

# Capitalism and colonies

## Jamaica and Saint-Domingue

*By Andy Cabot*

---

**Two recent books offer new perspectives on the slave system in the Caribbean, with a particular focus on Saint-Domingue. Their primary purpose – the economic development sustained by slavery – leads the authors to very different conclusions.**

---

Reviewed : Trevor Burnard & John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016; Paul Cheney, *Cul-de-Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism and Slavery in French Saint-Domingue*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Were colonies, or, more largely speaking, the colonial world, “globally” relevant during the early modern era? This is an historical question that still raises more questions – and thus more scholarship – than it provides answers today.

Two recent books address the thorny issue of the colonial world relations to the rest of the global economy in the second half of the eighteenth century, a period often considered as the apex of early modern globalization dominated by transoceanic trade, merchant capital, and state monopolies. The first of these is a joint effort from Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016) while the second one is written by Paul Cheney, *Cul-de-Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism and Slavery in French Saint-Domingue* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

The first book by John Garrigus and Trevor Burnard is the outcome of decades of scholarship by the two authors on the most important sugar colonies of the

eighteenth century: The British colony of Jamaica and the French colony of Saint-Domingue. Garrigus is a specialist of the social history of Saint-Domingue who devoted most of his career to the study of *gens de couleur*; freemen of mixed racial ancestry who constituted an intermediate class between African slaves and European settlers in that colony. Most of his articles as well as his first book drew on detailed archival research in the notarial records of the colony. Similarly, his colleague Trevor Burnard has concentrated most of its academic work on Jamaica. His first book was an extensive psychological journey into the life of the dreaded plantation overseer Thomas Thistlewood. Built upon the papers of several plantations owners and statistical records concerned with the many aspects of landholdings in Jamaica (land purchases, land grants, plantation sizes, locations, slaves' purchases), this research established him as a leading scholar of Caribbean slavery and led him to conduct a series of recent studies on British American plantation societies.

Both authors' research shared similitudes and led to the elaboration of the present publication. It is not *per se* a research-based collaboration as little "new" material is being exploited here. Rather, the main idea for this book was to put the expertise of two leading scholars of the colonial Caribbean in common to attempt an "integrated" study of the two most significant sites of the eighteenth-century plantation economy. It provides readers with a synthesis of the authors' cutting-edge scholarship as well as of the rapidly expanding secondary literature. It also shies away from delivering a strict "comparative" analysis as it proposes to deliver a truly "integrated" study aimed at showing how "French" Saint-Domingue and "British" Jamaica were "remarkably similar in cultural terms" (B & G, 9); and how they were "central to the nature of French and British imperialism in the New World and in imperial settings generally." (B & G, 19).

Paul Cheney is more of a newcomer in the field of Caribbean history. His original training was in economic theory and the economic thought of the Enlightenment; these interests most notably giving shape to a seminal study of French economic thinking and Old Regime intellectual mores in the eighteenth century. His latest release is at the crossroads between these earlier interests and a new research focus on Saint-Domingue. The main element in that transition from continental thought to colonial estate is the dense archival work conducted by Cheney on one family of noble proprietors in Saint-Domingue – the Ferron de la Ferronnays – over almost four generations, which allowed him to reconstruct with minutiae the destiny of a major sugar estate in the Cul-de-Sac plain, west of Port-au-Prince. A significant portion of these papers was accessed through authorization from a lawful descendant

of the Ferronnays; while the remaining research was done in the seized family papers located in the French National Archives. This in-depth archival material enabled Cheney to successfully reconstruct the history of the Ferronnays plantation, and to vividly describe all its most important phases, from the initial purchase in France to the final compensation granted to the family's inheritors in 1825 after the Haitian state eventually agreed to pay an indemnity for the property losses suffered by French planters during the thirteen-year-long Haitian Revolution (1791-1804).

## **Capitalism and Colonies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The proud mention of "capitalism" on the front covers of these books brings attention to the overbearing influence of Eric Williams' thesis developed in his 1944 *Capitalism and Slavery*: the economic activity generated by colonial trade financed early forms of industry in Britain in the eighteenth century which, in turn, helped bring about the end of an economically declining system –plantation slavery – in the early nineteenth century. Certainly, Williams' argumentation was primarily directed at countering the reigning interpretation concerning the British abolition of slavery and none of the books under study here engage in this much debated topic. Albeit through different means, these nevertheless attempt to shed some light on one of the most tenacious aspects of the "decline" thesis' legacy, namely, the idea that the Caribbean plantation economy stood as a remnant of a pre-modern and non-capitalistic site of economic enterprise at the close of the eighteenth century.

