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# A “Spirit of Independence” or Lack of Education for the Market ? Freedmen and Asian Indentured Labourers in the Post-emancipation Caribbean, 1834-1917

*P.C. Emmer*

In principle, the ending of the terrible and inefficient system of slavery should have produced progress, optimism and gratefulness on all fronts. To many, however, the end of slavery in the Caribbean was a big disappointment. On average, the ex-slaves did not become yeomen farmers nor did they improve their income and status as free plantation workers as many had hoped. The abolitionists in Europe and North America, who had fought so gallantly to get slavery abolished, were disappointed. The pessimistic predictions of their adversaries about a dramatic decline in plantation output had proved all too realistic<sup>1</sup>. Most abolitionists had not expected that so many of the freedmen would leave the plantations nor that so many failed to become the hard-working, God-fearing peasantry they had envisioned. Unwilling to admit that the fault lay with the unrealistic assessment on their own part ; they attributed the blame to the planters as well as the colonial and home governments. That the freedmen should have experienced stagnation, or even decline, in their living and working conditions could only be caused by obstinacy or obstruction on the part of the planters and the colonial civil servants. Yet, the planters were also disappointed. They realized that their slaves had not been

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1. On the post-emancipation decline in sugar production and per capita income see Herbert S. Klein and Stanley L. Engerman, 'The Transition from Slave to Free Labor: Notes on a Comparative Economic Model' in : Manuel Moreno Fraginals, Frank Moya Pons and Stanley L. Engerman (eds.), *Between Slavery and Free Labor; The Spanish-Speaking Caribbean in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore/London, 1985), pp. 255-269.

emancipated in order to improve the profitability of their plantations, but only a few planters had expected that their supply of permanent plantation labour would be reduced so dramatically. In order to fill the gap they were forced to search for reliable labourers in such far away places as India and China. In sum, the abolition of slavery seemed to have produced nothing but disappointment all around<sup>2</sup>.

In the existing historiography the traditional *bêtes noires* are the planters. They are accused of clinging to an old-fashioned and wasteful production system. This system, it is claimed had already adversely affected profits during the last decades of slavery and it continued to do so after slavery. These continuities between the pre- and post- emancipation periods have constituted the traditional explanation for the fact that the effects of slave emancipation did not come up to expectation<sup>3</sup>.

Over the past thirty years, however, the role of the planters in the Caribbean plantation economy has been reinterpreted. The view of the planters as “uneconomic”, wasteful and backward looking autocratic rulers of a crumbling empire has been turned almost upside down. Recent studies of the nineteenth-century slave economies in the Americas now portray the planters as highly efficient managers in the most prosperous sections of the world economy at the time. New interpretations based on plantation records confirm that the planters carefully tuned the purchase of slaves to their needs and avoided creating a wasteful mix of labour and capital. On the contrary, recent studies stress the fact that sugar planters were keen to introduce new machinery in the boiling houses of their plantations as well as to experiment with new crops (cotton) and new varieties of sugarcane. With slave prices rising, the planters also attempted to influence the natality and mortality of their slave populations by spending more of their income on providing better food, housing and medical care<sup>4</sup>.

Strangely, these new views regarding the management of Caribbean plantations and of the slave economics in general have so far influenced the historiography regarding planters and freedmen in the post-emancipation era scarcely at all. Studies of the emancipation experience continue to stress the decline of the plantations, the dominance of the planters and the relatively weak position of the ex-slaves. Even the arrival of a new influx of “workers in the cane” was incorporated into the existing, negative interpretation of the post-slavery era. The title of the first survey of labour migration from India to the Caribbean is telling: *A New System of Slavery*<sup>5</sup>.

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2. See Peter Kolchin, ‘The Tragic Era? Interpreting Southern Reconstruction in Comparative Perspective’ in: Frank McGlynn and Seymour Drescher (eds.), *The Meaning of Freedmen, Economics, Politics, and Culture after Slavery* (Pittsburgh/London, 1992), pp. 292-311.

3. As ‘pars pro toto’ I only mention two recent studies: Michael J. Craton, ‘Reshuffling the Pack: The Transition from Slavery to Other Forms of Labor in the British Caribbean, ca. 1790-1890’ in: *New West Indian Guide*, vol 68 (1994), pp. 23-75 and O. Nigel Bolland, ‘The Politics of Freedom in the British Caribbean’, in: McGlynn and Drescher (eds.), *The Meaning of Freedom*, pp. 113-146.

