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Commentary: the search for a unified field theory

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MICHAEL CRATON

COMMENTARY: THE SEARCH FOR A UNIFIED FIELD THEORY

The conference sessions of which the foregoing articles are the fruit were dedicated to the discussion of the interrelationship of changing labour systems and technologies in Caribbean sugar plantations between 1750 and 1900. What made the exercise frustrating and incomplete as well as challenging and important was that it clearly involved many more variables besides those of labour and technology. However widely labour and technology are defined, at least five other related and intertwined factors have to be considered: the availability and suitability of land; the supply of capital; the access to markets and market prices; management strategies, attitudes and personnel; and finally, changing economic policies – specifically those designed to speed the transition from narrow mercantilist units to a world-wide “free trade” system.

In seeking a causal explanation for the complex process of change in Caribbean sugar plantations over 150 years, we are all surely seeking the simplest possible key; what might be called – if the pun be pardoned – a kind of unified field theory. But besides making sure that we leave out of consideration none of the obtruding factors mentioned above, we must surely not look at one place or area in one time period, but at the whole region over the whole period of global changes.

As for special comparisons and interrelationships, we have gone some way, but probably not far enough. It is not enough to seek similar processes in different places over different time scales; we should seek to show how developments in one area led to, or related to, developments elsewhere, and how all related to global developments. This may seem a crass commonplace; but nonetheless ignoring it does seem to be the root of some of the confusions, for instance, in the “Williams-Drescher” debate, as well as in some of our own labour: technology discussions.

For example, what was true about the relative importance of economic and humanitarian arguments in the 1780s was surely very different from arguments under the same heads after the British slave trade was abolished in 1807. And what might be felt about the relative efficiency of slave versus free wage labour and the value of technological innovation before slaves were emancipated anywhere and industrialisation had not anywhere gone far, was surely very different from labour: technology considerations once the slave trade had ended and technological changes were ever more widely available.

There are also the questions of reasons versus chance or contingency in the quest for optimisation. We have to decide in a given case whether planters did what they knew or thought was best, or what was the best alternative actually open to them; or whether they did what they thought was best and were proved to be wrong; or whether they optimised rationally under certain conditions and were overtaken by events and developments that were unforeseen.

We could carry on this line of relativistic and hypothetical argument *ad infinitum*. But let us turn instead to a more relevant issue. How well have we in the foregoing articles answered some of the questions posed, or reaffirmed or refuted some of the claims made, in the initial position paper written by Peter Boomgaard and Gert Oostindie (1989)?

Firstly, was slavery inefficient (as well as unjust) as the abolitionists argued? In other words, were slaves under any circumstances more productive than other forms of labour? Were slave plantations ever more profitable than the same plantations might have been with “freer” forms of labour, given that such were freely available? Secondly, was slavery incompatible with technological change, sustaining a conservative class of owners and retarding progress, as Marxists aver?

Broadly, I take it, Boomgaard and Oostindie’s answers to both questions were “No”. But what of areas where slavery did continue because the quest for profits seems to have called for it to do so, at least for a time, as in Puerto Rico and Cuba, as well as in Brazil and the United States? Were these forms of slavery really the same as those that had expired? Or were the alternative labour systems loosely called free – indentured “coolies”, part-time peasant labourers, migrant workers bound by debt peonage or other forms of constraint – really no more than slaves, as Michiel Baud (1988) seems to argue? And were the levels of technological change or innovation under formal slavery itself of which several authors, notably Richard Sheridan (1989), have written, really as substantial as those that came after slavery ended – whether or not emancipation was the only reason or not?

Other less central questions put forward by Boomgaard and Oostindie have surely been aired, though not finally solved. These include, thirdly, the question of the relative abundance of available labour; fourthly, the importance of the periodicity of labour demand during slavery and after; fifthly, the role of slaves' and other workers' resistance to plantation labour, or, in particular, of all workers to cutting cane; and sixthly, the significance of tariff barriers, or their lack, in the establishment and maintenance of sugar prices, and thus of the levels of profitability.

