RECONCEPTUALIZING CARIBBEAN SLAVERY: IMAGINING THE URBAN CONTEXT

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Identifying the Conceptual Problem

On the whole, the historiography of Caribbean slave societies conceptualizes developments in terms of a hegemonic rural enterprise. In part, this rests on a heavy dependence on traditional sources, which are largely focused on the plantation sector. This analytical bias is not confined to the Caribbean aspect of colonial historiography. Gary Nash, writing in the North American context, observes that:

> Although historians have recognized the importance of slavery in the social and economic life of colonial America, they have associated that institution primarily with the plantation economy. . . . Textbooks in colonial history and black history rarely mention urban slavery . . . or take only passing notice of the institution. (223)

It is significant that Nash makes his comment in the context of an investigation of urban slave society in the northern colonies of the United States of America. For these, one might have expected some departure from the plantation hegemony associated with the southern plantation economy. Indeed, the north did not develop a plantation economy on the scale of the southern colonies and the predominance of the family farm and white labour did not reflect the dependency on slave labour which characterized the south. In the 1850s, it is precisely this difference in social and economic organization which leads to the development of sectionalist tensions, and later to the American civil war.[1]

An examination of some seminal contributions to the historiography of the English Caribbean plantation societies also reveals the tendency to negate or minimize the role and function of the urban milieu in the development of slave society.[2] There are few studies that theorize the specific characteristics and socio-cultural significance of urban areas. In addition, not much has been said about the ways in which urban slave systems depart from a plantation stereotype. This lacuna persists despite the evidence which is offered of these departures in some of these works.

In part, the failure to recognize the importance of urban life to the colonial elite, and to the African enslaved, is an expression of the tendency of some Caribbean historians to stay within the confines of plantation society models outlined by colonial historians, as well as by some social anthropologists. It is also due to a perception evident in the work of early colonial scholars, such as Lowell J. Ragatz, Frank W. Pitman, and Carl and Roberta Bridenbaugh, and echoed in the work of Orlando Patterson, for example, that colonial life was an unfortunate episode to be endured only by those who had no hope of escape. The assessment of West Indian society in the seventeenth century, offered by the Bridenbaughs, is typical of this perception:

> The history of Englishmen who settled . . . the islands of the Caribbean during the seventeenth century is a chronicle of impressive material social failure. . . . The family, the church, and the community were the prize institutions that provided the safeguards against barbarism. Human events in the predominately rural West Indies stunted them all with the consequence that true societies never developed. (413)

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1. See discussions on North-South differences in the ante-bellum United States in Winthrop D. Jordan, et al., eds., <u>The United States: Conquering a Continent</u>, 287-331.

2. See Elsa Goveia, <u>Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century</u>, Orlando Patterson, <u>The Sociology of Slavery</u>, and Edward Kamau Brathwaite, <u>The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820</u>.

Such views of West Indian society in its formative years, represented in the examples cited above, have been labelled by Jack P. Greene as "patently ethnocentric, specifically Eurocentric."[3] Indeed, Greene makes the important point that "the question is not whether European immigrants to those colonies succeeded in establishing societies, but *what kinds* of societies they – along with the much larger stream of immigrants from Africa – fashioned" (1515.)

Elsa Goveia's Slave Society in the British Leewards is now regarded as a seminal contribution to the historiography of West Indian slave societies. Her in-depth analysis of the institutional and legal framework through which masters sought to maintain the slave system has deepened our understanding of the dynamics of slave society. Goveia's analysis focuses on those forces which, in her view, were binding slave and master into a community. Her raison d'etre is revealed in the statement that her analysis seeks to
> identify the basic principles which held the white masters, coloured freedmen and Negro slaves *together as a community*, and to trace the influence of these principles on the relations between the Negro slave and his white master, which largely determined the form and content of society. (vii)

In this statement, one perceives the underlying methodology which stresses a macroscopic view of an entire society, almost, as it were, subjecting that society to a cross-sectional analysis and fixing it in time. Given the size of her target population, such an approach is, perhaps, appropriate. Nevertheless, her approach obscures important aspects of the historical reality which it seeks to enlighten.