Burnard and Garrigus are more particularly keen on piercing some cracks in the Williams thesis. To them, plantation colonies were undoubtedly "industrial, or at least proto-industrial operations" (B & G, 3) centred on the advent of a particular form of labour organisation: "the integrated plantation model" (B & G, 3), an almost scientific and industrial-like type of labour organisation that gradually came to define the Caribbean landscape in the early eighteenth century due to the dramatic progress made in sugarcane culture. This model came to replace the traditional task system still prevalent in most of the Caribbean in that period and completed the concentration of a predominantly African labour force in certain areas of the two colonies. (B & G, 3-6)

The authors consider the explosive growth of sugar production in the eighteenth century as similarly important to that of cotton or coal for explaining the rise of the manufacturing system. They insist on the fact that growing sugar "was

significantly more difficult than for any other early modern food crop, in terms of labour, capital, equipment, and timing.” (B & G, 5) while also adding that building a successful plantation required “that an eighteenth-century planter be an accomplished farmer and a manager of a complex manufacturing process.” (B & G, 7). Their argument reveals scepticism about the fact that economic progress and innovation in Europe made the colonial Caribbean an “anachronism”<sup>1</sup>, at least during the eighteenth century. Unlike Williams, they are drawn to seeing the process with an added nuance: West Indian plantations were the sites of many innovations that predated, precluded and eventually influenced the rise of the early factory system in Europe.

To further demonstrate this “industrialist” stance, the two authors spend considerable time describing and explaining the evolution of this thriving economic goldmine referred to as “the plantation machine”. In that regard, they place particular emphasis on the example of Saint-Domingue which featured more dedicated efforts by the French imperial state to promote plantations’ productions and land prospection. These involved robust state investments on elaborate irrigation infrastructures, generous funding from leading scientific academies on experimental designs for new sugar mills, and a deeper public scrutiny over the economic value of plantations among high-ranking nobles. The results of these state-directed enterprises were spectacular and included, among others: a frenzied immigration from *petits blancs* (poor whites) – one thousand arrival each year after 1763 – driven by what appeared to be the late eighteenth century version of the Gold Rush, and an unprecedented growth of the African slave population in the aftermath of the American Revolution (in Jamaica, around 12,000 slaves per annum were imported between 1783 and 1785, and 16,200 per annum in 1789-1795. For Saint-Domingue, around 125,000 slaves were landed in 1786-1790, representing 36% of the entire slave-trading activity during that period). (B & G, 189-190)

All these trends; and many more, are thoroughly investigated throughout the book. They manage to convey with great acuity the idea that colonies were not territories lagging behind the mighty European metropolises, waiting to be eaten by the unstoppable flow of free trade and economic innovation. The authors convincingly expose how colonies were not mere sites of productions solely dedicated to pour tropical produce into a designated “home” market (Britain and France respectively in the examples discussed). Indeed, the growth of demand for leading commercial crops in the second half of the eighteenth century greatly stretched the commercial outlets for slave-based commodities to “foreign” markets (British America, Eastern Europe, Turkey) and thus increased the commercial as well as the political influence of

Caribbean colonies in Europe. Certainly, one is reminded how the main agents of this vibrant commercial activity – sugar planters – often failed to reap the benefits of these extended trading channels and how this situation exacerbated tensions between colonists and their metropolises in the period. Nevertheless, it remains indisputable that the progress of sugar cultivation in Jamaica and Saint-Domingue, especially after 1763, represented a tremendous economic force, symbolised most fittingly by the Abbé Raynal in his bestselling *Histoire des Deux Indes*, where he described the Caribbean as the “principal cause of the rapid movement which stirs the universe”<sup>2</sup>.

Although it presents a very strong case for not limiting the historical significance of colonies, the book does not always offer a clear pathway for understanding the authors’ “defensible appreciation of the links between Caribbean slavery and European industrialism” (B & G, 21). To what extent were planters involved in expanding commercial agriculture? How much exactly did they profit from the growth of sugar culture and exports during the century? Did the “plantation machine” spur investments *from* planters into other areas of the economy? Some tentative answers to these questions are presented but remain largely incomplete. Their research provides readers with countless leads on where to look for uncovering the capitalistic aspects of the colonial economy; yet, these intuitions leave the reader with only a partial sketch of the “machine”; revealing more contiguous than concrete links between colonial slavery and capitalism.