We have all surely come away with fresh or reinforced ideas about these, and perhaps many other questions. Other differential factors which have occurred to me since include the significance of the great variations in the growing cycle of sugar cane and thus the length of the cane cutting season, between areas with very marked winter and summer seasons and those like Guyana where cane could be planted at almost any time of year and harvested almost continuously; of the difference between mixed cane farming systems based on the Brazilian counterpoint between share-cropping *lavradores* or *colonos* and true plantation slaves, and the more intensive monolithic slave labour systems preferred by the Dutch, British and French; or of the special "cultural" conditions that allowed a colony like Barbados to expand its sugar production to a peak after slavery ended without the availability of virgin land, without notable economies of scale or even substantial technological change.

My own chief feeling, though, is that the best place to look for firmer answers to the questions posed, is in the words and writings of the planters themselves – those with greater personal experience, and with more personal interest, than we as contemporary historians can ever have. The article I would have liked to offer at this time had I the time to write it would have been called "Worthy Park Revisited" – being a re-examination and re-evaluation of some of the material concerning a single Jamaican sugar estate which James Walvin and I studied and wrote about between 1968 and 1978 (Craton & Walvin 1970; Craton 1978).

In particular, I thought to look again at the three persons with very different characters and significantly different roles who gave evidence on behalf of Worthy Park in the 1848 Parliamentary Inquiry into the crisis facing the British Caribbean sugar industry. The hope was that each would provide a different facet of the problem of plantation management under changing conditions. First of these featured actors was George Price, fifth of six sons of the former owner, who had gone out to manage and revive the struggling family estate in 1843 at the age of 31 with an infusion of fresh capital provided by his father-in-law, Lord Dunsany. George Price made valiant but vain attempts to mechanise Worthy Park and reorganise

its labour force, mainly by offering competitive wages. He remained in Jamaica for more than 20 years despite the estate's economic collapse, an important figure in local politics and a resolute opponent of Governor Eyre. Second was Thomas Price, George's youngest brother (later, Lieutenant-Governor of Dominica and British Honduras), who had already been to Worthy Park in 1841 and returned in despair. As an absentee increasingly gifted with hindsight, he was a severe critic of what he regarded as his brother's "visionary" expenditure and mismanagement, unfairly blaming him for cutting off the family's Jamaican income. Third was Viscount Ingestre, Worthy Park trustee and mortgage-holder since 1835 by virtue of the last will of his brother-in-law, the father of George and Thomas Price. He now regretted the family connection which had led to such disastrous investment, bewailed the way in which his money was locked up, and would dearly have liked to deploy it elsewhere (British Sessional Papers 1848: 4963-5170).

The planned paper was not written, largely because the counterposed roles of the three *dramatis personae* did not come clearly enough through the written record. On a re-reading, most of the evidence given before the 1848 Commission was found to have been given by Thomas Price, who had far less direct involvement in the running of Worthy Park than had his brother George, and whose financial interest was less direct than Viscount Ingestre's. Yet the dozen pages of evidence presented to the 1848 Commission did touch on almost all the critical factors mentioned at the beginning of this essay and discussed in the foregoing articles.

Firstly, the evidence showed that at Worthy Park during the 1840s the availability of suitable *land* was not an immediate problem. Though the original estate had optimised its own cane lands since the 1790s, adjacent decayed or abandoned estates could be, and were, bought up for a song. Had the Prices been otherwise able to create a very large central sugar operation at Worthy Park, they would have been constrained in time by the surrounding mountains; in fact their enterprise failed altogether before suitable land ran out.

Secondly, *capital* was available to a degree, but what it could achieve was severely limited by labour and technical constraints. Thirdly, *technological modifications* were tried, but they failed for reasons unrelated to whether they could, or did, increase productivity. Fourthly, *labour* was a problem, but chiefly on account of the need to reorganise it efficiently into a two-tier system of a small corps of permanent workers and a larger seasonal cane-cutting gang, its availability *when needed*, and its *cost*. Fifthly, *imperial policy* was an extremely contentious issue, Thomas Price arguing that the economic situation might be remedied, if narrowly, if the imperial

government maintained the sugar price at ten shillings a hundredweight by subsidies, and if it subsidised the immigration of foreign labourers to allow the reduction of the daily rate of wages from one shilling and sixpence to twopence or fourpence.