Goveia's investigation show that at least fifty percent of the white population lived and worked in the towns and urban parishes. In St.Kitts, for example, there was a total white population in 1788 of some 1,912 persons. Of this number only some 450 persons lived in the rural areas. Moreover, if we use the ratios of slaves to white population which she provides, it would seem that more than half of the slave population lived and operated in a milieu which, it can be argued, differed in significant ways from the rural plantation (203 and 240-241). While caution is necessary with the demographics presented, it seems clear, among other things, that this urban concentration does contribute to the shaping of social life in the colony to the extent that important urban -rural differences might be identified. Goveia observes that the
> concentration of whites in the towns combined with the concentration of slaves on the plantations to produce a low ratio of whites to slaves throughout the rural areas. By their numbers the whites in the country were far less capable than the whites of the towns of exercising a direct personal influence on the lives of the slaves. They had, therefore, to rely on the sanctions of force and fear in the task of governing them. (230)

Importantly, however, the analysis is not extended to a discussion of the implications of those details that she mentions. The larger picture which Goveia pursues does not result in an emphasis on her own urban evidence. She appears to minimize the importance of her own observations; firstly, that urban slaveowners were more capable than their rural counterparts in exercising a "direct, personal" (146) discipline over the enslaved and, secondly, in full contrast, that "there [in the towns] . . . more than on the plantations they [the enslaved] abound in information, in vice, in insolence and in discontent" (242), that is, in freedom attitudes. Further, while Goveia asserts that generally, the enslaved in urban centres were "able to achieve a much greater independence and freedom of movement" (230) than those on the rural plantations, the implications of this for the development of the 'community' which she seeks to identify are not fully understood.

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3. Jack. P. Greene, "Society and Economy in the British Caribbean During the 17th and 18th Centuries" American Historical Review 79.5 (1974) 1515.

If, as it appears, the urban environmental represented an arena in which specific kinds of challenge / adjustments to the authority structure established by whites might be identified, there is a general failure to open an important window onto the enslaved Africans' expectations and perceptions of the slave society. Further examination of the structure and characteristics of urban slaveholder and slave populations in the Caribbean context will illustrate this point.

Another contribution to our understanding of the dynamics of slave society in the Caribbean is that made by Orlando Patterson in The Sociology of Slavery. Patterson's treatment of the theme of slave resistance and his examination of the 'Quashie' personality as an aspect of the survival strategy of the slave population is an important landmark in the attempts of Caribbean historians to investigate the psyche and persona of the slave. However, Patterson's analysis overemphasizes the role of the rural plantation in the shaping of West Indian slave society. He prefaces his work with the statement that this is the "first attempt . . . to analyze in *all* its aspects the nature of the society which existed during slavery in Jamaica" (11). With this introduction, it is surprising that the urban context of the slave society receives such limited attention. References to urban life are placed within the context of the rural plantation system which determines his perception of the characteristics of the urban population. The statement, for example, that the attraction of the large town markets was "largely social" (226) offers only a tantalizing glimpse at the research potential offered by these urban centres and appears to place encounters in these urban settings on the periphery of the plantation social system.

Two factors represent, for Patterson, the underlying bases for the structure and functioning of the Jamaican slave society – absenteeism and the rural plantation as a society system. Moveover, since each plantation operated as an autonomous structure in the rural landscape, indeed, as "a self-contained community with its [own] internal mechanism of power" (33) his model represents a social disintegration which is the very antithesis of the 'community' postulated by Goveia. Within this context, social development (or lack of it) is linked to the behaviour and ideologies of the planter elite. The absence of leading planters from the colony had led to the stunted development of the society.

Absenteeism, therefore, was the factor which had "robbed society of its most responsible and able members with disastrous consequences for the society as a whole" (52). The concept of 'absenteeism' and its applicability to West Indian slave society has been dealt with elsewhere and it is not intended to analyze that issue here.[4] However, one may note that Patterson's preoccupation with the theme of absenteeism has implications for how he views other aspects of the social formations in slave society. There is a determinism inherent in Patterson's view of absenteeism as causal factor which blocks from view the development of a creole colonial culture in the experience of slaveholder and slave alike. This also underlies Patterson's tendency not to interpret the way in which urban formations might have been contributing to modifications of the slave society stereotype.

Those factors, in the urban environment, which were impacting on the emerging socio-economic formations of slave society do not receive the necessary attention. As David Barry Gaspar has noted with respect to Antigua, an increasing number of slaves were involved in occupations which had "no direct contact with the plantations" (51). Further, he has argued that an

> appreciation of the broad spectrum of slave employment leads to the
> realization that slave occupations naturally bred and shaped a complexity of

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4. See Douglas G. Hall's discussion of this in "Absentee Proprietorship in the British West Indies to about 1850."

> roles and a wider range of relationships with . . . whites . . . that must have
> strongly influenced individual and collective responses to enslavement. (93)

If this picture of an increasing non-plantation occupational profile, with all of its implications for socio-economic formation, is reflective of Antiguan slave society in the eighteenth century, it might be equally applicable to the Jamaica of Patterson's study.

There is enough evidence available to demonstrate that in several Caribbean locations non-plantation contributions were at least as powerful in shaping social and economic life as was the case for the rural plantation system. Indeed, it is clear, as Barry Higman points out in Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834, that the contrasting material conditions of life represented in rural-urban differences, "meant not only differences in numbers, the mere ability to survive as a population, but shaped the entire fabric of slave society" (398). Thus, the inclusion of an urban dimension in the historiography of the slave societies of the Caribbean appears to be important if we are to access a clearer picture of the factors which shaped those societies.

