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RESPONSE TO PIETER C. EMMER'S
"RECONSIDERATION"

Criticisms, however strongly expressed, are valuable where they extend and deepen debates. Pieter Emmer's critique, though, is so ill focused, ill informed, and intemperate, that it is difficult to know how to respond profitably, or even politely.

Emmer begins badly by referring to my article as being "on slave emancipation in the Bahamas" rather than on the British West Indies as a whole over an entire century. He compounds this by a lack of clarity about quite what area and period he is referring to at a given time. He fails to distinguish clearly (as my article did) between British colonies and other territories, between sugar plantation colonies and others, and between different types of sugar colony; nor does he acknowledge the vital importance (stressed in the prologue to my article) of relating events and changes in the British imperial orbit to those in other areas and empires and in the world at large.

For someone who dismisses my use of such well-established terms as "proto-peasant" and "proto-proletarian" as "ahistoric abstractions" that "impede rather than increase our understanding of what happened," Emmer's own employment of such cloudy terms as "the elite" and "the freedmen" is specially unfortunate, as is his conflationary use of the label "planters." The first two tend to ignore such important intermediate categories as poor whites, missionaries and magistrates, non-whites free before emancipation, Liberated Africans, and migrants of different races both before and after 1838; the third to exclude the class which Howard Johnson (1991) has called an "agro-commercial bourgeoisie," which was

New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids vol. 69 no. 3 & 4 (1995): 291-297

particularly important in non-plantation colonies and town settings. Emmer's concentration on plantations and planters, indeed, leaves out such matters necessary for a comprehensive analysis as share-cropping, truck payment systems (found in all forms of employment), and the increasing role of towns in the development of relations between employers and employed.

Even more confusing is Emmer's use of the term "abolitionist," (pp. 278, 287) seemingly (though I am not entirely sure) applied alike (and in a generally derogatory sense) to those who favored slave emancipation, who brought it about, and who have a certain interpretation of it (including, perhaps, myself). Far clearer, cruder, and more revealing of his own position, are his concluding remarks that in my account "the planters could do no good and the freedmen nothing wrong," that the Caribbean plantations were "the blood-sucking leeches at the periphery of world capitalism" and that my "judgements are founded in the strong desire to show that ... [my] heart is with the 'underclass.'" This contumely at least has the merit of showing Emmer in his true colors, as the kind of free market liberal who as an historian empathizes with the planters in their quest for efficiency and profit, to the degree that he will argue against the evidence that this was of actual benefit to plantation employees.

Emmer states as a given a "productivity revolution" before abolition that is at the least debatable. Apart from the fact that total sugar production in the old established British sugar islands actually declined and that when divided by their total slave populations productivity in these islands can be said to have decreased, what Emmer's definition of increased productivity obscures is both that production was concentrated in the colonies and areas that were optimal for sugar production to the detriment of those less favored, and that it was a desperate expedient in the face of declining world prices, which in turn were due to competition from non-British areas and the gradual removal of protection. In crediting the changes in production techniques entirely to the planters, Emmer, moreover, ignores the facts that they were, at least in part, forced upon them by the British West Indian laborers' disinclination to work as slaves and by the prolongation of the slave trade to competing areas, and that they were achieved at the slaves' expense – in terms of health and mortality as well as enforced labor. British slave owners almost universally opposed both the abolition of the slave trade and emancipation, neglecting the slaves in unprofitable areas as much as they were allowed to, or shifting them to more profitable colonies as long as that was legal, while extracting as much work as they could elsewhere, whether in the new fertile colonies (like Trinidad and the Guianas), those with struggling plantations (like Jamaica),

or those (like Barbados and Antigua), where, because of their monopoly of the land, the planters' control over the slaves was almost absolute.