But the bottom line, sixthly, was surely the *world sugar price*. This had reached a catastrophic low in 1846-7, so that even with optimisation and maximum production, Worthy Park's total income from sugar and rum was well below the cost of production. In existing circumstances the total income was actually less than the *wage bill* – quite ignoring all the other costs, including that of servicing the standing debt. Under such circumstances, it was inevitable that capital would migrate elsewhere, and even relatively fortunate Jamaican estates like Worthy Park would be forced to close.

What happened in the face of these and similar problems and crises? It depended, of course, on who you were and what were the options, if any, available to you. Firstly, the workers (whose role and behaviour are hardly considered in the foregoing articles) did what they could to find alternative work or ways of subsisting, or to obtain the best type of work and the best wages, and to shape and optimise and determine conditions as best they could by forms of industrial action or resistance.

Secondly, the planters and their managers did what they could to adjust and juggle and make new equations. These included changing field and factory practice as best they could, to get new capital if they could, to make technological changes as far as their knowledge and means allowed, to diversify (and here the comments about the moves towards coffee, cotton and, later, bananas are very apposite) and, in the last resort, to shut up operations altogether.

For those, thirdly, who provided the capital – absentee family members or associates like Thomas Price or Lord Ingestre, or faceless bankers – the options and strategies were different again. They might be satisfied with local attempts to adjust and reform the labour and technical systems, or to diversify, to cut back production temporarily, or to practise economies of scale as far as possible. But they were far readier than resident owners or managers to close down operations and switch elsewhere. In many cases they were only frustrated by the inertial provisions of the existing laws of inheritance, entail and bankruptcy, which made it practically impossible to dispose of “encumbered” estates until 1854 (Craton & Walvin 1970: 208-233).

These are the three main levels of human behaviour and practices. But we ought also to distinguish three, or even four, other more determinant levels on the material plane: those of individual plantations, of the larger

island or colony units, and of the Caribbean region as a whole – placed, of course, within the total world economy.

For itself, Worthy Park staggered on somehow as a sugar producer, until the years of stunning success following World War Two – though under several different owners. This story is written in *A Jamaican plantation* and *Searching for the invisible man* (Craton & Walvin 1970; Craton 1978). The island colony of Jamaica as a whole, however, almost ceased to be a sugar producer by 1900, becoming a rather more diversified but still desperately poor backwater, notable mainly as an exporter of migrant labourers at a time when capital migrated to sugar production in Cuba and banana plantations in Central America. Within the island, as Verene Shepherd has pointed out in a recent dissertation, cattle pens largely took over the best former sugar land, and the cattle pen owners turned themselves into, or became part of, what Douglas Hall and Verene Shepherd have termed a “penocracy” (Hall 1959, 1979; Shepherd 1988).

In the context of the wider Caribbean this points up a curious but significant development very relevant to our current discussions. Whereas Jamaica was one of the greatest sugar producers during the heyday of slavery, islands like Spanish Puerto Rico and Cuba, and other Spanish mainland colonies, were largely cattle ranches and small scale producers of minor crops. Once Cuba and, to a certain extent, Puerto Rico became great sugar producers, though, the positions were almost reversed, with Jamaica reverting to a largely ranching and peasant subsistence economy. Viewing this transition in the widest perspective, it was clearly a local function of an age that saw great developments in the internationalisation of capital, the spread of free trade and laissez faire principles, the worldwide organisation of transportation, processing and marketing, and, not least, the much more efficient organisation of migratory labour on a global scale (Moreno Fraginals 1978; Scott 1985; Zanetti & Garcia 1988).

Out of a reading of the foregoing articles and our discussions of them at the 1988 Americanists’ conference in Amsterdam, I make the following preliminary, tentative and personal conclusions. If we look for the *single* over-riding principle in the labour: technology equation or the sugar plantation debate at large, we cannot do better than accept the truism that sugar plantations are “ultimately in the business of making profits”. But beyond that, an only slightly less simple formula gives me slightly more satisfaction, at least for the time being: “Change (including technological change) was ultimately driven by the quest for profit in the face of the world sugar price. Change, however, was limited not so much by the availability of capital or labour as by the availability of plentiful, cheap, fertile and politically unencumbered *land* – since both capital and labour

would readily migrate or become available to such areas, and *only* to such areas."

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