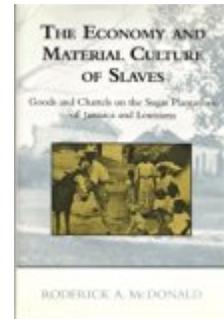


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Roderick A. McDonald. *The Economy and Material Culture of Slaves: Goods and Chattels on the Sugar Plantations of Jamaica and Louisiana*. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1993. xiv + 339 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-1794-1.

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Roderick McDonald's new book, *The Economy and Material Culture of Slaves*, exemplifies both the strengths and some of the weaknesses of the new social history of slavery. It enriches our understanding of the complexities of slave life and helps to restore the slaves to center stage as historical actors in their own right, not helpless victims of larger forces. But it also skirts some interpretive difficulties and occasionally founders in partially digested masses of descriptive detail.

Like most modern historians of slavery, McDonald finds himself pulled in two directions as he tries to capture the essence of the slave experience: on the one hand, he stresses the oppression and destitution of the slaves; on the other, he finds in the internal economies and material culture of the sugar plantation slaves evidence of their autonomy, independence, and power to shape their lives according to their own preferences. Indeed, by the end of the book, this second line of interpretation is taken so far that the author even refers to the "dominion they [i.e., the slaves] had over the lives and society of those who enslaved them" (175). Perhaps this claim of "dominion" is acceptable as a rhetorical flourish, if not an empirically based conclusion, but it illustrates an interpretive quandary: how to view slaves who both dominated their

masters and were dominated, even oppressed, by them?

I'll return to this and other interpretive issues later in the review. First, a summary of the book itself. McDonald begins with a brief introduction in which he explains his decision to investigate the mature the mature phases of two rather different sugar-producing regions: Jamaica in the several decades before and after 1800; and Louisiana from the 1820s to the Civil War. The choice makes sense, but I wish that McDonald had done more with the explicitly comparative dimension of his study. Intriguing comments here and there (e.g., p. 165) are left mostly undeveloped. McDonald also provides a concise description of the processes of sugar growing and harvesting in each area. After thus describing the work that occupied most of the time of the slaves, he proceeds to explore the ways in which they used their "free" time to tend their own properties and work for extra pay.

These activities constituted the "internal" or "slave" economy within the larger plantation economy. This is the main focus of the first half of the book. In two chapters (one each on Jamaica and Louisiana), McDonald investigates the crops the slaves grew on their "provision grounds" and in their kitchen gardens; the livestock and poultry they owned and turned into extra food or income; the household articles they manufactured and sold; the resources they collected from the environment around them; the many types of work they performed for cash or credit; the markets in which they sold what they produced or gathered on their own time; the peddlers and traders they dealt with as intermediaries; the diverse array of products they bought with the income they earned; and the forms of theft by which they supplemented their rations and earnings.

How and why did such internal economies arise? McDonald does not investigate this question in any detail but declares that, by the time the Jamaica and Louisiana plantation economies matured, it had become “customary” for owners to permit their slaves to own (and bequeath) plots of land and farm animals, to sell produce in markets or on the plantation, and to work on their own account for pay or credit. What may have started out as privileges given to certain slaves, or as strategies to force slaves to see to their own subsistence needs, appear to have hardened into rights or entitlements that most slaves would refuse to give up. They were the product of protracted “negotiations” that exemplified the leverage slaves had in determining the uses of their time and energy, when these were not commanded by their owners. By and large, these rights or activities were not protected by law. Instead, the authorities struggled periodically to curb the more dangerous tendencies (above all, toward freedom) they seemed to embody. Owners, for their part, understood and tried to steer clear of the dangers. But they could also see the economic (and common) sense of allowing their slaves some measure of autonomy, if it resulted in a higher standard of living for the slaves, better health, more personal satisfaction, more successful reproduction, and a more productive plantation economy.

Readers unfamiliar with the well-developed internal economies of slave societies outside mainland North America will find much to marvel at in these chapters. The material they contain demonstrates the flexibility of these slave societies and the ingenuity and initiative—one might even say the entrepreneurial spirit (with all that the phrase implies, from the petty to the grand)—of slaves given opportunities or niches for their own pursuits. Jamaican slave sellers and their produce came to dominate urban markets, and slaves held a large fraction (about 20%) of the circulating currency on the island. Slaves in Louisiana were paid by their owners for cutting wood or digging ditches on their own time. They also earned fairly large sums by gathering Spanish moss (used for stuffing in upholstery) and shipping it to agents in St. Louis and elsewhere. These are just a few examples of the many economic activities noted by McDonald.

