. It is the colonized, i.e., the plantation workers who are economically dependent on the colonizers for sustenance. It is important to remember that the economics of the plantation system does not, itself, depend on any one slave or, for that matter, on any one plantation of slaves. Rather, the economics of the plantation system is contingent on the acceptance of slavery as a viable means of labor and more importantly as the most efficient means in generating capital. Therefore, economically speaking, it is the slave, i.e., the particular slave, that is economically dependent on the colonizer. To put it simply, slaves live so that they may work. Once slaves can no longer produce, the cost for sustaining their lives is not offset by their productive means and therefore an economically savvy plantation owner

would slaughter those unfit to work. These four disadvantages, inherent in the plantation system, reverberate within the Jamaican community and throughout the Caribbean even today — the only exception being, after the abolition of slavery Caribbean natives, including myself, a resident of Jamaica, must seek to “emancipate ourselves from mental slavery”, to paraphrase the late-great Bob Marley.

Religious Hegemony and its Influence in the Caribbean Plantation System

In his book, Gordon Lewis writes,

What were the rights and wrongs, the purposes and the limits of the new imperial responsibility? What legal and political rights...remained to the...new subjects...Did Papal grant or *raison d'état* (reason of state) confer moral authority...And since, finally, all of these questions naturally related to the character of the new subject-peoples, what in fact was that character?³

These questions are in no sense rhetorical. Answers to these questions elucidate the nature of colonialism and the ideology of authority and domination. As rational and civilized people, Europeans cannot simply travel to foreign lands, enslave the productive populations, rape the native women, disown their bastard offspring and leave once all the resources have been pillaged, this would be inhumane and unthinkable. There is an interesting means, however, to circumvent the horrible stigma associated with exploration, viz., Christianity. The syllogism used to justify the enslavement of an entire people was simple, yet effective. The following syllogism serves as an example of one such justification:

To be a human is to have a soul
To have a soul is to be Christian
These natives are not or refuse to become Christians
∴ these natives have no soul
∴ these natives are not human.

³ Lewis, Gordon. *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought: The Historical Evolution of Caribbean Society in Its Ideological Aspects, 1492-1900*. (Baltimore, University of Nebraska Press, 1983). p. 43.

It is quite simple to deduce slavery from such premises, as slave labor contributed to the accumulation of vast wealth, wealth derived from Caribbean plantations. If the natives refuse to convert to Christianity, they cannot have souls, if they do not have souls they cannot be human, and finally, if they are not human then they are not entitled to be free. Thus, it is undeniable that religion played an integral role in the proliferation of the slavery, which sustained numerous plantations. The religious justification for the enslavement of a people is essential if one is to propagate the guise of civility. Who would contest the church? Such justification is integral in skewing the brutal practices of conquest and expansion. Who would admit to thievery and wantonness greed? Europe and Europeans participated in the systematic exploitation of the Caribbean and its people over the course of four centuries, specifically for their own advantages.

To illustrate this relationship between the church and colonialism, Lewis writes,

if [the natives] were to be regarded, like infidel or relapsed heretic, as beyond the pale of Christian charity, it followed that their complete servitude was justified; if, on the other hand, they were to be regarded as peoples potentially sharing the promise of the Christian revolution, it would follow that, at the least, they would have to be gently treated as some sort of innocent pagans who were legitimate candidates for successful evangelization.⁴

The role of Christianity specifically the Catholic Church, with respect to its function in the colonization of the Caribbean, was that of the justificatory body directly responsible for the atrocities that befell native Caribbean peoples. To illustrate the systematization Euro-Christian involvement had on the slave trade, Eric Williams writes,

The planters and miners in the colonies...desired a Negro slave trade...they regarded the Negroes, as Columbus had regarded the Indians, as having no religion, and, therefore, free from taint of idolatry and heresy.⁵

⁴ Lewis, p. 43.

