

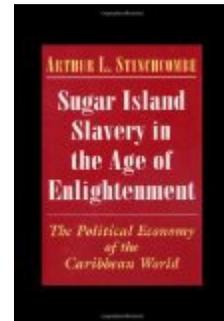
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Arthur L. Stinchcombe. *Sugar Island Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment: The Political Economy of the Caribbean World*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. xi + 361 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-02995-5.

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Quite understandably, the topics of slavery and emancipation tend to dominate the historiography of the pre-twentieth-century Caribbean. After all, the islands were the backbone of several European empires. The contributions of slave-based sugar, tobacco, and coffee served to stimulate and consolidate the rise of industrial capitalism in Europe—points developed so well by Eric Williams and Sidney Mintz, among others. Consequently, slavery, emancipation, and their economic consequences played significant roles in the political economy not only of the Caribbean, but also of Europe.

While the interaction of political economy and emancipation in slave societies has been a major focus of works dealing with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Caribbean (see one of the latest contributions by Kathleen Mary Butler, *The Economics of Emancipation: Jamaica and Barbados, 1823-1843*), the specific topic of “freedom” and its multiple meanings has perhaps received less focus. Arthur Stinchcombe’s *Sugar Island Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment* is a deliberate effort to recast the focus of “freedom” and its meanings in a comparative light for most islands and the different social sectors on those islands. Acknowledging that he is building on the popular plantation economy thesis, Stinchcombe notes that too often this thesis is “used as a theme to unify extended treatments of history, rather than as a theory to explain the variations among islands and between historical periods” (p. 3). Consequently, the author (a noted sociologist at Northwestern University) has written a complicated comparative analysis of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Caribbean.

Stinchcombe argues that “permutations and modifi-

cations” of two major causes (the rise of racist slave systems due to sugar plantation development and the destruction of this system as “democracy” made its way from Europe to the islands) “produced the macrosociological and macropolitical variations in the structure of freedoms between the islands as they entered the 20th century” (p. 26). The “core problem” for the nineteenth century, argues Stinchcombe, is understanding the different methods, problems, and variations in “the transmission of the democratic movements in the metropolises to the [already very diverse] islands, transforming the social meaning” of social and political boundaries (p. 18). These problems were laid in the eighteenth century and largely rested on how much local control island governments exercised, so that “[m]uch of what freedom meant after emancipation was ... decided locally” (pp. 176-77).

The book is divided almost exactly into halves, with the first describing the development of “slave societies” and the second half describing the effects of emancipation. Stinchcombe is very specific about his definition of a “slave society”: “a society in which very many of the familial, social, political, and economic relations are shaped by the extensive and intensive deprivation of slaves of all sorts of rights to decide for themselves” and whose “pervasive purpose in many kinds of social relations between more and less powerful people is to keep the others (slaves) from deciding or being able to decide” (p. 3). This definition becomes the foundation for a hierarchy of most to least slave societies, determined by “the degree to which the island government devoted itself exclusively to making the liberties of the planters in their property unlimited, and had the powers necessary to do a good job of that.” This degree is then determined by 1) “the degree

to which an island was a sugar island,” 2) “the degree of internal social and political organization of the planters,” and 3) “political place of the planters in an island government and of the island government in the empire” (p. 130).

For Stinchcombe this measure for the degree of a slave society directly corresponds to the amount of “democracy” in the islands. The sugar islands that fit his “most slave society” status before emancipation were the British and French islands. In the nineteenth century, utilizing his scale, the “least” slave societies were Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and the Spanish colonies of Cuba and Puerto Rico. Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Martinique, and Guadeloupe are seen as the “most ‘democratic,’” the first two having received political virtues from revolutionary imperial ties and the latter two “from fuller incorporation into the imperial democratic system” (p. 13). Freedom in the post-emancipation Caribbean is directly linked to the island’s degree of “slave society” and its links to metropolitan democratic movements.

All of this brings up the question of “freedom” and what it is we mean when speaking of such an Enlightenment-era concept in the Caribbean. Chapter 5 (“Planter Power, Freedom, and Oppression of Slaves in the 18th Century Caribbean”) is perhaps the key chapter in this book. Building on a debate between Frank Tannenbaum and Herbert Klein on one hand and Manuel Moreno Fraginals on the other, Stinchcombe sides with Moreno Fraginals, who argued that the best approach to understanding slavery and freedom was not to look at legal dichotomies (as did Klein and Tannenbaum), but to analyze slavery and freedom within the realms of daily practice. Whereas writers like Orlando Patterson utilize an approach that sees the idea of freedom as shaped by the practice of slavery, Stinchcombe counters by insisting we see freedom as “the high end of an empirical variable in the 18th century Caribbean” (p. 125). In this way, it is better to speak of a continuum between “freedom” and “unfreedom,” in which the daily practice of social structures and the power of planters determine the level of oppression of slavery.