Kamau Brathwaite's contribution to the historiography of slave societies in the colonial Caribbean is to be underscored. His discussion of creolisation in the Jamaican context offers a dynamic view of the process of social formation taking place there. He pays some attention to urban issues in his examination of late 18th century Jamaica. He lists some 67 occupations for whites in the towns, identifying a significant contribution of the merchant community to the development of the "cosmopolitan nature" (117) of Kingston. He notes the position of the merchant community in the social hierarchy, recording that in 1745, the Kingston vestry had ordered that the

> Pew commonly known by the name of the Merchants Pew and the next
> adjoining Pew to the Northward be kept separate for the use of Merchants
> and Officers and that no other person be allowed to settle there. (113)

More significantly, he points to a process of accumulation by which wealthy merchants were "moving out of town and becoming landowners" (116). In short, the town appeared to be the centre of economic and social transformation.

Brathwaite recognizes the importance of the town to aspects of black resistance. Here, urban maroons could merge with a free coloured population and escape detection. Here, too was a milieu in which aspects of the creolisation which he theorizes, could be observed. Despite these observations, however, his discussion of the urban context is limited, surprisingly so. Still, some departure from the 'fragmented society' and plantation model evident in the work of Patterson and Goveia, respectively, may be detected. His observation that "Jobbing and Hired slaves" and Tradesmen were making a significant contribution to creolisation does offer some basis for an extended investigation of the impact of the urban centre on the development of colonial slave societies (159-161).

As a result of the foregoing discussion it is possible to suggest that the urban dimension in the colonial Caribbean requires a more systematic and extensive treatment. Further, the urban context should be identified as a distinct element in the historiography of the Caribbean slave societies. My own examination notes some of the factors which identify that distinctiveness and seeks to establish a basis for a reconceptualization of the notion of slavery/slave system in the Caribbean context. Certainly, it may be noted that urban centres in the colonial Caribbean in the pre-1834 period represented significant concentrations of the enslaved population. That fact alone should stimulate our investigation. In the Barbadian context, 13 percent of the slave population were living in Bridgetown, the capital, and chief port, by the mid 18th century. By 1834, some 13,000 slaves, or about 17 percent of the total enslaved population, were resident in Bridgetown. These urban statistics do not include the number of slaves living in the three other towns of the island.

Towards a Conceptualization of Slavery in the Urban Context

Some of the observations that follow indicate that slaves acted more independently in the towns, and that they perceived the discipline in that environment to be significantly relaxed. For example, in 1708, Governor Crowe sent a despatch to the Council of Trade and Plantations. Included in this despatch was a memorandum from the Grand Jury of Barbados. This complained that 'negroes' were behaving quite out of order with the expected norms of slave behaviour. The Grand Jury reported: "We present a common nuisance and scandal, the multitude of negroes resorted to the town of St. Michael on the Lords Day et., revelling, gameing, swearing and caballing to rob, etc."[5]

Contemporary observers of the West Indian social scene in the colonial period were often struck by the contrasts between life in the towns, and in the rural areas. For example, Dr. Frederick Bayley who spent four years in the West Indies during the late 1820s, observed that the

> life of a town negro is totally different from that of a slave in the country.
> An inhabitant of a West India town is, perhaps, a possessor of six, eight, ten,
> or even a dozen slaves; and out of this number he selects three or four of
> the most valuable for his own domestic services, and generally hires out the
> rest to serve in the capacity of servants. . . . (33)

These observations, coming as they do from contemporary observers covering a wide chronological span of the colonial social scene, serve to provide fascinating glimpses into the features of life in the urban slave milieu. In the latter observation, issues of contrasts in the size of slave ownership, the nature of economic and labour organization, and occupational differentiation are all hinted at. These issues will receive closer attention as this investigation develops.

Several factors appear to be important in distinguishing the urban from the rural scene. For example, following Barry Higman (pp. 107-115 of Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834), and Hilary Beckles (Natural Rebels), we may note that gender is an important variable in comparing the rural and urban dimensions of colonial life. As Beckles points out, an "unusually high proportion of slave owners in Bridgetown, both white and free coloured were women, and there is evidence to show that in West Indian towns white females tended to own more female slaves then did their male counterparts" (18). Moreover, the evidence shows that the slaveholding pattern for the towns tended toward small units of 10 slaves or less and that most of these were owned by women.

The available demographic data indicate that there was an increasing female proportion in the urban population which moves from a male majority in 1680 to a female majority by the late 18th century.[6] This movement in the male: female ratio had implications for the structure of property holding in the town. It also reflects the impact of higher male mortality, relative to female mortality, on the population structure. When these factors are viewed alongside a tendency on the part of white males to bequeath small numbers units of slaves to their wives and daughters, with the larger numbers going to sons, the overall impression is that of a significant female ownership of small slave holdings.