In looking at the situation after slavery ended, Emmer loads his case by the exaggerated statement that very little is known about the post-emancipation era compared with the slavery period. This intends to devalue both my present article and another (1992) on the Caribbean as a whole, which were at pains to survey and promote the considerable body of work that has in fact appeared over the last four decades – by Alan Adamson, Hilary Beckles and Andrew Downes, Robin Blackburn, Nigel Bolland, Peter Boomgaard and Gert Oostindie, Bridget Brereton, Patrick Bryan, Russell Chace, Mary Chamberlain, Edward Cox, Richard Frucht, Douglas Hall, Kusha Haraksingh, Gad Heuman, Howard Johnson, Cecilia Karch, Keith Laurence, Claude Levy, Richard Lobdell, Walton Look Lai, Roderick McDonald, Jay Mandle, Woodville Marshall, Trevor Marshall and Bentley Gibbs, Sidney Mintz, Brian Moore, Bonham Richardson, Walter Rodney, Veront Satchell, Monica Schuler, Verene Shepherd, Lorna Simmonds, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Swithin Wilmot and others (none of whom Emmer cites), as well as by Gail Saunders and myself. In place of these he mentions "recent" and "revisionary" scholarship (usually unspecified in detail) which is presumed to validate his own interpretations – including what are to my mind an erroneously favorable view of the indentured labor system and an underestimation of the depth and breadth of popular resistance to an overbearing economic and political system (pp. 287-88).

I apologize if Emmer's difficulties with the concepts of premature formations which he labels "the proto's" are genuine. If such a specialist is puzzled, the ordinary reader surely requires more elucidation. Perhaps too readily I presumed common knowledge that "proletarian" (even for non-Marxists) means landless wage laborer tending towards factory and urban employment, and that (following Sidney Mintz) "peasant" means a countryman with at least access to land of his own, working in a family unit as independently as possible, given the need for a margin somewhat above subsistence and a dependence on local if not export marketing. Against what Emmer seems to assume, however, my formulation depends not so much on the distinct categories of peasant and proletarian as on the existence in the post-emancipation West Indies of a distinct type, the peasant/proletarian – ideally (from the point of view of the black majority but not of the white elite) having both land of their own and the capacity to work for satisfactory wages at times when it suited them best.

Thus, by extension backwards, proto-peasant and proto-proletarian activity in slavery times denoted not necessarily the emergence of two

distinct types, but the degree to which slaves in general were able both to work land virtually as their own, in families, for self-subsistence and obtaining of a cash surplus in local markets, and also to negotiate the terms and realize at least some of the cash value of their labor for the estate owners and town employers. Pondering on the recent work of Roderick McDonald (1993) about the changes in slaves' material culture towards the end of formal slavery (in Jamaica and Louisiana), I would even, without apologies to Emmer, suggest the addition to the "proto's" of the concept of slaves as "proto-consumers," in respect of the way in which an increasing involvement in and dependence on world markets and the products of industrial capitalism, gradually changed both the lifestyle and expectations of slaves, perhaps helping to speed emancipation in the process.

Given his pro-planter, pro-imperialist, pro-capitalist view, it is to be expected that Emmer and I should see some of the facts, events, and trends in different lights. It is perhaps inevitable that he would massage the statistics and adjust the facts to bring them in line with his general interpretation. Some of such instances are of the relativistic "half-full rather than half-empty" type, but others are more culpable, especially where they (wilfully, it seems to me) distort my own arguments and position, either as stated here or in other publications. Other statements, moreover, are not just misleading, but misled.

One example of numbers juggling is Emmer's deployment of the statistics for evictions in Jamaica in the post-emancipation period. For him, "the eviction of 45 squatters a year during the period 1869-1900 is extremely low in relation to an ex-slave population of more than 300,000" (p. 280), whereas for me (and, presumably, Veront Satchell, who compiled the statistics) the same data can be shown to mean the eviction of 1,200 *families* from about 28,000 acres within a decade by the government alone, apart from private evictions (Craton 1994:57). Along the same lines are Emmer's conclusions that the incidence of unrest both during and after slavery are evidence of relative quiescence and satisfaction among the laborers rather than the reverse. This is backed up, moreover, by a statement about the paucity of the forces of law and order needed both before and after emancipation that is demonstrably false. In *Testing the Chains* (1982) I have surely demonstrated how vital it was to have garrison troops and militia to keep the peace and put down slave revolts during slavery, and how slave revolts occurred most commonly in times of military weakness. Even after slavery ended, regular army detachments, especially units of the West Indies Regiment, were deployed in almost all colonies for much the

same purpose, until they were superseded by a sufficient constabulary.