Paul Cheney engages even more directly with the terms of the historical debate initiated by Williams; yet, while doing so, his arguments take the reader in a much different direction than his counterparts. The introduction presents the notion of “capitalism” in the colonial context as a particular form of economic pursuit inherently limited in its development and expansion. While Burnard and Garrigus see “wealth” and innovations in the plantation system, Cheney asserts that these nevertheless lay “on besetting weaknesses” (Cheney, 2). To support this claim, the book relies mostly on the correspondence of Jean-Baptiste Corbier – the manager of the Ferronnays plantation in the Cul-de-Sac plain – which gives a lively and detailed impression of all aspects of plantation life (managing production levels, controlling the enslaved labour force, discussing and disputing over plantation costs and needs with his employers, etc..) and serves the author’s main ambition throughout the book: to demonstrate the “dead end of a peculiar manifestation of early modern capitalist accumulation.” (Cheney, 6)

Chief among the “weaknesses” identified by Cheney is the “tenacity of patrimony” (Cheney, 11). As he eloquently puts it, the economic and social success of the Saint-Domingue’s planter class had inherent limitations largely attributable to its association with the “characteristic pathologies” (Cheney, 13) of French Old-Regime culture; a persistent tendency which largely explains the “inertia of this system” (Cheney, 13). Indeed, the book argues that sugar planters, as rich and successful as they might have been, often turned a blind eye to adopting new management techniques and making labour more cost effective. They also refrained from investing in expensive tools (water-powered mills) to ameliorate the quality; and thus potentially larger profits, of their sugar operations. In other words, the colony’s proprietors displayed a *rentier’s* mentality averse to risk and more focused on the consolidation of their initial investment. Hence, as a counterpoint to the picture of unrestrained production growth and land clearances set forth by Burnard and Garrigus, it is made clear that planters were often satisfied with the way things were. Their basic economic strategy for running their plantations was characterised by an uneasy compromise between the “inward” trends of the “closed world of the plantation” (C, 44) and the “outward”, market-driven forces of the French Atlantic economy. In other words, not many sought to drastically extend their commercial operations, even when Saint-Domingue reached its peak development in the late 1780s.

Cheney also points out to other forms of weaknesses within the plantation economy created by the social, geopolitical and environmental context of the Caribbean. Chapter III lays out a careful examination of Corbier’s manoeuvres for driving slaves’ mortality down, thus insisting on the irremediable tensions between rational rule and the extreme brutality of the slave regime. While presenting the repeated promises made by managers for committing overseers to less violent punishments and better diets for slaves, the author suggests a much needed thought: “Suffering was not to be eliminated, only its gratuitous, unproductive forms. Was it enlightenment?” (Cheney, 90). On chapter IV, Cheney’s use of Corbier’s account books reveal how production and plantation management faced dramatic challenges in times of war. Naval blockades and embargoes on foreign foodstuff by belligerents forced the plantation personnel to reorient production towards subsistence crops; thus putting conjectural strains on an economic organisation already limited in its prospects for growth in times of peace. Reliance on “adaptive strategies” (Cheney, 109) even extended beyond prolonged situations of political instability and tended to be employed quite regularly to minimise subsistence costs.

The many occurrences of conflicts revolving around production and management exposed by Cheney build up a powerful case for the deep instability of colonial capital. However, the book's main thesis also rests on unstable ground. If the history of plantation management on the Ferronnays' estates is remarkably telling, the lack of comparative focus with other plantations is equally striking. Was this plantation *truly* representative of the troubled relationship between colonies and capitalism? The chapter focused on wartime management is telling in that regard as Cheney seems to wholly dismiss the period of recovery that took place in the 1780s. Though the renewed slave-trading activity is mentioned, he considers it as simply the result of a typical and temporary boom-bust cycle when planters profited from the re-opening of markets and contracted massive debts to metropolitan merchants. Large purchases of slaves and land clearances were not "not so much the return to health as the onset of a different kind of fever" (Cheney, 129). Considering the cautious reminder of his counterparts not to "confuse bad plantation management with the viability of Saint-Domingue's plantation complex" (B § G, 224), there is reasonable doubt as to the strength of this interpretation. If there's a brilliant case here for the existence of an economic *querelle* between "Ancient" and "Modern" ways of producing commodities on one large plantation, one is less convinced by how this opposition proves the impossibility of Saint-Domingue undergoing a truly "capitalist" or proto-capitalist development during its "golden" age.

