The Evolution of Labor Systems in the Caribbean

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Course description:
This seminar will explore crucial issues and debates in the history of Caribbean working people. 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 preferred locus for the founding of plantation systems 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. These slaves, 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 recognized as "universal". 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, they lay the material and demographic foundations of these "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 understandably focused much of their attention on understanding the dynamics of labor systems through five centuries of colonial history. Several of the crucial questions that continue to be debated in the literature will be examined here: 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 subjected groups, and how did such compromises affect social and cultural evolution? To what extent did the autonomous spaces shaped by slaves and other laborers make their mark on Creole cultures? What connections existed between the extraction of economic surplus from the plantation colonies and metropolitan economic development? 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? And what were the peculiar features of the proletarianization of labor under conditions of dependent capitalism? These and other related questions will form the backbone of seminar topics.

Requirements
A) Historiographical paper: Seminar members will write an historiographical paper (15-25 pp. long) on a pertinent topic, selected in consultation with the instructor. The paper should probe a substantial aspect of Caribbean labor systems, on which there is a substantial accumula-
tion of historical writing. 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 one should strive for thoroughness in the bibliographic coverage, she/he should accord priority to the substantive, analytical issues encompassed by the topic.

The historiographical papers are due on April 24. You should provide four or more copies of the paper, to be placed on reserve in the History Library (4257 Humanities). Each paper will be the subject of a short, 20-minute discussion on either May 1 or May 8.

B) Presentations: Each seminar participant will make a brief presentation that incorporates insights and findings from all the readings assigned for the given week (Groups A and B, as well as the general assignment). A schedule of presentations will be drawn up during 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 take on a leading role in the rest of the seminar deliberations.
SCHEDULE AND READINGS

Week 1 (Jan. 23) — 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, *The Modern Caribbean* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), may also be useful, although its contents are chiefly focused on the contemporary period. You may also wish to examine one or several of the following:


Week 2 (Jan. 30) — Caribbean Workers in Comparative Economic Perspective

*All:*


*Group A:*


*Group B:*


*Supplementary:*


Levi Marrero, *Cuba: economía y sociedad* (14 vols. to date; Madrid: Playor, 1971-).


**Week 3 (Feb. 6) — Labor Systems of the Spanish Conquest**

*All:*


*Group A:*


*Group B:*

Jalil Sued Badillo, *Los caribes: ¿realidad o fábula? Ensayo de rectificación histórica*, Río Piedras, Editorial Antillana, 1978, chs. 2 and 6, though you may wish to skim chs. 3-5 also.


*Supplementary:*


**Week 4 (Feb. 13) -- From Indentured Servitude to Slavery in the English Caribbean**

*All:*


*Group A:*


Group B:

Supplementary:


Week 5 (Feb. 20) -- The Slave Trade and Slave Demography

All:


Group A:

Group B:


Supplementary:


**Week 6 (Feb. 27) -- Plantation Slavery and Capitalist Development**

*All:*

Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, complete the book.

*Group A:*


*Group B:*


*Supplementary:*


Week 7 (March 6) – The Williams Thesis: Debate and Challenge

All:

Group A:

Group B:

Supplementary:


Week 8 (March 13) -- Counter-plantation Legacies

All:


Group A:

Angel Quintero Rivera, "La cimarronería como herencia y utopía," David y Goliath (Buenos Aires), 40 (noviembre de 1985), 38-41.

Group B:

Supplementary:
Michael Craton, Testing the Chains, Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies (Ithaca, 1982).

José Luciano Franco, Los palenques de negros cimarrones (Havana, 1973).


Week 9 (March 27) -- Turning back the clock: slaves and peones in a late developing plantation system

All:
Group A:


Group B:


Supplementary:


Luis M. Díaz Soler, Historia de la esclavitud negra en Puerto Rico (1953; Río Piedras, 1970).

Arturo Morales Carrión, Auge y decadencia de la trata negrera en Puerto Rico (1820-1860), San Juan, Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe e Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1978.

Gervasio García, Historia crítica, historia sin coartadas: algunos problemas de la Historia de Puerto Rico (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1985).

Week 10 (April 3) Emancipation and the Struggle for Meaningful Freedom

All:

Group A:

Seymour Drescher, "Brazilian Abolition in Comparative Perspective," The Hispanic American Historical Review, 68:3 (August 1988), 429-60.


Group B:


Supplementary:


Week 11 (April 10) – Contract Labor, Migration and Social Segmentation

All:


Group A:


Group B:


Supplementary:


Week 12 (April 17) -- Peasant Adaptations after Slavery

All:

Group A:


Group B:
Sidney W. Mintz, Caribbean Transformations, chs. 7-9, pp. 180-250.

Supplementary:


Manuel Moreno Fraginals, "Plantaciones en el Caribe: el caso Cuba-Puerto Rico-Santo Domingo (1860-1940)," en La historia como arma y otros estudios sobre esclavos, ingenios y plantaciones (Barcelona, 1983), 56-117.


Ralph Shlomowitz, "Plantations and Smallholdings: Comparative Perspectives from the World Cotton and Sugar Cane Economies," Agricultural History 58:1 (January 1984), 1-16.

Vernon D. Wickizer, "The Smallholder in Tropical Export Production," Stanford University, Food Research Institute, Food Research Institute Studies 1 (1960), 49-99.
Week 13 (April 24) Proletarianization

All:


Angel G. Quintero Rivera, "El desarrollo de las clases sociales y los conflictos políticos en Puerto Rico", in Rafael R. Ramírez, Carlos Buitrago Ortiz y Barry B. Levine, eds., Problemas de desigualdad social en Puerto Rico (Rio Piedras: Ediciones Librería Internacional, Colección Diálogos No. 5, 1972), pp. 31-75.

Group A:

Group B:

Supplementary:


Weeks 14 & 15 (May 1 & 8) Paper Presentation Sessions