The freedom of a planter, for example, to manumit a slave or allow time on provision grounds had a corresponding degree of freedom for the slave. Planter freedom had its “extreme manifestation” in manumission. Thus, the “core bourgeois liberty is the freedom to alienate property, to truck, barter, and exchange” (p. 131). Critics may challenge Stinchcombe for this very owner-

focused approach, but he counters that from a slaves’s *daily* practice and existence, this was better than totalitarian slavery/unfreedom. “Thus it was when the slaveowner wanted trustworthy agency by slaves that he or she treated them as if they were free, as if they had rights, and in the extreme gave them rights” (p. 131). Crucial to the slaveowner’s freedom was the degree of freedom planters and local governments had from imperial oversight.

This planter freedom is important for understanding the effects on the nineteenth century. Stinchcombe sees Barbados as the best example of an eighteenth-century slave society. Such a slave society was maintained after emancipation owing to the “more solid liberties of Barbadian planters and the better organization of flexible governments constituted of those liberties” (p. 320). Consequently, in those slave societies of the eighteenth century that retained strong local governments in the nineteenth century (primarily in the British Caribbean), “[f]reedom was a route to greater social discipline” (p. 320). In effect, even though Great Britain was perhaps the most democratic European country of the nineteenth century, the strong racist planter class of the islands and island government provided stability for these “slave societies” so that the British islands were even less democratic (and thus less “free”) in the nineteenth century than the Spanish island colonies.

The student looking for a quick summary of late slavery- and emancipation-era Caribbean history will be frustrated by this book. Clearly it is written from the perspectives of the social sciences and its lack of a clear narrative structure (so important, thankfully, once again in the field of history) will leave one clawing for something tangible. This is definitely not a book recommended for undergraduates or newcomers to Caribbean history. On the other hand, the book is not based on primary sources, relying exclusively on secondary literature. To that end a student may find useful the bibliography plus the brief synopses of various authors’ views throughout the text. However, persons more familiar with Caribbean history may be surprised by the absence of certain authors in the bibliography, which is so crucial for Stinchcombe’s insights. For instance, Stinchcombe relies on only one of Hillary Beckles’s works, ignores Herbert Klein’s 1986 comparative work on slavery in the Americas, and overlooks all works by Verene Shepherd and Richard Sheridan. Most surprisingly, especially for a book that has such a heavy emphasis on the intellectual as well as the practical impact of “freedom,” Stinchcombe overlooks Gordon Lewis’s monumental history of ideology in the

Caribbean (*Main Currents in Caribbean Thought*).

While Stinchcombe is excellent at conceptualizing “freedom” and “slave society” and then holding tightly to these conceptualizations, he is less strict in his use of “democracy” and “world system.” When he is discussing “democratic movements,” “crises of democracy,” and “Democratic libertarianism,” the reader is led to believe that Stinchcombe speaks of a European-defined notion true to Enlightenment-era thinking on the subject. Considering that the “core problem” he analyzes for the nineteenth century is the transmission of democratizing movements to the islands, this makes some sense. Yet, scholars of Caribbean history will have to ask, “What about slave versions of ‘democracy’?” This lack of alternative (that is, slave-based) definitions of democracy relates to another issue that scholars may question. Stinchcombe writes very little about slave initiative in this book. In fact, other than the heavily discussed Haitian Revolution, the only slave rebellion listed in the index is for a nineteenth-century rebellion in St. Croix (p. 225). If a fundamental aspect of democracy is the power of the people to define their existence, and the majority of people in these societies were slaves and ex-slaves, then should their initiatives not be a central aspect of the meaning of freedom in the Caribbean?

Finally, Stinchcombe mentions the importance of the “world system” in the development of slave societies and then the transition to emancipation. In the introduction’s discussion of chapter 12, he writes: “What we will have shown is how a capitalist world system built a slave system, and then tore it down” (p. 25). For all the set up,

Stinchcombe really writes around “world system” theory. The “world system” is repeatedly mentioned, and chapters on finance capital (chapter 3) and economic demography (chapter 4) give a general political economy feel to the first half of the book, but nowhere is there a detailed or theoretical discussion of how the world system is applicable to the Caribbean. In fact, there is no reference to a work on world systems theory in the bibliography, not even the bible of the field: Immanuel Wallerstein’s three-volume work, *The Modern World System*. Beyond the lack of discussion of the concept, one has to ask whether the “capitalist world system” was the *agent* that in fact built and destroyed Caribbean slave systems.

Ultimately, Arthur Stinchcombe’s *Sugar Island Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment* is an intriguing and at times deceptively humorous work that should spark all scholars of the Caribbean and scholars of the Enlightenment’s effects in the Americas to rethink the issues of freedom and slavery. Though some may question the practice of creating a hierarchy of slave societies, and others may question whether Haiti and the Dominican Republic were more democratic than the British islands in the nineteenth century, this work is still a notable contribution to studies of emancipation-era Caribbean history and of the impact of European historical events on the processes of democratization half a world way.

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