Henderson Carter

Labour Pains: Resistance and Protest in Barbados, 1838–1904. Kingston: Ian Randle, 2012. x + 256 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

According to conventional narratives Barbadian planters successfully engineered a political culture of acquiescence among the black majority, making the island the heartland of the Caribbean's pro-planter counterrevolution. Only at three points in history—1816, 1876, and 1937—was this elite-driven consensus disturbed. *Labour Pains* challenges longstanding claims by scholars such as Bruce Hamilton and Claude Levy that black Barbadians' own conservatism explains their failure to undertake meaningful postemancipation revolutionary action. Henderson Carter traces the political consciousness of Barbadian working people between 1838 and 1904, a period of dire oppression and hardship, showing how nineteenth-century workers' struggles "represented a critical link between enslaved resistance and the struggle for democracy in the 1930s" (p. 206).

The book creatively draws on Marxist thought, subaltern studies, and classic works of European and Caribbean social history, illustrating that Barbadians engaged in insurgent practices ranging from "collective bargaining by riot" (p. 164, quoting Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* [1959]) to violent anti-authoritarian insurrections that sought to overthrow the sociopolitical order, as in the 1876 Confederation Rebellion. What differentiated Barbadian working people from other postemancipation laboring populations was the "military capability of the state instruments" (p. 208) and the solidarity of the Barbadian ruling elite, which created few crises of hegemony that working people could exploit as apertures for revolutionary action. Even though they faced immense odds, laborers forced planters to legislate "accommodation ... on a regular basis to appease the workers' clamour for social justice and economic betterment" (p. 208). The post-1937 reforms that radically transformed the island were a longterm outcome of nineteenth-century workers' efforts to "obtain for themselves socio-economic concessions, escape oppressive conditions and seek the removal of the ruling elite" (p. 14).

Carter tracks the way the planter-merchant elite systematically and ruthlessly manipulated its control of political institutions and land in order to maintain a captive labor force. This plantation society apparatus of domination allowed elites to avoid "structural modifications to the plantation system" and block "large-scale migration, the reduction of land prices, and the removal of penalties levied on the industry of the aspiring workers" (p. 43). The imperial government colluded with the plantocracy, abdicating responsibility for reform and deploying military force to support the local police and prevent change.

Carter offers new detail about the 1838–40 protests against the Masters and Servants Act, noting that “Although the Act was not withdrawn ... These various modes of protest were launched by a politically conscious people engaged in collective negotiation and democratic contest” (p. 95).

Adapting E.P. Thompson’s moral economy idea, Carter shows that the 1850s–90s witnessed deepening injustice and escalating worker-state conflict, the highpoint of which was the Confederation Rebellion of 1876. He differentiates between such phenomena as “riot, disturbance and rebellion” (p. 97), and offers new evidence about and theoretical interpretations of the Confederation Rebellion, significantly updating George Belle’s 1984 analysis of this poorly understood uprising. Migration to towns and out of the island was a continuation of rural insurgency, evidenced by Barbadian emigrants’ frequently rebellious actions across the Caribbean. The growing hardships of working life were reflected in the initially dramatic withdrawal of children from estate labor, followed by their gradual return by the 1850s as alternatives became less accessible. Nevertheless, Carter sees children’s postemancipation withdrawal from agriculture as the origin of a “modern Barbados” defined by “the quest for educational pursuits and other non-agricultural forms of employment” (p. 182).

Carter’s refined discussion of the “working people” is not matched by his hurried and undertheorized dismissal of the “middle class,” a group that could have included anyone from well-to-do white merchants to black entrepreneurs hard to distinguish from laboring people. Disappointment awaits readers who think the title, *Labour Pains*, is a *double entendre* indicating intersectional analysis of labor, race, and gender. Women rarely appear as historical subjects, the bibliography lists only eight female scholars, and there is no engagement with scholarship on gender and emancipation.¹

The bibliography in this 2012 publication ends in 1997, making no mention of Hilary Beckles’s *Great House Rules* (2004) or my own *The Children of Africa in the Colonies* (2008), both of which focus on postslavery Barbados. Carter does not acknowledge that several of his insights had already been made in publications from the early 2000s. In a study of postemancipation popular democracy it is unfortunate to see no references to Mimi Sheller’s pioneering *Democracy*

1 See, for example, Melanie Newton, 2000. “New Ideas of Correctness”: Gender, Amelioration and Emancipation in Barbados, 1810s–1850s. *Slavery & Abolition* 21(3): 94–124; Pamela Scully & Diana Paton (eds.), 2005. *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World* (Durham NC: Duke University Press); Mimi Sheller, 1997. Sword-Bearing Citizens: Militarism and Manhood in Nineteenth-Century Haiti. *Plantation Society in the Americas* 4:233–78; Mimi Sheller, 1998. Quasheba, Mother, Queen: Black Women’s Public Leadership and Political Protest in Post-Emancipation Jamaica, 1834–65. *Slavery & Abolition* 19:90–117.

after Slavery: Black Publics and Peasant Rebellion in Jamaica and Haiti (2000) or my own discussion of the importance of emigration in nineteenth-century Barbadian democratic consciousness and the systematic suppression by the island's press and local officials of information about black protest. Nevertheless, *Labour Pains* is an accessibly written and empirically rich study of politics, protest, and popular consciousness after emancipation.

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