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5. Cecil E. Headlam, ed., Calendar of State Papers 1706-1708 (Hereford: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1916) 772 Note. 1591: iv.

6. For a discussion of these demographic shifts see my "The Urban Context of the Slave Plantation System: Bridgetown, Barbados, 1680-1834."

It seems, also, that female ownership is associated with a regime of discipline which departs from the typical profile of the rural plantation. Indeed, it seems that the influence of gender ideologies may have some bearing on the disciplining of slaves in the urban context. It is probable that white female slaveholders, occupying a marginalised role in a patriarchal society and faced with the reality of their husbands' sexual control over the female slave population, may often have been more brutal than men in their treatment of slaves. It is also probable that in the urban context, where female ownership was more widespread, there was a general breakdown of slave discipline.

Barry Higman, in Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834, identifies the absence of the driver as an authoritarian figure and gang labour, the principal institutions for organizing slave labour in rural life, as an important feature of urban life in the Caribbean (228). He suggests, also, that the smaller scale of urban slaveholding meant that the majority of urban slaves came under the direct supervision of their owners (242). There was an urban equivalent to the driver in the office of 'constable' or 'jumper.' I contend, however, that the system of discipline was not as direct and as personal as he implies, at least not in the case of Bridgetown. Indeed, the authorities were forced to come to grips with what was perceived to be a serious dereliction of responsibilities by the urban slaveholders. The preamble to an Act of 1749, entitled An Act for Rendering More Effectual, and for Supplying Many Defects in the Several Laws of this Island, for the Governing of Negroes, illustrates this concern. The concerns expressed in the preamble are addressed to both male and female owners:

> Whereas divers mischief do often happen, and frequent disorders occasioned in and about the towns … by the notorious fighting, quarreling, and other evil and daring practices of Negroes and other slaves, openly carried on in the public streets and Highways … which has been in a great measure owing to the indulgence and countenance given by some Masters and Mistresses to their slaves. (Richard Hall 354)

For William Dickson, an Englishman who resided on the island from the 1770s into the early 1780s, there was no doubt that the social behaviour of white females had had an ameliorative effect on the slave regime. He argued that to the

> humanizing influence of the softer sex, who are proportionately far more numerous in Barbados than in any other British colony, the negroes are undoubtedly indebted, in a great measure for the superior lenity they experience in that island. (38)

Dickson's observations may have been coloured by his own biases as a privileged person in the colonial environment. However, he could not have missed that many of the owners in the urban context were free coloured females. More importantly, for our discussion, it is within this context that he identifies the towns as a prime example of the departure which he identifies:

> The inhabitants of the towns may, in general be said to be humane. Many of them, indeed, treat their domestics with a degree of indulgence, which in their present uncultivated state . . . they are in general but ill able to bear, and which they often abuse. Hence the fiddling, dancing, drinking, gambling, and the consequent quarrels, thefts and burglaries, which every night, more or less, disturb the peace, and prey on the property and inhabitants of Bridgetown. (38-39)

Dickson was not alone in his observation of these characteristics of urban slave society in Bridgetown. Sir William Young, who visited the island in 1791, was struck by the appearance of black women in the streets who "dressed in a style much above even our common artisans" and in many cases were wearing "gold ear-rings and necklaces" (qtd. in Edwards, 244). When asked about his impressions on his first landing in Bridgetown, his reply was that: the "negro women seemed to be the proudest mortals I had ever seen"

(244). Young's encounter with the slaves and freedmen in the town was even more surprising:

> Nor did I see anything relative to the conduct of the slaves that implied the situation of abject acquiescence. . . . Many pressed their services on our first landing; and some first begged, and then joked with us . . . with great freedom of speech and some humour. (244)

Young reported an incident in which two boys, one black and the other mulatto, had almost come to blows. One old slave was prepared to bet thirty-six shillings on the outcome. What struck Young most, was the confidence with which the bet was made: "I gave him no credit for possessing a six-and-thirty shilling piece, but I gave him full credit for a language which characterizes a presumption of self-importance" (245). Though Young's visit to the island was brief, he had managed to grasp some of characteristics of Barbadian slave society. In particular, he had grasped some of the peculiar features of the urban slave milieu. He points out that in "qualification of all inference from my first view of negroes I should observe, that they were town negroes, many of them, probably free negroes, and many, or most of them, domestic or house negroes" (246).

For many of the slaveholders in the town, particularly female slaveholders, who possessed small units of slaves, 'hiring out' the time of the slave often provided the sole source of income. Under the system, slaveholder and slave entered into an informal arrangement in which the slave was relatively free to seek his/her employment. In some cases, slaveholders would advertise the services of their slaves in the local newspaper. Such services could range from that of the skilled artisan to the thinly veiled offer of prostitution services (often advertised by female owners) which so scandalized Dickson during his stay in Barbados.

