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Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 360 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, index, and acknowledgments. \$47.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-81-224829-5; \$27.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-081222-4-238.

Review by Robert D. Taber, Fayetteville State University.

Is capitalism an ideology of exploitation? A system of mass labor organization? A pattern of investment and re-investment? How did French and British planners and planters think about the mechanisms and profitability of chattel labor during an age of sophisticated automata? How did the colonial context, including slavery and new ideas of race, shape notions of Britishness and Frenchness? And how did the people who lost the most in the system, the enslaved whom British, French, Dutch, and other European traders forcibly transported to the Caribbean, respond to their circumstances?

These questions form the heart of Burnard's and Garrigus's long-anticipated comparative history of the two western Caribbean colonies that together represent the eighteenth-century sugar system at its height. The comparative framework is apt, as Saint-Domingue (colonial Haiti) and Jamaica share historical parallels but also key divergences. Both had been part of the extended Taíno world until Spanish conquest at the turn of the sixteenth century, only for the English and French governments to lay claim to them in the mid-seventeenth century as part of larger designs to access the wealth of Mexico and Peru. Even after conquest—a history that white colonists in each would later reshape to suit their political ends—the colonies were peripheral to investments in sugar and slavery in the eastern Caribbean colonies of Barbados and Martinique. Local planters pushed the shift to capital-intensive sugar cultivation in the late 1600s and early 1700s as an effort to use the profits of freebooting or privateering and to claim respectability. Both colonies had complicated reputations in Europe as places of profit and disaster, boldness and weakness, licentiousness and death. While colonists were regarded as lacking in Christian fervor, enslaved Africans created some of the most well-known (albeit misunderstood) syncretic cosmologies, including Vodou and Obeah. And both places are sites of world-renowned resistance to slavery (the Jamaican maroons; the Haitian Revolution) with historiographies initially developed by men of the Church, planters, and colonial lawyers. As the opening sentence puts it, the colonies were “extremely profitable but socially monstrous slave societies” (p. 1).

For Burnard and Garrigus, defining capitalism as a type of mass social and economic organization of labor and as the engine of a racializing ideology that created whiteness as a “defining character of full citizenship” is two sides of the same coin, one explained by their metaphor of “plantation

machine” (pp. 2-3). The enslaved workers “from one continent,” supervised and brutalized by a small free population, “manufactured products in a second continental zone for consumers in a third” (p. 1). Central to this system were planters organizing the enslaved into a “gang system of labor,” or in the French, *ateliers* (p. 4), efficiencies of scale (p. 5), and sensitivity to the scheduling of harvest and production (pp. 5-6). Burnard and Garrigus push back directly on scholarly quibbles that planters’ resistance to the adoption of new plow designs means sugar estates were not “factories in the field” (p. 7). They point to the irrationality of saving on labor costs for planting when harvesting remained labor intensive and that planters in the second half of the eighteenth century were eager to adopt new technologies where they thought they would be beneficial. As for plantations being ineligible to be capitalist enterprises because labor was a fixed cost, Garrigus and Burnard argue that “sugar planters saw their laborers not only as workers but as highly flexible capital investments...property...and also as people...Planters could sell them, use them as collateral, or hire them out to planters who needed additional labor. Slaves thus represented highly liquid forms of capital, as well as being people who produced income for their owners (pp. 7-8).” Arguments about the centrality of slavery to the development of capitalism stretch back at least to Eric Williams’s *Capitalism and Slavery*,^[1] and they are crucial to the discussion among historians of the United States about “the new history of capitalism” and *The New York Times*’ “The 1619 Project.” At the same time, these arguments highlight not only the importance of bringing the Caribbean more fully into discussions of ancien régime France and the Revolution, but also of the need to pay attention to the histories of resistance, resilience, and creativity that emerge from the early modern Caribbean.