4. The – by now classic – argument for the viability of the West Indian plantations was put forward by Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977). On the ‘policy of amelioration’ see J.R. Ward, *British West Indian Slavery, 1750-1834: The Process of Amelioration* (Oxford, 1988).

5. H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery; the Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1820* (London, 1974).

Thus the prevailing view has been that the freedmen were underdogs, who could not be accused of making mistakes, or if they did, could be excused on the grounds of the high level of compulsion in the post-emancipation society. Similarly, it is claimed indentured labourers from Asia were so badly treated they could not possibly succeed in building a new and successful existence in the West Indies. The Caribbean plantation world always had been and had remained a “bad” region and anyone going there must have been forced, misinformed or otherwise duped by crooks and profiteers<sup>6</sup>.

However, the surprisingly optimistic findings derived from the recent research regarding Caribbean plantation slavery, have found their corollary in the new interpretation of the labour migration from Asia during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. New research obliges us to re-evaluate the view that indentured labour migration simply was slave trade and slavery in another guise. Rather than harming themselves, it now has been established, Indians on average increased their living standard considerably by moving to the Caribbean. Their well being also improved. Overseas Indian women did have fewer children than in India but the death rate in the Caribbean – except in the early years when the first immigrants arrived – was also considerably lower resulting in a demographic growth rate higher than in India itself. Suicide, marital violence and return migration decreased over time, but possession of land, savings and even physical stature increased. New research has also destroyed the (no doubt racially biased) assumption of the abolitionists that more than a million Asian migrants were of such limited intellectual capacity as to be misled for almost a century into inadvertently degrading themselves. In reality, the attraction of the earning potential of the Caribbean can be deduced from the massive influx of Asian migrants. After all, they could have opted to go to many destinations in Africa and Asia, or, for that matter elsewhere in India itself<sup>7</sup>.

These findings regarding the social and economic ramifications of Caribbean plantation slavery as well as those regarding Asian immigrants, put the traditional interpretation of the post-slavery period into question. Unfortunately, it is not as yet possible to arrive at definitive conclusions as the relevant data regarding demography, income levels and other aspects of the lives of ex-slaves in the Caribbean have not yet been fully unearthed. To arrive at a body of statistical evidence regarding the ex-slaves will not be easy as those who could have provided the data, such as colonial civil servants and the planters, have left much less statistical information about the freedmen than about the slaves. Once the freedmen moved away from the plantations, they removed themselves from quantitative history. We have no mortality and natality rates, no records

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6. ‘the plantocracies with the connivance of the imperial government and the British government in India began the steady importation of an alternative labour force of East Indians under terms of indentureship that were little better than ‘a new system of slavery’’, Michael Craton, ‘The Transition from Slavery to Free Wage Labour in the Caribbean, 1780-1890: A Survey with Particular Reference to Recent Scholarship’, *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 13/2 (August 1992), p. 45.

7. David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 120-139.

of diseases and their treatment, no information on incomes and expenditure.

In view of this dearth of data we have to rely on circumstantial evidence. Thus it is of the utmost importance to use our new insights into the nature of the plantation economy and of indentured migration from Asia to test the existing interpretations regarding the post-emancipation societies. While we might be approaching the “end of history” in the historiography of slavery, we certainly have not reached this point in analysing the relevant information about the subsequent period<sup>8</sup>.

In this chapter the economic behaviour of the ex-slaves and that of the indentured labourers from Asia will be compared. In contrast to the freedmen the Asians continued to profit from Caribbean agriculture, be it as plantation workers or as small-scale farmers. Why did the freedmen opt to reduce their employment on the plantations and why were the indentured labourers from Asia willing to do the opposite? And why were – later in Caribbean history – the ex-indentured Asians more reluctant to leave small-scale farming than the freedmen<sup>9</sup>?