Though there were differences between Jamaica and Louisiana—for instance, slaves in the former tended to sell their goods and services off the plantation, while those in the latter did so on the plantation—the outcomes and purposes were similar. In both cases, slaves consumed much of what they produced and thus enjoyed a better diet, better health, and more variety than they

would have if no such activities had been permitted. And, in both cases, slaves used their earnings to buy personal items—food, clothing, tobacco, alcohol, finery for special occasions—that, McDonald argues, expressed not just their own decisions and preferences, but also their values and culture.

This link between the internal economy and the material culture of slaves leads to the focus of the next two chapters of the book: the housing, food, and clothing of the slave population. Since much of each of these was provided by owners (and plantation records describe the provisions in detail), McDonald spends a great deal of time on sometimes tedious descriptions of blanket allotments and the like. Adding to the tedium, in table after table and appendix after appendix, he unloads reams of raw data, much of which could be, and usually is, summarized elsewhere in far less space. The inclusion of this raw data is something of a mystery in this otherwise well designed book.

Table 16, for example, occupies one-and-a-half pages (142-143) and simply lists names of household heads, numbers of persons in each household, and numbers of blankets issued to each on one Louisiana plantation in October 1854. The bottom line? Each person received one blanket. Similarly, Appendices I-III and VIII present raw data on slave households and their properties (land, animals, houses) on two Jamaican estates in 1825. The data are summarized and interpreted at length elsewhere in the book. What is the reader supposed to do with these four appendices, which take up 52 pages (more space than the longest chapter)? This is taking reverence for source materials a bit too far. In contrast, the 16 pages of illustrations that precede the appendices are, in my opinion, truly helpful and instructive.

After a too-brief (six-line) introduction to the material culture theme, McDonald launches right into a technical description of slave hut construction in Jamaica. This and other empirical passages in these chapters have real value. At the interpretive level, however, McDonald constantly struggles to make sense of very complex patterns (or data with no apparent pattern at all). Clearly, living standards were uneven, owing partly to planter biases and partly to the slaves’ own efforts. The most talented and enterprising slaves, already favored by their owners in various ways, were precisely the ones able to better their conditions through the internal economy, while the less able profited from it least of all. Thus, the internal economy tended to accentuate already existing inequalities. The guards slaves stationed at their provision

grounds and the padlocks they bought to secure their property suggest it also created new sources of jealousy and division among the slaves.

Did the internal economy truly, as McDonald contends, constitute the means by which slaves used their own preferences and values to shape the material environment of their quarters and the community life they enjoyed there? I find his arguments on this score to be less than fully convincing. Brief discussions of house types and clothing styles would be more persuasive if they were linked to broader notions of culture that embrace the realm of the spirit, domestic space, personal adornment, and individual, family, and group identity. McDonald's periodic references to slave autonomy and independence in the defining of their material world wear thin as one recalls the severe constraints within which they often operated.

To be fair, themes of autonomy and independence are found in most of the current literature on this and related topics. In a brief conclusion, McDonald restates the arguments of his first four chapters and then summarizes some of the other literature on the slaves' economy. This discussion helps to situate his own work in a larger context, but for the reader's sake it probably should have been presented at the beginning, not the end, of the book. Anyone interested in the larger picture of which this work is a part should consult an essay

by Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan that, in two versions, introduces their edited collections on *The Slaves' Economy: Independent Productions by Slaves in the Americas* (London, 1991) and *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville, 1993).

However one chooses to evaluate the internal economy, it is clear, as McDonald asserts, that there was no monopoly of power within the institution of slavery. It is also clear that many plantation slaves became experienced participants in market and wage relations. Their experiences not only helped sustain them as slaves, but they also prepared them, to some extent, for post-emancipation life. Whether internal economies helped or harmed slaves, whether they strengthened or weakened the slave system itself—both can be argued—they are a little known but vital part of slave life. McDonald's well researched book (his essay on bibliography and historiography illustrates the depth and breadth of his research), despite some weak spots, advances our understanding of this subject and encourages us to keep our eyes open to the rich variety of work and material life in the plantation societies of the Americas.

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