Hilary McD. Beckles, *The First Black Slave Society: Britain's Barbarity Time in Barbados, 1636–1876*. Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2016. xv + 296 pp. (Paper US\$35.00)

The island of Barbados (430 km²) formed a small addendum to the English Civil War (1642–1651) that Oliver Cromwell ultimately dominated. However, the developments that ensued would become major chapters in any historical narrative. Barbados's history became characterized by a new brand of brutality which spread from its use as a penal settlement, the subsequent development of a society characterized by the forced servitude of West Africans, and the rapid expansion of the island's lucrative sugar industry. In *The First Black Slave Society*, Hilary Beckles refocuses the traditional narrative to make Barbados and its enslaved the subject of one of the most infamous periods (1636–1876) of British Caribbean history. By so doing he moves the study to focus instead on the attitudes of the British that made their system of West African chattel slavery a horrendous historical experience that must never be forgotten.

While other works have been written on this topic, Beckles's work stands out because of its focus on the human interaction that took place during this predominantly economic process. The 18 chapters of the book deal in detail with the movement from the establishment of sugar cane as merely a cash crop in the island to the social climate it subsequently created—a climate in which whippings, rapes, murders, tortures, castrations and general torture colored the colonial relationship.

In this context Beckles's main aim is to help readers understand the “barbaric” ethos that underpinned the mind of the British Caribbean enslaver. Indeed, he convincingly argues that perhaps “barbarity” became more important to the enslavers than even the profits of the economic process itself! For example the unwillingness of the enslavers to end the system even when it became unprofitable, and their holding out even at the risk of losing the financial compensation of £20 million offered by the British Parliament, only strengthens Beckles's challenge to readers to look beyond the island study of Barbados he presents and to focus on an institution so despicable that only a race of barbarians would have championed it.

Within his exposition, Beckles is at pains to alert readers to the difference between the sugar colony based on slave labor and one based on the sadistic delight of the enslaver upon the enslaved as the labor was extracted. He wants readers to understand the ethos that underpinned the minds of the enslavers—a point highlighted by the early Caribbean historian Elsa Goveia (see, for example, her 1965 book, *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the end of the*

Eighteenth Century), but now reinforced by Beckles's timely reminder. It is here, then, that his refocusing of the traditional "historical" gaze is evident. Moving away from a contemporary historical exposition, he weaves his narrative into an epic trope—one in which enslaved people, having survived the horrific odds of enslavement, ultimately took their own freedom. "In the end, they designed and delivered an island-wide freedom war" (p. 229).

Beckles is a polemicist of note, so his writing is not just for students interested in historical information. Nor is it only for researchers interested in referencing sources for a larger historical project. Instead it is for thinkers interested in the more complex project of understanding the juxtaposition of human nature and historical agency. His is a sociological exposition that questions political, moral, and financial ethics beyond the gambit of the sources. He questions the legality, morality, and arguments of apologists for enslavement and those who, by their tacit responses, gave legitimacy to the "Barbarity Time." This book is a must read!

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