## Colonies and culture

Despite its centrality in the two books, the authors are able to move beyond the timeless question of the potential links between colonial slavery and capitalism. To account for the significance of the Caribbean in the early modern era, they also both provide a thickly synthesised and fiercely convincing portrait of the cultural dynamics of Caribbean societies; which largely supports the idea that these were more than places of despotism and despair.

For Burnard and Garrigus, colonies were as creative as they were destructive. They were central components of early modern imperial culture, the prime factor for the movement of people, ideas, practices – and therefore capital – across the Atlantic in the early modern era. In many ways, colonies were sites of cutting-edge cultural inventions. Regarding the ethnic group most directly concerned by this vast historical motion – African-born slaves – the two authors convincingly demonstrate that their

fate was not simply one of passivity and suffering, but one that was rooted in a new type of historical belonging, shaped by a broader sense of community transcending the ethnic and social categories imposed by European empires. This manifested itself in very concrete terms during the outburst of slave revolts which broke out in Saint-Domingue and Jamaica during the Seven Years' War which are analysed with much finesse in chapter V. When touching upon this topic or others more remote from traditional forays in economic theory, the book is indeed at its best; demonstrating how colonial societies implemented far-reaching historical transformations, the impact of which was both far from being restricted to the major American plantation areas and deeply influential in the making of the emerging "global" culture of their time.

Much like his equals, Cheney also proposes his most illuminating interpretations of colonial society when touching upon cultural questions. The many issues faced by the larger-than-life Corbier indeed allow the reader to grasp certain crucial aspects of colonial societies. For large planters, negative European discourses on the colonial world produced a counter-discourse that had largely pervasive effects. Unlike in European countries where literature, Enlightenment thinking and scientific progress softened the most brutal aspects of monarchical and religious authority, colonies' appropriation of critical knowledge hardly led to any serious questioning of the slave regime. It was sentimental without the accompanying *civilisation des moeurs*. For field slaves, it was within the many cracks and contradictions of the proto-factory system that resistance and creative power expressed themselves, and Cheney devotes ample attention to how slaves profited from the fragility of the plantation system. Yet, he also notes that the gender, ethnic origins and various skills of slaves were essential components of the plantation organization; thus demonstrating that slaves also proved powerful and important within the plantation. Indeed, their knowledge, their culture and their skills proved their "indispensability to the smooth functioning of the plantation" (C, 77). He further insists by noting that large-scale and repeated *marronage*, common in certain parts of the Ferronays plantation, were the main reasons why productivity did not increase even in times of peace.

## Conclusion

The two books do not necessarily engage with similar intensity in the debates they introduce. Concerning the old and divisive argument initiated by Williams some



seventy-five years ago, they present different evidence, provide different approaches, and; most of all, operate with a different methodology to argue for the existence of a relation between capitalism and colonies. Burnard and Garrigus are cautious in delineating the macroeconomic aspects of the plantation economy and see its functioning and evolution as a living organism whose course during the eighteenth century was marked by technical, scientific, and economic progress; while Cheney is prone to focus on the arrangements and mechanisms at a micro level of analysis, in the plantation; hence bringing much analytical depth to the larger economic trends of colonial production to describe what he perceives as particular – and decidedly non-capitalistic – methods of accumulation.

These volumes are more successful in validating a larger common intellectual ambition: to inscribe the colonial “experiment” in the Caribbean within a global analytical frame to demonstrate its significance in the early modern era. They help raise a fundamental question concerning the present limits and opportunities facing a potentially “global” interpretation of the colonial world: Who profited from this particular phase of European colonisation and how did they profit? This focus on the “benefits” is a much-needed one as it tends to bring critical distance to several dominant discourses on colonies, whether these emanated from the metropolitan officials and planters of the eighteenth century – a discourse of order, lucrative prospects and scientific progress – or from the anti-colonial foes of the past century – a discourse focused on the cultural chaos of the colonial world and the domination over indigenous peoples. By giving researchers and readers a solid starting point for investigating this issue, these books help complement and refine Williams’ hypothesis by deepening the evidence at hand and by outlining a more comprehensive overview of the situation, thus opening crucial avenues of research for future studies on the relationship between global and colonial history.

Published in *Books & Ideas*, 21 May 2018.