⁵ Williams, Eric. *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean 1492-1969*. (New York, Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970) p. 42

The endorsement of the Catholic Church was sufficient to spearhead a new era in human civilization. Granted, Africans enslaved other Africans, primarily war captives, but never in the history of humanity had such an undertaking been attempted. Men, women and children were systematically being taken from African and exported to the “New World”. Thus, the operational structure of the plantation system during the 16th and 17th century — particularly such systems as existed throughout the Caribbean, fostered institutional exploitation.

The Plantation System and its Operational Infrastructures

In an insightful analysis of the plantation system during colonialism, Handler and Corruccini investigate “Barbados’ prominent position in England’s Caribbean Empire”, which “was later preempted by Jamaica”. (Handler, 1983, p. 66). While their analysis is substantially related to physical anthropology and dental findings, their investigation is nevertheless important in shedding light on the operational patterns or regularities associated with plantation living. Handler and Corruccini note that, “The physical anthropological evidence on the nature and consistency of the slave diet is supported by more extensive information derived from historical sources” (Handler, 1983, p. 75). As I have written earlier in this investigation, sustaining the lives of the slaves — for the plantation owners, was the only expenditure incurred in this multinational exploitative extraction of resources, other than the cost of hiring overseers. The plantation management was keen to minimize its overhead. With respect to the slave’s diet, it was “derived from the rations that were formally distributed by the plantation managements” (Handler, 1983, p. 75). The plantation management had its total economic gain as a priority, rather than the livelihood of dispensable Negro slaves, which serves also to illustrate the total economic dependence of the colonized on the colonizer. What has happened is Europeans have

introduced themselves into the “New World”, disregarded exchange, barter or economic systems already in place and substituted them for an economy of slavery and exploitation, which serves to further incapacitate an already disabled people. The peoples of Barbados and Jamaica were not excluded. Their dental records show, according to Handler and Corruccini, that a slave’s diet consisted primarily of corn and a hodgepodge of vegetable matter, which was considered sub par, with respect to a European standard. Hence, one of the operational regularities for plantations owners during the 16th and 17th centuries consisted in maximizing profits by minimizing the cost associated with sustaining the lives of their laborers. “Plantation allocations varied as a result of a variety of factors within the control of individual managements; for example, what they were willing to spend on food in their efforts to maximize profits and reduce costs,” (Handler, 1983, p. 79). The first expenditure to be cut was typically the cost associated with properly nourishing the slaves. Handler writes, “The examples of malocclusion [abnormalities in the chewing surface of the teeth] in the Barbados slave population probably relate to malnutrition” (Handler, 1983, p. 74-75).

Thomas notes, “it is virtually impossible to separate economic policy from socio-political factors in [a] region’s development” (Thomas, 1988, p. 181). It is important that we, as researchers, not merely present the facts of the matter — disregarding the inextricable association of those facts to actual human beings. Imagine, if you will, the physiological trauma one experiences while suffering from malnutrition, then, compound that trauma with the psychological trauma inflicted by the plantation management and the recognition of one’s own enslavement. It is only then that we may be able to attempt to understand how the economic policy of colonialist governments necessarily affected socio-political factors.

One of the socio-political factors that influenced the livelihood of late 17th and early 18th century Jamaican slaves pertained to the ever-growing number of slaves working on sugarcane plantations. The cultivation of sugarcane requires much effort and substantial labor. The proper harvest of sugarcane required a large workforce of Jamaican slaves to maintain productivity. Legislation was introduced in 1703 to protect the plantation owners and British investments. To illustrate this point Williams writes,

An act of Jamaica in 1703 required one white man for the first ten Negroes, two for the first twenty, and one for every twenty thereafter...A fine equivalent to the cost of a servant's maintenance was imposed for each deficiency...By the new law in 1720, the ratio was fixed at [1/150] (Williams, 1970, p. 106-107).