The example of the Bahamas, one of the poorest colonies, gives the lie to Emmer's assertion that a strong police force was deemed unnecessary and did not increase after slavery ended (p. 280). As an excellent analysis by Howard Johnson (1991:110-24) and the forthcoming second volume of the social history of the Bahamas by Gail Saunders and myself show, there was a steady increase in the numbers and efficiency of the Bahamian Police after 1833 (augmented from 18 to 140 in sixty years, or eight times over, while the overall population scarcely doubled), with the major reorganization (and quasi-militarization of the force) occurring as a direct result of the withdrawal of the garrison in 1891.

Even shakier are Emmer's relativistic argument (p. 288) that the fate of the West Indian ex-slaves was tolerable because conditions for workers in Europe were little if any better, and his implication that I ignore parallels and linkages between metropolitan and colonial conditions. Apart from the blunt rejoinder that neither of two evils is good, I would like to restate the bases of my long-held beliefs: that the so-called liberal reforms initiated in the metropole were made under pressure and represented adjustments by the ruling class to retain wealth and power (in a manner most famously analyzed by Antonio Gramsci); that while the imperial adoption of free trade and laissez-faire policies doomed the British West Indies to become an economic backwater, similar hegemonic adjustments were made by the colonial planter and agro-commercial elites in an altogether more blatant form, through their dominance in the legislatures and executives, and their control of the forces of law and order, of the system of education and, above all, of the laws relating to landholding and relations between employers and employed.

All elements in the British West Indies may have suffered as the century went on and economic conditions deteriorated further, but what power and wealth there was to be garnered was monopolized by the bourgeoisie (planters, landowners, merchants), while the majority of the population (peasants, proletarians, peasant-proletarians, indentured immigrants) were relatively victimized. I challenge Emmer to show that the ordinary people of the West Indies were not in fact oppressed, did not suffer worse physical and material conditions than any found in Britain, and were not intentionally retarded in respect of social services, political representation, landholding, employer-employee relations and trade union legislation, after an impartial reading of the evidence (even the conclusions) of the official inquiries, for example, into the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica, the Federation Riots in Barbados, the various plantation explosions in British

Guiana, and into British West Indian conditions in general made in 1897-98 and 1938-45.

Judging by his remarks on my treatment of slave demography, however, it seems unlikely that Emmer could ever review evidence impartially or treat a counter interpretation fairly. His assertion that I seem "to assume that the planters could throw the switch from negative to positive demographic growth by simply reducing the workload" and thus to attribute to planters an "omnipotence" which reaches "supernatural dimensions" (p. 280) is a gross distortion. Even a cursory reading of what I have previously written on slave demography (such as two articles not cited by Emmer, published in the *William and Mary Quarterly* in 1978 and the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* in 1979) shows that the intensity of work exacted was but one of the determinants of population growth in slave populations which I recognize; while a fairer reading of the present article shows that what I refer to was simply the tactic of slave owners (like those in the Bahamas and the Virgin Islands) who had slaves surplus to local labor needs (and who had increased in numbers mainly because they were not crammed into slave quarters and forced into plantation labor in less healthy areas) did their utmost to transfer them to colonies (like Jamaica and Trinidad) where the owners could obtain a better financial return from the slaves' labor (invariably to the slaves' demographic detriment).

That Emmer's remarks about my position in regard to the technological options open to planters over the transitional period (p. 282) is a similar distortion can be adjudged in reference to the relevant sections of *Searching for the Invisible Man* (1978) and my summary remarks in a symposium on the subject organized by Peter Boomgaard and Gert Oostindie, entitled "Searching for a Unified Field Theory," published in this journal in 1989.

The most extreme of Emmer's imputations is that my sympathies for the hitherto mute masses of the West Indian underclass hobble my objectivity. This is accompanied by remarks such as "it is not clear whether he would have preferred a development in which the plantations had disappeared overnight," and "had Michael Craton as a freedman chosen Haiti in order to escape the arrogance of the planters, the strikes and rebellions, the lack of social services, the absence of a general franchise and the difficulty of obtaining sufficient land, he would have been migrating from the frying pan into the fire" (p. 285). My response to this is that as an historian my own hypothetical preferences are irrelevant to my responsibility objectively to analyze what actually happened. Whether I do this or not, and whether my conception of objective analysis is sounder than Emmer's, are, of course, far less important than whether my account of the transition out

of slavery in the British West Indies is more solidly rooted in the scholarly evidence and more convincing than his. This, as well as the matter of relative authorial bias, is for the fair reader to judge.

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