University of Wisconsin–Madison
Department of History

History 730
Pro-Seminar in Latin American History
CAPITALISM AND SLAVERY IN THE CARIBBEAN
Semester I, 2005-2006

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Office hours:
Wednesday 1:30-3:30 (sign-up only)
Wednesday 3:30-4:30

Course description:
This seminar will explore important problems and debates in the history of Caribbean working peoples, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. One of Europe’s foremost tropical frontiers in the age of merchant capitalism, the Caribbean islands and the contiguous lowlands of South and Central America were, along with Brazil, a locus of plantation systems created to satisfy the demand for tropical staples such as sugar, tobacco, cotton, and coffee. Because the area’s native population was practically annihilated during its initial contact with the Europeans, the establishment of efficient and profitable exploitation colonies in these relatively empty spaces hinged on the adoption of labor systems which subjected large numbers of forced migrants to working and living conditions so rigorous as to be universally abhorred by their victims. After some experimentation before 1650, African chattel slavery became the preferred mode of exploitation. The workers, brought from Africa in numbers that exceeded 3 million for the Caribbean alone between 1500 and 1865, were obviously stripped of the individual rights which in Europe at the time were being increasingly regarded as “universal”. African slavery and ancillary forms forced labor thus became the standard institutions for the procurement of labor in the Caribbean for nearly four centuries. Logically, these institutions of labor exaction laid the material and demographic foundations for those “entirely new societies”, fashioned by the European colonizers as if they were the antitheses - albeit indispensable ones- of the emerging capitalist-liberal order.

Historians of the Caribbean have focused much of their attention on understanding the dynamics of labor systems through five centuries of colonial history. Several of the larger questions that continue to be debated in the literature will be examined here: How were specific forms of labor in the colonial sphere, and social relations in general, shaped by specific demands of European capitalism? In what ways, and to what extent, did capital accumulation in the South Atlantic system influence the rise of European factory capitalism? More specific issues to be addressed include: What were the determining factors in the selection of a specific “bundle of rights” over others’ labor? How is the transition from one system to another (e.g., indentured servitude to African slavery) explained? What concessions did the dominant groups tender to the subject groups, and how did such compromises affect social and cultural evolution? How and to what extent did the autonomous spaces shaped by slaves and other laborers make their mark on Creole cultures? Why was the secular institution of slavery abolished all of a sudden in the nineteenth century, and how was this event related to the triumph of industrial capital in the European core? These and other related questions will form the backbone of seminar topics.

Requirements
A) Paper: Seminar members will write a substantive, article length (20-35 pp. long) paper on a pertinent topic, selected in consultation with the instructor. The paper should probe a well-honed question
regarding Caribbean labor systems during the period of slavery and emancipation. The paper should be 
comparative; that is, it should focus on more than one island, country or colony. Ideally, it should also 
straddle linguistic/political areas; for instance, it might compare Jamaica with Cuba or the French West 
Indies with the Spanish islands. Finally, it should be more issue-oriented than citation-oriented. While the 
author should strive for thoroughness in the bibliographic coverage, she/he should accord priority to the 
substantive, analytical issues encompassed by the topic.

The papers are due on Friday, December 2, at 4 P.M. via email to Professor Scarano, who will 
convert it into a PDF (Adobe Acrobat) file and distribute it to all members. All papers will be the subject 
of a short, 15-minute discussion during the last two class sessions. A schedule of presentations will be 
drawn early in the semester, so that seminar members will know when it will be their turn to present.

B) Presentations: In addition to the paper presentation at the end of the semester, each seminar 
participant will make one brief presentation that incorporates insights and findings from the readings 
assigned for a given week. A one-page written summary of the main points of the presentation, with 
copies for every seminar member, will complete this task. A schedule of presentations will be drawn up at 
the first seminar meeting. The presentations will synthesize and critique the most significant issues raised 
in the weekly readings, and will lay the groundwork for the ensuing discussion. It is expected that the 
presenter will assume a leading role in seminar deliberations on the day of her/his presentation.

Books available for purchase

Rainbow Bookstore has the following titles available for purchase. In addition, most other 
required readings will be in a packet (availability TBA), on College Reserve and/or online.


Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: 
Vintage, 1985).

Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan, eds., *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life 
in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993).


Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of this World*, trans. Harriet de Onis (New York: Farrar, Staru, 
and Giroux, 1989).

Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833–1874* 
(Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999).

Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* 

Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French 
SCHEDULE AND READINGS

Week 1 (Sept. 7) -- General Orientation

No assigned readings. There are few satisfactory general works on Caribbean history that seminar members may read for background. Franklin W. Knight’s *The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) and Eric Williams’s *From Columbus to Castro, the History of the Caribbean, 1492-1969* (New York: Vintage, 1970) are among the most recommendable. Colin Palmer and Franklin W. Knight, eds., *The Modern Caribbean* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), may also be useful, though it is predominantly focused on the modern period. For incisive articles on Caribbean history written with synthesis in mind, check out also the *UNESCO History of the Caribbean* (several volumes to date, 1997-2003). You may also want to examine one or more of the following:


Week 2 (Sept. 14) -- Caribbean Workers and the Empire of Sweetness


Week 3 (Sept. 21) -- Problems in the Early Adoption of Racial Slavery


**Week 4 (Sept. 28) -- From Indentured Servitude to Slavery in the English Caribbean**


**Week 5 (Oct. 5) -- The Slave Trade and Slave Demography: Views from Without and Within**


**Week 6 (Oct. 12) -- Slavery, War, and Revolution: From Saint-Domingue to Haiti**

Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of this World*.


Week 7 (Oct. 19) -- Plantation Slavery and Capitalist Development

Williams, Capitalism and Slavery, complete the book.

Week 8 (Oct. 26) -- The Williams Thesis: Challenge and Reaffirmation


Week 9 (Nov. 2) -- Counter-plantation Legacies


Week 10 (Nov. 9) -- Peasant (and Proletarian?) Adaptations during Slavery and through Emancipation

Selections by Marshall, Tomich, Campbell, and McDonald in Berlin and Morgan, eds., Cultivation and Culture.


Week 11 (Nov. 16) -- The Demon Within: Slave Society in Nineteenth-Century Cuba

Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833-1874 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999).


**Week 12 (23) Emancipation and the Struggle for Meaningful Freedom**


**Week 13 (Nov. 30) -- Contract Labor, Migration and Social Segmentation**


**Weeks 14 & 15 (Two sessions on week of December 7 and 14) Paper Presentation Sessions**
I. Capitalism, Slavery, and Emancipation: History and Historiography


Goveia, Elsa V. "Eric Williams, British Historians and the West Indies." *Caribbean Quarterly* 10 (June 1964): 48-54.


II. The Origins of Racial Slavery


III. The Political Economy of Caribbean Sugar


Scarano, Francisco A. “Estructuras de la plantación azucarera esclavista: el modelo clásico y sus variaciones.” *Del Caribe* VI, no. 16-17 (1990): 6-14.


**IV. The Slave Trade**


V. The Haitian Revolution and the Caribbean


VI. Plantation Slavery and Capitalist Development


VII. The Williams Debate


VIII. Slave Resistance and Adaptation


IX. Proto-peasantries


X. Cuban Slavery and Emancipation


Saco y López Cisneros, José Antonio. Historia de la esclavitud de la raza africana en el Nuevo Mundo y en especial en los países americó-hispanos. With a foreword by Fernando Ortiz. La Habana: Cultural, 1938.


XI. Emancipation in the broader Caribbean


### XII. Contract and other Immigrant Labor


