Trevor Burnard & John Garrigus

The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 360 pp. (Cloth US\$ 45.00)

This book offers an in-depth analysis of the two most lucrative European colonies in early America, British Jamaica and French Saint-Domingue, during their peak years, between 1740 and 1788. After unpromising beginnings as havens for buccaneers and military adventurers, the growth of plantations brought a social revolution to both colonies. Following the lead of planters on Barbados, Jamaica and then Saint-Domingue adopted the large integrated plantation, capable of cultivating and processing sugarcane. Employing large-scale capital investments, rigid time management, and the brutal discipline of gang labor, planters pushed proto-industrial agriculture to astonishing rates of profit. They had created a “plantation machine” that drove them along “parallel pathways” (p. 8).

Despite important differences, reliance on the integrated plantation made the colonies resemble each other in key respects. High death rates, common to plantation societies in the tropics, meant the colonies could only be sustained through immigration, overwhelmingly, in each case, by the importation of African slaves. The resulting populations skewed toward male adults of prime working age, largely alienated from the fruits of their labor and from formal social power. Their energies instead fueled the fabulously wealthy few, who staged ostentatious displays on great estates and in bustling towns, and wielded political influence in imperial capitals. Defined by extreme inequality, both Jamaica and Saint-Domingue were black societies under white rule, “remarkably successful” precisely because they were “terrifyingly brutal” (p. 21).

They were also colonial societies under imperial rule, and local elites contended with distant policymakers in London and Paris, who were intent on treating the colonies as game pieces in strategic competitions. Wars of imperial conquest overlaid more quotidian campaigns of racial capital accumulation. Through the War of the Austrian Succession, the Seven Years’ War, and the American Revolution, the planters maintained their grip on the burgeoning gangs of enslaved black people. Yet slaveholders’ violence did not go unanswered. Slaves escaped the plantations for the mountainous interior of both colonies, occasionally skirmishing with colonists. They plotted and sometimes launched rebellions, as in the Jamaican insurrection of 1760. They made folk heroes of those martyred for conspiracy, as they did with Saint-Domingue’s Macandal after 1758. In response, the white masters tightened their regimes, massacring suspected rebels and drawing more exclusive racial classifications,

“inaugurating a pernicious ‘white purity’ form of racism that shaped Atlantic societies into the twenty-first century” (p. 137). Despite metropolitan disapproval, the colonists were certain they had a winning strategy in the Caribbean. In 1788, on the eve of the campaigns to abolish the slave trade in Great Britain, and the French and Haitian Revolutions, the plantation machine was humming along, causing great misery and producing increasing profits. The planters were “at the forefront of social, economic, and political development in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world” (p. 19). There was scant reason to believe it would end anytime soon.

This is a vital portrayal, and yet the authors have strangely neglected serious treatment of the mass of slaves who turned the plantation machine’s gears. Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus see the activities of sugar planters as the “lynchpin of an Atlantic trade network, linking Africa and Europe with the Caribbean” (p. 37). But this view flatters the planters’ self-conception too much, even as it encourages the authors to forgo an opportunity to connect their admirably close study of colonial social life with the vast literature on the African diaspora in the Americas. Had they done so, Burnard and Garrigus might have shown how the thoughts, skills, and actions of enslaved workers affected the operation of the economy, how the politics of belonging among Africans and their descendants diverged, overlapped, or crosscut the racial classifications imposed by Whites, and how the part slaves played in the eighteenth-century’s race wars articulated with transformations in Atlantic capitalism.

Slaves generally recognized that the plantation machine was predatory. They feared that the slave trade was cannibalistic, that gang labor produced zombies along with goods for trade, and that the struggle between planters and slaves was nothing less than a battle between good and evil. Burnard and Garrigus powerfully demonstrate what the enslaved knew too well: “Violence was at the base of all the wealth and social and political power in slave societies in the region” (p. 48). If this is now a timeworn truism, it nevertheless bears repeating again and again, especially for those who seek every opportunity to chant down the old enemy one more time.

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