The new legislation posed a significant threat to Jamaican slaves. This meant more masters to answer to, different personalities to interact with and essentially a greater possibility for adverse living conditions. Unlike slaves, white men were compensated for their labor and as such, their employment detracted from the total possible revenue. While the legislation was enacted to control the slave population, it also adversely affected the productivity of the plantation system as such. Nevertheless, the expenditure was necessary if England was to protect its investment.

D.K. Duncan writes, "Separately between 1673 and 1694 there was a slave revolt or threat of one every year. These were met with swift and brutal responses."⁶ As Duncan has noted, throughout the latter half of the 17th century Jamaican slaves revolted against their oppressors. The threat of revolt was a very real aspect of plantation life — and its owners and the British government could not afford to project fear, as this may embolden revolt and activism among the Jamaican slaves. The cost associated with adhering to the new regulations was far too steep a price to pay, and thus, to compensate for their inability to meet the required ration of 1/150 as Duncan had

⁶ D.K. Duncan, "A Proud Tradition of Struggle" Tuesday Aug. 5, 2003 *Jamaica Gleaner*.

noted, their brutality increased. Fear supplanted the requirement that every one hundred and fifty slaves be governed by one white man. Therefore, the plantation owners were able to skirt the cost associated with employing a white overseer.

...whites were too expensive. In 1736 it was estimated that it cost fifteen pounds to transport a servant from England to Jamaica, and thirty pounds a year in wages and food after his arrival (Williams, 1970, p. 107).

Despite the size of some plantations throughout Jamaica, the cost was simply too great, again, market economics and the sugarcane plantations, sought to preserve its revenue, despite continuous revolts throughout the latter portion of the 17th century. Hence, in telling the story of Jamaica's history, the revolts of the 17th century, which slowed the generation of capital, spawned 18th century legislation, particularly in 1720, which mandated that a fixed ratio be maintained, i.e., one white man for every one hundred and fifty slaves. "Few plantations [however] had their required quota" (Williams, 1970, p. 107) and from these deficiencies to attain quota, Jamaican slaves were "met with swift and brutal responses" as a means of controlling the slave population in Jamaica.

The Transformation of Market Economics from the Plantation to the Factory

The market economy of cash crop farming implemented throughout the 16th and 17th century, designed to feed Europe and starve the Caribbean, is the same market economy in place today. Not to be confused with slavery, however, our contemporary market economy rears its ugly head in the form of neoliberalism or economic globalism and a "race for the bottom". The remaining discussion will attempt to correlate the latent connection between the Caribbean plantation system of the 16th through 18th centuries with our current practices of neoliberalism or economic globalism.

Economically, outsourcing provides corporations with cheap labor, which translates to greater returns and lower consumer costs. It is often argued that neoliberalism is beneficial for the laborers, themselves, commonly women of the Third World, as it serves as a source of income, wherein they are able to provide for themselves and their families. Whether discussing territorial imperialism, associated with the Caribbean plantation system, or neoliberalism, the investments of the first and third-world remain the same. Gayatri Spivak writes, “generally [the] first-world [is] in a position of investing capital; another group, generally third-world, provide the field for investment, both through the comprador of indigenous capitalist and through their ill protected and shifting labor force.”⁷ It is important to note that neoliberalism in-and-of-itself does not stipulate that a corporation exploit its labor force. It just so happens, however, that neoliberals, in an attempt to shift the emphasis from a liberal economic system to a neoliberal economics of surplus wealth, inadvertently elicit such corruption. It is, therefore, third-world laborers that serve to fuel the first-world economy, while neither receiving the fruits of their labor nor the economic advantages gained by the generation of surplus capital. It has always been the case that the third-world has contributed laborers to match the economic investments of the first-world. In the past, first-world investments were constituted by the infrastructure necessary for the plantation system to become operational, viz., ports, ships, a means of transporting raw materials from the plantation to the docks, the purchase of slaves, banking systems and so on. This infrastructure was not implemented for the advantage of the natives, even after the abolition of slavery, the infrastructure either built or developed under colonialism, within the Caribbean, was done so for the sole benefit of colonizers. The phrase “the race to the bottom” perfectly illustrates the extent of exploitation *justified* by the economics of

⁷ Spivak, Gayatri. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988). p. 287.

neoliberalism, which only differs from the plantation system of the 16th through 18th century by the slightest degree. The question that arises in a discussion of neoliberalism, then, and the international outsourcing of labor is, “what is the least they will work for?”