The Plantation Machine is also, in many ways, the strongest one-volume history of Saint-Domingue written thus far in English, benefitting from John Garrigus’s long engagement with the history of the colony. While there are more thorough volumes on particular topics, places, individuals, or ideas, and this volume does not extend into the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), the authors draw on and improve upon a dizzying array of secondary sources. Of particular note is the economic histories of Saint-Domingue in the 1780s, which often focused on one particular plantation or trading house to argue that colonial investments were unprofitable, often because of bankruptcy laws that made it impossible to foreclose on indebted planters. Drawing on work by Albane Forestier about the Chaurand merchant house of Nantes,^[2] the authors show that the merchant house made its “best returns from buying Saint-Domingue properties...[evaluating] plantations very comprehensively, paying special attention to the quality of management,” (p. 224) as opposed to the failures of Romberg and Bapst analyzed by Françoise Thésée, which the authors blame on the firm’s “irrational exuberance’ about Saint-Domingue” (p. 223). Also notable is their deep engagement with primary and secondary sources on enslaved religiosity (pp. 235-243), which enables them to build on and critique previous conversations regarding the origins of Vodou, the lack of Catholic confraternities in Saint-Domingue, and the impact of mesmerism. The authors also effectively draw on Moreau de Saint-Méry’s compendium *Loix et Constitutions* to shed new light on the political history of Saint-Domingue, particularly the conflicts between the two colonial councils and the Navy Ministry at the conclusion of the Seven Years’ War (pp. 156-162). The chronological organization, centered on the years of 1740-1788, the height of the sugar economy in both colonies, also makes the narrative easy to follow and underscores the volume’s value as a reference for further work on Saint-Domingue.

One area of continuing dispute is the web of cause-and-effect in the intertwined histories of the French and Haitian revolutions and the questions that these connections raise about the agency

of the self-liberating, the nature of political history, and approaches to the studies of France and Haiti. Historians of the ancien régime and the revolutions alike need to be mindful of the complexity of the web and the long biographies of different personnel. While it is true that few in Versailles with power cared about the *de jure* racial discrimination that had solidified in colonial law across the 1700s (p. 262), it remains an open question how long the colonial regime of Saint-Domingue could have survived the mass importation of military veterans from West and West Central Africa. The argument in chapter five, that the Macandal poisoning scare in Saint-Domingue in the late 1750s was due to the consumption of spoiled wheat, will also be controversial due to previous assumptions that the enslaved would not have access to wheat bread and the deaths of livestock during the scare, but it deserves serious consideration. The authors carefully detail the information available about the smuggling trade between British North America and Saint-Domingue—where wheat flour was a key commodity—and show the correlation between low supplies of high-quality flour and deaths from poisoning. Spoiled flour would also be subject to a caloric variation of Gresham’s law, more likely to circulate, including being thrown into livestock feed. The story of the enslaved Kongolesse woman Marie Kingué convincing her slaveholder in the 1780s that she could detect poisoners is a valuable addition to the discussion of the uses of poison in the power dynamics of plantation society (pp. 258-259). More work needs to be done on the ways the enslaved and free people of color influenced and subverted colonial society in Saint-Domingue.

Robert Palmer’s *Age of Democratic Revolutions* famously limited discussion of the Haitian Revolution to a few passing references.[3] Scholars of the French Revolution are increasingly recognizing the importance of the Haitian Revolution not just as having an identifiable history not entirely explainable by metropolitan events, but also as exerting influence of its own on developments in France. The same dynamic holds true for the colonial period, and *The Plantation Machine* is essential reading for any scholar of the eighteenth century or French capitalism and industrialization or anyone who still considers Napoleon I’s empire to be the first French empire.

NOTES

[1] Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944).

[2] Albane Forestier, “A ‘Considerable Credit’ in the Late Eighteenth-Century French West Indian Trade: the Chaurands of Nantes,” *French History* 25, no.1, (2011): 48-68.

[3] R. R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolutions: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959–1964).

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