Under the 'hiring' arrangement the slaves often provided their own housing, food and clothing. In return, a fixed payment was made to the owners. An interesting comment on this system, made with respect to an urban slave community in North America, suggests that this type of arrangement "provided masters [and mistresses] with the profits of slave ownership without the accompanying managerial responsibilities" (Lack 263). Whatever the advantages it brought these slaveowners, the attraction it held for the slaves was clear. It is suggested that slaves actively sought such arrangements because of the following reasons. Firstly, blurred lines of authority could lead to a hirer being unsure of the extent of his/her disciplinary control. Slaves could exploit this to their advantage. Secondly, hirers might have little interest in the slaves' off-work activity, thus permitting a higher degree of independent action to the slave, than would have been possible under the owner's supervision. Thirdly, the flexibility created by the blurring of lines of authority often forced both owner and hirer to offer positive incentives to their slaves, to guarantee better compliance with their desires (Lack 263-264). In the Barbadian context, the benefits of the system to owners of small slave units, and to slaves, underlie the fact that over 58 percent of slaves in Bridgetown in the period between 1817 and 1834 could be classified as skilled slaves.

Skilled slaves could merge with the free black population in the urban environment and use their service skills to ensure survival. The demand for some services was so acute that a runaway slave might even solicit the aid of a white person in his/her efforts to escape detection. Such advertisements as those noted below given an indication of the problem which faced some white owners. On May 21st, 1788, John Bryan advertised for the return of his slave, Fortune:

> Runaway from the Subscriber, a Short, Stout well-made negro man named FORTUNE; he is round shouldered, parrot toed and speaks thick, plays well on the fiddle, and is frequently seen in the Old-Church Yard Bridge-town. Whoever will apprehend and deliver him . . . shall receive FIVE POUNDS

reward, and if any person will give information of his being harboured by any white or free person . . . shall receive FOUR MOIDORES reward. . . .[7]

In another advertisement of January 17th, 1809, Ely Lynch, a merchant of High Street issued the following warning:

<u>Caution</u>

The Subscriber forbids any person hiring his Mulatto Man Richard, by trade a joiner, without first applying to him at his Store, the corner of High Street.[8]

The authorities were not blind to the implications which the hiring system might pose to the control over the enslaved. As early as 1708, the local Assembly passed an Act (expanded and amended in 1733 and again in 1774) which sought to limit the competition which slave vendors were posing to white merchants in the town. The 1708 Act was entitled <u>An Act to prohibit the Inhabitants of the Island from Employing, their Negroes or other Slaves, in Selling or Bartering</u>. Under this legislation, persons were prohibited from employing their slaves in the sale of 'enumerated' items such as "Wares, Merchandize, Stock, Poultry, Corn Fruit [and] Roots" (Richard Hall 185). More specifically, however, the Act went on to state:

if any person or persons inhabiting this island, being Owner or Possessor of any Negro or Negroes, or Slave or Slaves, shall permit such Negro or Negroes or other slave or Slaves to go at large, and hire out him, her, or themselves to any person or persons, to follow any trade, occupation or calling and receive the profits thereof to him, her, or themselves, or rendering to his or her said Master or Mistress or to any other person or persons whatsoever for their use, a daily, weekly, or monthly sum of money or any other income, or any manner of gratuity whatsoever, every such person . . . for every such offence shall forfeit the sum of ten pounds current money. (Richard Hall 186)

The provisions of this legislation indicate a concern which goes beyond the mere prohibition of vending imported foodstuff and manufactured items.

Elizabeth Fenwick, an Englishwoman who lived in Bridgetown between 1814 and 1820, experienced at first hand the challenges of the hiring system. Her experience may well be based on the fact that she was a female operating in a system in which the norms of slave behaviour departed from those typical of the rural patriarchal system. She wrote to a correspondent in England, complaining:

Our domestics are Negroes hired from their owners, and paid at what seems to me an extraordinary rate. . . . They are a sluggish, inert self-willed race of people, apparently inaccessible to gentle and kindly impulses. . . . Nothing but the threat of the whipe [sic] seems capable of driving them to exertion. . . . (qtd. in Wedd, 163)

In a further comment on the hired slaves under her charge, she noted that "nothing awes or governs them by the lash of the whip or the threat of being sent back into the fields to labour" (qtd. in Wedd, 168). She was particularly upset at the response of a female slave who "boasted to her owner's other slaves that she knew that I would not suffer her to be flogged and, therefore, she knew better than to work when she was not made to do it" (qtd. in Wedd, 175).

Such a blurring of the lines of authority would appear to be more problematic in the rural environment. Indeed, the modification of the patriarchal authoritarian structure so typical of the rural scene underlay the introduction of other replacement structures. The Act of

7. <u>The Barbados Mercury</u> May 21, 1788.