Clearly, if one labors and receives no wage for this labor, then as a laborer the individual is defined as a slave, which is evident in the plantation system of the Caribbean. Neoliberalism, however, not to be confused with slavery, cannot race to the “absolute bottom”, i.e., free labor; hence neoliberal economics justifies the labor of the laborer insofar as there *is an exchange* of currency for labor. What is interesting to note, nevertheless, is that one cannot stipulate or quantify exactly what the rate of exchange should be. This is a peculiar fact inherent to the statistical and economic variables associated with the outsourcing of labor. All that can be stated is that the laborer cannot work without receiving a wage. The interesting question become, “is one cent per hour a *justifiable* salary, per day, per week, per month?” How low is the first-world willing to go?” Unfortunately, in the 21st century, it is evident that an interdisciplinary investigation of slavery and slave labor remains a viable topic if we, as a human society, are to prevent the atrocities of slavery from ever gaining social acceptance.

What is disturbing about neoliberalism, as a viable economic system, is that it reinforces and perpetuates first-world dominance and suppression of third-world people on the basis that it offers economic opportunities to an otherwise desperate group. Hence, a first-world corporation is “justified” in paying \$.17/hour for a product which takes three hours to manufacture, which is then sold to first-world consumers for \$175.00, because \$.17/hour is the highest per hour wage paid in the region. Moreover, at \$.17/hour it would take the third-world laborer 1029 hours of labor or 43 days of *continuous* work to afford the product produced, while the actual

manufacturing cost of the product is a mere \$.51. Hence, the laborer has been systematically disenfranchised from the very product of his or her labor.

As a Jamaican, I have experienced the devastation neoliberalism has had, not only on Jamaica's economy but also, and more importantly, on Jamaica's inability to educate its breadwinners — the vendors, entertainers and hotel staff, which keeps Jamaica from social revolt. For the vendors and entertainers of large hotels and all-inclusive villas, Jamaican laborers find themselves disenfranchised from their labor, i.e., entertainment. They are the “meters and greeters,” the bell boys, the reggae band, the performers and entertainers but most importantly they are the street vendors. After leaving the airport, they are innumerable vendors selling anything from bracelets to t-shirts, they are willing to braid hair and the price, as always, is negotiable. Honeymooner, springbreakers and vacationers alike, leave the “hustle and bustle” of their daily lives to escape to “paradise”, what about the Jamaican people? the vendors? the laborers and entertainers? Where do they escape? Where is their paradise? The answer is quite simple: there is no paradise. After the entertainers and vendors leave their jobs, they go to a shanty in the heart of Kingston, where the real Jamaican is able to reveal him or herself, as tired, destitute and typically uneducated. The only advantages they have arise because they can speak “the queen's English”, which is essential since the hotel staff, composed of Jamaican natives, must be able to service the needs of primarily English speaking customers. For those Jamaicans unable to oscillate between their native patois and “the queen's English” their only source of income is the sale of their wares on street corners.

I have attempted to briefly discuss the plantation system of the Caribbean and its operational structure and associate this conception of free market economics with the multinational economics of neoliberalism, arguing that it is dangerous to demarcate a wage of

\$.1/hour from that of enslaved labor. Economists, then, have the strict obligation to justify the threshold at which the least wages are paid to third-world laborers. If these questions are not taken seriously, the injustices of slavery are contrasted from neoliberal economics by only the slightest degree.

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