Course description:

This seminar will explore ongoing 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 that 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 stripped of the individual rights which in Europe at the time were being increasingly regarded as “universal”. African slavery and other ancillary forms forced labor thus became the standard institutions for the procurement of labor in the Caribbean for nearly four centuries; naturally, these institutions 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 demands arising from 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 particular aspect of 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 writer should strive for thoroughness in the bibliographic coverage, she/he should accord priority to the
substantive, analytical issues encompassed by the topic. A historiographic paper or a “review of the literature” it should not be.

The papers are due on Friday, December 3, at 4 P.M. via email to Professor Scarano, who will convert them into a PDF (Adobe Acrobat) file and distribute them 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 gives a critical overview of the week’s readings. A two-page (maximum) written summary of the main points of the presentation, with copies for every seminar member, will complete this task. This summary will be distributed to seminar members at the beginning of the session, although the presenter is encouraged to send hers or his in advance via email. 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

We will read the following books, which you can purchase at Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative, 426 W. Gilman St. (tel. 257-6050). Books will also be on reserve at College Library. Most other required readings are online.


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 William’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 its contents are predominantly focused on the modern period. For incisive articles on Caribbean history written with synthesis in mind, check out 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**


Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, ch. 1.


**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**


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


Seymour Drescher, “*Capitalism and Slavery* after Fifty Years,” *Slavery & Abolition* 18, 3 (December 1997):212-227.

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


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


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


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


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


Selections from Verene A. Shepherd, *Maharani’s Misery: Narratives of a Passage from India to the Caribbean* (Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2002).

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


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 améu-ro-hispanos*. With a foreword by Fernando Ortiz. La Habana: Cultural, 1938.


XI. Emancipation in the Broader Caribbean


*Apuntes sobre la cuestión de la reforma política y de la introducción de Africanos en las islas de Cuba y Puerto-Rico*. Madrid: Fortanet, 1866.


**XII. Contract and Coolie Laborers**