8. <u>The Barbados Mercury</u> January 17, 1809.

1749, to which I have already referred, stated that for the crimes of
    threatening, fighting or quarelling one with another; or for any insolent
    language or gesture to any white or free person; or swearing, cursing or
    uttering any obscene speeches or drunkenness; or making, selling, throwing
    or firing off Squibs, Serpents or other 'Firework,' 'such negro' or 'other slave'
    was to be flogged by the 'Common Whipper.' (Richard Hall 355)

This reference to the 'Common Whipper' is to a structure of discipline which seems to have had no counterpart on the rural plantation. Dickson identifies the person so charged with this function as the 'jumper.' According to his account, "owners in the towns, when they punish regularly, employ a fellow called a Jumper" (16). There was no guarantee, however, that this could deprive the black urban population of their independence. Dickson complained that a servant whom he hired, was discovered gambling by a magistrate. This was bad enough, but what was more surprising was that "the fellow not only stood his ground after his companions had disappeared but used some very improper language" (17). A flogging by the 'Jumper' did not cure the slave of his actions. Moreover, Dickson was upset by the leniency of the magistrate who had only ordered six lashes (17). Such a situation was almost unthinkable in the rural setting but it would seem, judging by the available evidence, that the response of the enslaved man, coloured as it was by the 'appropriate language,' might not have been an isolated incident in the urban environment.

Despite the modifications of slaveowner-slave interaction associated with the urban scene, there are reminders that this was, after all, a slave society. As elsewhere in the diaspora, some slaves found that closer proximity to the slaveowner might be detrimental to their well-being. As Barry Higman has pointed out in Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834, "slaves were flogged and otherwise abused by their owners and equally important, the towns contained visible symbols of public terror in the shape of workhouses, jails, cages, stocks, and treadmills" (243). In addition, judging from the comments of some visitors to Barbados on urban conditions, housing for slaves and freedmen might be one negative aspect of the town scene. Daniel McKinnen who visited the island in 1802, and Trelawney Wentworth who published a book on the island in 1834, commented on the dilapidated appearance of the housing occupied by freedmen and jobbing slaves.[9] As McKinnen observed, the financial state of these persons "will hardly allow them to build anything than a shed; and [they] are happy to take possession of and patch up the wrecks of houses that otherwise would be deserted" (16).

It is true that town slaves, in general, were housed in their owners' negro yards but, as Higman tells us in Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834, "the spread of self-hire and board wages system meant that many slaves were forced to seek lodgings separate from their owners' premises in negro yards belonging to free people or in huts built by themselves on the fringes of the town" (255). While most slaves and freedmen occupied housing of an inferior quality in the town, some freedmen and women "lived in houses that were comparable to the houses of the wealthier whites" (Handler 145, 146). In addition, by the 1760s, it is clear that in Bridgetown, some free blacks and mulattoes were moving into streets which were formerly the exclusive preserve of whites. That is, they were purchasing and residing on property in residential and commercial areas where there is no indication of freedman/woman ownership hitherto. This is the case with respect to Cheapside which emerges in the seventeenth century as the major residential and commercial district in Bridgetown. Indeed, the accumulation which accompanied the

9. See Daniel McKinnen, A Tour Through the British West Indies in the Years 1802 and 1803, 15-16; see Trelawney Wentworth, The West India Sketch Book, 278-281.

successful entrepreneurship of some of this group was becoming evident in the town. For example, Hannah Gill (in 1816) and Elizabeth (Betsy) Austin (in 1814), both of whom were hoteliers (and brothel keepers), owned property in Bridgetown valued at £1,050 and £1,984, respectively. This compares with an estimated average property value for urban whites in the same period, of some £1,095.[10]

Another feature of some importance in our investigation is the role of the internal marketing system, of which Bridgetown was a central hub, in mitigating the control which slaveowners had over the slave system. Dr. Frederick Bayley observed "the sight of so many negroes on their way to town carrying on their heads baskets of fruit and vegetables in the market" (41). What he did not discuss was the implication which control of the market had for the development of the slave society. Through this, blacks could escape the drudgery of the plantation; through this, the slaves tasted one of the few vestiges of freedom which the plantation economy permitted them; through this, too, the black population was put in touch with the metropolitan world. Indeed, the position of Bridgetown as an entrepot for the extension of colonial trade to the rest of the Caribbean serves to underline the importance of the town to the flow of information coming from abroad. It was to Bridgetown that the slave insurrectionists of 1816 looked as they sought the intelligence they needed to plan their rebellion.[11] Indeed, the Governor and the officers of the militia might have been aware of this. It was only after Bridgetown had been secured that troops set out to confront the rebels in the countryside.