To throw light on the dynamics of Caribbean plantation agriculture the second section of this chapter summarizes some of the new research findings regarding the last decades of slavery indicating that Caribbean plantations had the potential of being able to finance an important increase in slave incomes. The third section analyses the labour market in the post-emancipation Caribbean, indicating that psychological rather than economic reasons explain the decline of ex-slave labour. The fourth section surveys the sources of Asian migratory labour and its choice of destinations, indicating that Asian labour migration entailed only a minute section of the Asian population and that most of the migrants had economic motives for deciding to travel to the Caribbean. The final section examines the different attitudes of the freedmen and the Indians towards agricultural labour, and in conclusion, suggests that the ex-slaves and the ex-indentured Asians had had a different education for the market and that it is this dissimilarity more than anything that explains the fact that these two groups opted for different economic lives.

#### THE SLAVES AND THE SECOND PLANTATION REVOLUTION : THE POLICY OF AMELIORATION

Detailed historical research over the past twenty years, drawing upon the many surviving plantation archives, provides us with a remarkably new picture of the New World plantations. These studies make the point that we should strongly distinguish between the first, pioneer phase of the capitalist plantations in the Caribbean – roughly between 1650 and 1750 – and the second phase, which is to say the period between 1750

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8. Pieter C. Emmer, ‘Scholarship or Solidarity? The Post-Emancipation Era in the Caribbean Reconsidered’, *New West Indian Guide*, vol. 69/3 (1995), pp. 277-290 and Michael J. Craton, ‘Response to Pieter C. Emmer’s «Reconsideration»’, *New West India Guide*, vol. 69/3 (1995), pp. 291-197.

9. A. Lemon and N. Pollock (eds.), *Studies in Overseas Settlements and Population* (London, 1980), p. 228.

and 1850 during which the mature plantation system developed. The differences between the two periods are striking.

- 1) The plantations, both in the U.S. South as well as in the Caribbean showed a sustained and high rate of economic growth during the second phase of plantation agriculture. For the sugar plantations the cultivation of a new high-yield cane variety as well as the mechanisation of extracting and refining the cane juice increased productivity. A sharp rise in demand for cotton products greatly increased the profit rates of cotton plantations<sup>10</sup>.
- 2) The increase in plantation incomes, which resulted from the increased growth, was distributed more evenly among the factors of production than during the first period of plantation agriculture. Investors, owners, management and slaves all profited from this development. A recent study of the major sugar areas of the British Caribbean shows that the rise in slave incomes was as high as 35 per cent during the period from 1760 to 1832. Similar observations have been made about the income of slaves on the cotton plantations in the U.S. South<sup>11</sup>. These increases contrast sharply with the downward changes in income of the proletariat in Britain during the first phase of the Industrial Revolution, which took place during the same period<sup>12</sup>.
- 3) The increase in the expenditure on slaves was forced upon the planters by the market. It is true that the Atlantic slave trade continued to supply almost any number of slaves, but after 1750 it did so at constantly rising prices. The continuous rise of slave prices stimulated the planters to try to improve the demographic growth of their slaves in an attempt to overcome the main drawbacks of the Caribbean plantation economy, which had always prevented autochthonous demographic growth among both European migrants and African slaves, at least in the British, French and Dutch Caribbean<sup>13</sup>. The Caribbean planters embarked upon a policy of "amelioration", which entailed a package of improvements in working and living conditions, unique at the time. Amelioration provided the slaves with better housing, a maximum number of working hours per week, pregnancy leave for female slaves, minimum food rations and constant availability of medical care. It should be added that this policy was not based on economic motives alone. Some of it was forced upon the planters by the colonial governments, which in turn were under pressure from the powerful abolitionist lobbies in Western Europe and in the U.S.<sup>14</sup>.

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10. Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: the Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York, 1989), pp. 60-113.

11. Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (London, 1974), pp. 144-157 and pp. 238-239.

12. Ward, *British West Indian Slavery*, p. 192.

13. B.W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834* (Baltimore/London, 1976), pp. 303-307.

14. Michael Craton, James Walvin and David Wright (eds.) *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Black Slaves and the British Empire* (London, 1976), pp. 310-315.

