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Economic History and Historical Geography of the Caribbean: The Last Ten Years Reviewed

This review of writing on Caribbean topics has to start far from that part of the world, as is often the case with matters affecting the central and southern part of the Americas. In this case we have to see at least some of the influence on historical and economic geography as having its source in the confines of some upper stories of unpretentious row housing in Cambridge, England. Here is housed the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, which having commenced its work in the sixties emphasized the need for the study of family reconstitution and the application of suitable statistical techniques to accomplish that purpose (e.g., Wrigley, 1966). Thus one of the themes of the last decade in Caribbean historiography has been the question of the survival of the family under slavery and the demographics of the population in relation to local geographic conditions.

The thread we have traced reflects the links with English universities of Caribbean historians and indirectly contemporary American scholars, notably Brion Davis (1966) who was awarded a Pulitzer prize in 1967 for his reassessment of slavery, and of Engerman and Genovese (1974), Fogel et al. (1972), and Gutman (1976). Quantitative history had arrived and the processing of data on individuals had commenced with the assistance of the computer.

As the last decade opened, the sources for economic and geographic history had already been identified. Chandler (1965), Baker (1968), Comitas (1968), and later Handler (1971) and others had provided inventories and keys to the manuscripts much superior to those employed by earlier scholars (Bell, et al., 1926). Thus the task of data analysis and the dimensions of the possibilities had become clear, and challenged a new breed of Caribbean scholars.

Some of the precursors of this new wave produced their work in the early seventies (Innes, 1973). Hindsight would suggest that special attention should perhaps have been then directed to the work of Dunn (1972) and Craton and Walvin (1970) as both their works, especially the latter, contained the seeds of the new concern with the micro scale and the techniques suitable for such investigation. However, two other contributions should also be mentioned,

Patterson (1967) and Blassingame (1972), for their material on the family and the life of the common man under the condition of slavery and the argument that life did indeed go on in spite of the seemingly "total institution" of the plantation geared as it was to exploitation, and the development of export directed economies and societies.

The major development of the seventies, then, was the processing of the rich archives of the Caribbean using micro scale approaches normally centered on the household unit. Outstanding among these scholars was Dr. Barry Higman, whose "Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica at the time of Emancipation" was accepted as a Ph.D. thesis at the University of the West Indies in 1970, and then revised to appear as *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica 1807-1834* (1976). Here, as the book preface states, is a reassessment of approaches to the history and geography of the slave period away from the "political aspects of slavery and its abolition," and towards a study of "the nature of slavery and its impact on individuals and populations and the application of new techniques to the analysis of demographic data." The postulate is that the nature of the economy affected the growth and structure of the slave population and in turn was affected by the demographics. Differential expressions of the plantation system related to the geographic conditions and associated crop choices are seen to play a role within Jamaica, and Higman concludes that upward social and economic mobility was possible for a minority under slave conditions, although it was coveted by many, as their skills increased. Necessarily, however, he concludes that this would usually imply a migration to town where a semi-independent existence might be achieved.

Although Higman does not draw the further conclusion, perhaps it might be said that the urban pull of the 1830s with its offer of this sense of anonymity compared to the plantation condition underlies the continued drift to the town in subsequent periods in Jamaica, and indicates the strength of this attractiveness as a general phenomenon in the region and the lesser developed world in general.

Not only does Higman demonstrate the new history possible to a cliometrically trained historian in his use of sources, but he has a geographic background that leads him to not inconsiderable cartographic efforts and to field work. In this latter regard his excavations at Montpelier and Roehampton estates in the early seventies (Higman, 1974) can be matched by similar activities by two other leading figures in Caribbean studies namely, Handler and Craton (Handler and

Lange, 1978; Craton, 1978).

Handler, an anthropologist by training, has shown a lifelong interest in the economic history and geography of the region with specific reference to the lifestyles of minority groups as well as the lot of the common man. Although many articles have appeared as a result of his work, his major contributions have been made in the last decade. The first is a guide to the documentation on Barbados referred to above (Handler, 1971), and the second a major contribution resulting from archaeological excavation of a slave cemetery and extended periods of field work (Handler and Lange, 1978). Again the problems of reconstruction of folk history can be seen to have called forth a technical skill appropriate for the conditions where most slaves were illiterate, and some substantial progress in understanding the past has been achieved.

Craton is even more accomplished in his techniques and his masterpiece "Searching for the Invisible Man: Slaves and Plantation Life in Jamaica" (Craton, 1978) demonstrates a familiarity with sources, quantitative methods, demographics, and family reconstruction, field work, cartography, and oral history. Indeed it establishes a standard for the integration of a multiplicity of approaches to solve a problem in the reconstruction of the past. Few if any geographers have accomplished as much, and although he has been criticized from the standpoint of empathy with his subjects on the strength of his being essentially an alien representing the planters view (Beckford, 1972a), this, his most recent study, confounds this criticism.

All these developments in scholarly achievement centered on the Commonwealth Caribbean area and its historical geography and economic history have added a totally new dimension in the last decade. Little of this has been contributed by geographers, yet no geographical understanding of the region could now claim validity without reference to this material. What then are the implications and the foreseeable further developments?

Firstly, interpretive models have to be expanded and revised. The older concepts of metropolitan dominance, export driven economies, and plantation societies with the often implied notion that the slave populations were mere pawns of little greater significance than the stock with which they were inventoried have to be rejected. Indeed substantial steps have been taken in this direction by Beckford (1972b), Brookfield (1975), and others. But these are only partially

related to the newly worked data. New regional insights can, and should, be developed from the revelations contained in the microscale information now available. "Human" explanations now become possible in the sense suggested by Brookfield (1964) opening the door as he suggests to Spencer's scenario (1954) where "there can be no finite limit placed upon the variety of data with which the regional cultural geographer must deal in his effort to depict the operation of man in his chosen landscape it seems to me that it is up to the cultural geographer not only to describe that particular landscape, but to describe the processes by which it came to be in the shape that it is today."

Apart from developments in regional understanding and cultural insight, a theme that has already emerged in the last decade is a concern with population geography. The vital statistics of the population have been laid down not only at the island wide level, but also at the scale of the productive unit, and the family. The nature and strength of family ties is presented and the mobility, socially and spatially, through time examined. In this latter regard one might add mention of the additional studies by Potter (1975), who analyzed the migratory patterns of East Indians in Guyana during the period of indentured labour; Roberts (1957), whose studies on Jamaican population past and present have been germinal; and others such as Hall (1978) and Marshall, whose current work on changing patterns of land holding and population distribution following and caused by emancipation is turning up information on village origins (e.g. Hughes, 1974). An additional dimension to these studies, however, could be added, with attention being paid to human well-being among these peoples in relation to the incidence of disease and data on causes of death. Indeed such studies might lead to a reevaluation of purely economic measures of deprivation and progress in the context of the Caribbean world. Thus stagnation and persistence of patterns of living, as opposed to regions undergoing rapid and/or continuous change, might be identified and new insights gained on the human innovators in a context of limited opportunity.

Increasingly the Caribbean scholar is forced to acknowledge the indomitable spirit of man as expressed in the region through time. Undoubtedly the initiative in geographical change has remained with mankind in this area too, in spite of the fact that for too long so many were seen but as the chattels of others.

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