The hustle and bustle of huckster activity in Bridgetown provided an environment in which all kinds of clandestine activities could take place. It is clear that the authorities had more than the control of marketing in mind when in the preamble to an Act of 1774, entitled An Act the Better to . . . Remedy the Mischiefs and Inconveniences Arising to the Inhabitants of this Island from the Traffic of Huckster Slaves, Free Mulattoes, and Negroes, they state:

> Whereas many injuries and inconveniences do continually arise to the inhabitants of this island from the traffic of Free Mulattoes, Free Negroes, and Slaves who go on board vessels arriving here, and purchase live stock to revend, and who also go a considerable way out of the respective Towns to meet such persons as bring in stock, fruits, roots . . . and do buy up and engross the same, by which means the prices of stocks and provisions are greatly advanced. . . . (qtd. in Moore, 166)

Part of the problem which they envisaged was that contact with shipping might open up avenues through which slaves might leave the island. Indeed, in the Act of 1708 there is a caution to persons who "tempt or persuade any . . . slaves to leave their Masters or Mistresses service . . . out of an intent and design to carry away any of them off this island" (Richard Hall 185). In addition to this concern, the authorities were aware that the urban market might be a conduit through which stolen goods might find their way into the legitimate trade. As early as 1688, authorities were passing legislation (An Act of Governing of Negroes, Clause xiii) to deal with the "great mischiefs [which] daily happen by the petty larcenies committed also by the Negroes and Slaves of this island" (Richard Hall 117) and in the Act of 1708, their concerns were fully detailed as in the preamble it is stated that:

> Whereas sundry persons do daily send their Negroes and other Slaves to the several Towns of the island . . . to sell and dispose of all sorts of Quick-stock,

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10. The values for Hannah Gill and Elizabeth Austin are taken from inventories of their Bridgetown properties held by the Department of Archives, Barbados. The property value for whites is taken from Handler, 140.

11. Report on the Slave Insurrection in Barbados 1816, 28-34.

> Corn, Fruit, Pulse, and other things under colour of which they traffic among themselves, and buy, receive and dispose of all sorts of stolen Goods, to the great damage of the Inhabitants of this place. (Richard Hall 185)

Issues such as these reveal the potential of urban research in further extending our understanding of the dynamics of slave resistance. Moreover, our understanding of the nature of slave societies in the Caribbean will be compromised without the inclusion of an urban dimension.

While historians of Caribbean slave societies in general may not have paid adequate attention to urban issues, there have been some significant commentaries. Indeed, in this regard, the work of Barry Higman, represents a valuable contribution to the historiography of Caribbean slave societies. The focus of his book <u>Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1808-1834</u> is on the demographics of slave society. The publication of the book was preceded by a number of other works in which the urban aspect of Caribbean slave society receives special attention.[12] Given the focus of his book, it is not surprising that there is a mass of statistical data and that a major section consists of numerous tables and graphs dealing with such variables as mortality, age structure, gender structure of the slave population, and so on. What is of particular relevance to this investigation, however, is the considerable attention which he pays to the urban milieu.[13]

Moving away from strictly demographic concerns, Higman addresses social issues in a section of Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1808-1834 entitled "The Character of Urban Slavery". Like Goveia, he notes that the ratio of whites to slaves was higher in urban areas than in the rural. Indeed, it is pointed out that "most urban slaves lived in more intimate contact with their owners than did rural slaves" (257), and Higman suggests that the smaller scale of urban ownership meant that the majority of urban slaves came under the immediate supervision of their owners. I have already pointed out that this view may require some modification. Indeed, Higman notes that "a significant minority" (258) of urban slaves worked and lived with a degree of freedom extremely rare in a rural slave society, and he points to a "distancing of slave and master and the independence symbolized by self-hire and board wages" (258) as important variables in the breakdown of discipline in the urban slave economy.[14]

The importance of Higman's work rests, in part, on the detailed attention which he gives to the urban areas and his is, by far, the most detailed analysis of urban slave society on the Anglophone Caribbean to date. Unfortunately, his conclusions have been fashioned by the fragmentary nature of the data. This is suggested, for example, in his analysis of the slave population statistics for Barbados. To assume that "all slave holdings lacking field labourers" (227, 431) in the parish of St. Michael, Barbados may be classified as 'urban' indicates the scope of the problem.[15] To make this assumption is to subsume under the term 'urban' slave holdings which, merely on the basis of size, could not be expected to have a 'field slave component.' Indeed, in considering the inventories of small properties in St. Michael (the parish in which Bridgetown is located), many of these were located in

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12. See, for example, Barry W. Higman, "Urban Slavery in the British Caribbean," <u>Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica 1807-1834</u>, and "Jamaican Port Towns in the Early Nineteenth Century."

