

## **Book Review: Slavery Without Sugar: Diversity in Caribbean Economy and Society Since the 17th Century**

**Joseph Adjaye**

Department of Africana Studies, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260

Shepherd, Verene A., ed. *Slavery Without Sugar: Diversity in Caribbean Economy and Society Since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. 336pp. \$59.95 (cloth).

This volume is a collection of essays on colonial Caribbean society and economy that seek to demonstrate the complexities in the lives of the enslaved populations outside of the plantation. The book's principal goal is to critique the tradition of Caribbean historiography that views the plantation complex in a straight-forward monocultural model or enslaver-enslaved dichotomy. These paradigms, according to the authors, mask the inherent diversity and heterogeneity of Caribbean society. Though recognizing the relative dominance of the sugar plantation as a system of production, *Slavery Without Sugar* demonstrates to the contrary that sugar did not control the whole structure of life in the Caribbean.

The book's eleven essays include studies on indigo farming in St. Domingue/Haiti (David Geggus); timber extraction in Belize (O. Nigel Bolland); livestock farms called "pens" in Jamaica (B. W. Higman); and coffee farming in Jamaica (two separate essays, one by S. D. Smith, and the other jointly by Verene A. Shepherd and Kathleen E. A. Monteith). Other studies examine the production of a variety of forest, maritime, and other non-sugar agricultural resources, such as the cultivation of cotton in the Bahamas (Gail Saunders).

A major aspect of the economic diversity that the volume seeks to illustrate is in the lives of the enslaved urban populations. Thus Evelyn Powell Jennings' essay on the king's enslaved laborers who worked on Havana's fortifications in the 18<sup>th</sup> century demonstrates that their lives were significant not only in terms of occupational diversity in enslavement in Cuba but also in illuminating the characteristics of urban enslavement as a whole. Her essay, along with Pedro L. V. Welch's analysis of the urban context of the enslaved in Barbados, Felix V. Matos Rodriguez's study of domestics in Puerto Rico, and Franklin W. Knight's examination of the free colored in Cuba, demonstrate that enslaved urban peoples faced conditions of life different from plantation or rural slavery, thus underscoring the fact that the peculiar characteristics of urban enslavement have to be studied if the complexities of Caribbean slavery are to be fully understood. As all the essays show, the rural dimension represented only one aspect of the social reality of plantation societies.

*Slavery Without Sugar's* major contribution is in critiquing the totalizing tendency to focus on sugar; "the concept of a single type of plantation complex modeled on sugar can no longer be applied sweepingly to the colonial Caribbean" (p. 14). In exploring different dimensions of non-sugar production, the volume does an effective job in illuminating the complex nature of Caribbean economy and the implications of those forms of production for our understanding of the wider dynamics of class, race, and power outside of the sugar plantation. Labor processes, for instance, affected settlement patterns, demographic characteristics, and political power. Thus the socioeconomic marginality of Jamaican pen-keepers, who lacked political power, is contrasted with the relatively better-situated status of coffee farmers. Indeed, the conditions of enslaved labor in the Caribbean varied according to a number of factors not the least of which were the nature of the economic enterprise in which they were engaged and whether they were in a rural or urban setting. For qualitative differences existed in their lives, their contribution to the economy, their capacity to negotiate the terms of their conditions of enslavement, and their pursuit of freedom.

In stressing that diversification was "the real Caribbean experience," the contributors to the volume are not exactly breaking fresh ground. The theme of diversity in commodity production and the occupation of the enslaved had been emphasized by Barry Higman and others since the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> However, *Slavery Without Sugar* makes a significant contribution to an under-researched aspect of Caribbean studies, by adding to the pluralist discourse on Caribbean economic and social history.

1. B.W. Higman, *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica, 1807–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) and *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807–1834* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