13. See, for example, Higman <u>Slave Populations</u>, 93-99, 329-378, and 226-260.

14. Higman, <u>Slave Populations</u> 242-248.

15. See note on Table S2.2 in Higman, <u>Slave Populations</u> 431.

the rural areas but did not include field labourers. A scan of other documents drawn from the rural parishes in the east of the island also reveals the existence of small properties without 'field labourers.' However, the value of Higman's contribution is to be underscored.

David Barry Gaspar's work on Antigua represents another important contribution to the analysis of slave societies in the English-speaking Caribbean. His book <u>Bondmen and Rebels</u> examines the factors surrounding a 1736 slave conspiracy in that colony. More importantly, some attempt is made to assess the impact of the urban environment on the shaping of the slave psyche and its role in shaping the slaves' resistance. The chief plotters in 1736 were town slaves, trusted slaves "who profited from a great deal of social space and freedom from surveillance" (230). As Gaspar observes, the "psychological and sociopolitical base for a large-scale plot was perhaps strongest among the numerous artisans, especially in the towns" (233). The two principal leaders in the conspiracy, Court and Tomboy, were drawn from this group of slaves (233 and 244). In the urban environment of St. Johns, Antigua, there was a social mobility not "ordinarily accessible to plantation slaves" (233-234). It was a mobility which offered slaves, "especially those who lived in town, access to a wider world of values, ideas and experiences" (233). Thus, the theme of urban departure is raised as well as important assessments of the impact of rural-urban differentials on slaves' self perception. However, apart from an exploration of the urban backgrounds of Court and Tomboy, the analysis does not go far beyond an introduction of the issues raised.

In addition to the contributions of Higman and Gaspar, mention must also be made of Neville Hall's work on urban slavery in the Danish West Indies.[16] While my intention is to focus on the Anglophone Caribbean, Hall's work provides comparative material which permits us to identify general trends throughout the region. Until his untimely death in 1986, Hall was engaged in a promising and important investigation of the meaning of urban life to the slave. His research clearly establishes the importance of a study of the urban centre to a historiography of Caribbean slave societies. Hall notes that the urban context facilitated certain challenges to the slave system and played a part in mitigating the severity of slavery. In Hall's words, in <u>Slave Society in the Danish West Indies</u>, the

> communal interaction of urban slave and freed men can be perceived not merely as pleasurable forms of inter-ethnic social commerce. In the important sense it existed also as a defence against the whites' hold on hegemonic power; in another sense, as an offensive instrument aimed at containing that power's effectiveness, or, under proper auspices, of defeating it. (98)

Hall's grasp of the dynamics of urban resistance is revealed in this extract. Indeed, in the Danish West Indies as in the British Caribbean, the importance of the urban context to a study of the totality of slave society is underscored. With this perspective, it is not surprising that Hall ends one article with the statement that "it is, therefore, of more than passing significance that the ultimate confrontation with white authority . . . took place in one of the three towns of the Danish West Indies" (165).

Reflections

The foregoing historiographical discussion seeks to highlight the tendency of some

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16. See Neville A.T. Hall, <u>Slave Society in the Danish West Indies</u> 87-109; "Slaves and the Law in the Towns of St. Croix 1802-1807"; and "Slavery in Three West Indian Towns; Christiansted, Fredericksted, and Charlotte Amalie in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century."

Caribbean historians to negate the special characteristics of the urban context of slave society.   It also examines some of those characteristics in an effort to establish the need for a (re)thinking of our notions of the Caribbean institution of slavery. We need to examine carefully the conditions of employment in the urban context economy; the family life experiences[17]; the nature of work organization; the participation of the enslaved in the urban economy; the nature and incidences of slave resistance; in addition to wider aspects of life in an urban, maritime, environment. It would appear that such a refocusing of attention might force a re-drawing of the mental pictures of slave life which still continue to hamper fuller appreciation of the ways in which the enslaved were reading the 'room-to-manoeuvre' options of their existence. It is clear that the enslaved understood the limitations of any actions designed to win freedom. However, limitations were also signposts to possibilities and men and women in the slave communities were rational beings quite capable of reading these possibilities. All around them, the enslaved could see evidence of weakness in the system. True, they could see the obvious instruments of control such as the 'cage' and the 'jumper,' but they could also see slave kin who had bought their freedom by way of sums accumulated in the hiring trade. They could see formerly enslaved women, within a few years of manumission, become tavern owners and small-scale entrepreneurs. They saw themselves as they handled their owners' and their 'own' money. They could see whites who had been co-opted into the emancipationist schemes of their social inferiors. Indeed, with the arrival of each ship, they could see the arrival of whites who had no vested interests in slave ownership. For all these reasons and more, the maritime, port, environment in the slave-era Caribbean becomes a fertile ground for the (re) conceptualization of Caribbean slavery.

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17. See my "The Slave Family in the Urban Context: Views from Bridgetown, Barbados, 1780-1816" and "The Urban Context of Slave Life: Views From Bridgetown, Barbados, in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries."

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