4) In addition to the points raised above, there is one “growth” factor in the plantation world, which has only received intermittent attention from researchers: the production of foodstuff by slaves during their free time. It has always been known that slaves used small plots of land, allotted to them by the planters, on which they grew all kind of crops and where they also raised chickens, goats and even cows. Some of this produce was consumed in order to supplement the rations distributed by the plantation management, and some was sold on the market<sup>15</sup>. There are no figures indicating exactly how much growth this sector experienced. It has been pointed out that towards the end of the 18th century most, if not all, of the food for sale in Jamaica had been produced by slaves during their free time. Unfortunately, that does not say very much as most of the food consumed in Jamaica was not offered on a local market. Some have claimed that the growth of this production as a “breach” in the “slave mode of production”, a “contradiction and inconsistency of the slave regime” and as a sure sign of the decline of the plantation system<sup>16</sup>. Yet, rather than showing the decline of the plantation system, the growth of the garden plot production indicates an increased efficiency of plantation production. Because of the amelioration policies, the slaves had more free time on their hands and perhaps more physical energy left than before. Similarly, there is no reason to assume that the dramatic reduction of the working week in Western Europe and North America, the gigantic growth in income, and the increase in free time and subsequently of “domestic” activities after WW II, in any way signalled a decline in the efficiency still less the end of the “capitalist mode of production”. It should be stressed, however, that the agricultural pursuits of the slaves and their marketing skills did not constitute preparation for the life of an independent farmer after emancipation. Until the end of slavery, slave owners were obliged to spend increasing amounts of their money on the distribution of food, household items, medical care and housing. Whatever the slaves produced and sold themselves was extra, perhaps best described as a vent for surplus<sup>17</sup>.

The changes on Caribbean plantations after 1760 were as fundamental as those during the period after 1640. In view of that it is possible to speak of a *second* plantation revolution. Rather than being dying, blood-sucking leeches at the periphery of world capitalism, modern archival research has shown that after 1760 plantations in most parts of the New World became rather successful economic enterprises, with a strong potential for economic growth as well as for improvement of the working and living conditions of its labourers. In the British Caribbean most

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15. Sidney W. Mintz, ‘The Origins of Reconstituted Peasantries’ in Hilary Beckles and Verene Sheperd (eds.), *Caribbean Freedom; Economy and Society from Emancipation to the Present; A Student Reader* (Kingston/London, 1993), pp. 94-98.

16. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, ‘Introduction’ in: *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 12/1 (May 1991), p. 1.

17. William A. Green, *British Slave Emancipation; The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830-1865* (Oxford, 1976), p. 27.



of these improvements were already in place before 1800, while in other parts of the Caribbean the second plantation revolution occurred during the first half of the 19th century<sup>18</sup>.

It was during this period of rapid growth that slavery was abolished. In theory, the abolition of slavery might have been to the advantage of all concerned. It would have allowed the freedmen to select those employers paying the highest wages and it would have allowed the planters to dispense with payments for costs not directly related to productive labour on the plantation such as housing, plantation hospitals and medical care and rations for those too young or too old to work<sup>19</sup>.

In some of the smaller islands in the Caribbean, especially those with a high population density, plantations did prosper after emancipation without the arrival of additional labour, their operation being based on modern, capitalist labour relations. In most parts of the Caribbean, however, rising wages were unable to attract enough ex-slaves to work on the plantations. The law of supply and demand simply did not work in those parts of the Caribbean, where freedmen had the opportunity to obtain land of their own. In spite of the fact that there usually was a decline in personal incomes as soon as the ex-slaves opted to become peasants, rising wages did not reverse the “flight from the plantations”. In fact, higher wages further stimulated the freedmen’s move away from the plantation, as their need for a regular money income was limited. That explained their “backward bending” supply of labour<sup>20</sup>.

#### THE DEMAND FOR LABOUR IN THE CARIBBEAN AFTER SLAVE EMANCIPATION ; COMPULSION OR CHOICE ?

Very rapidly after emancipation the labour costs of Caribbean plantations reached a level at which it became attractive for the planters to hire labourers from Europe and Asia. Planters were, in addition, willing to pay high prices for former slaves and migrant labourers brought in from elsewhere in the region as well as for illegally imported slaves. They tapped a wide variety of sources. Traditionally, they had turned to Africa, but the supply of Africans was minimal. Paradoxically, the Africans stopped migrating across the Atlantic at the very moment in which the African migrants themselves finally could have negotiated a price for their participation in international migration<sup>21</sup>.

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18. Drescher, *Econocide*, pp. 65-91.

19. David Eltis, ‘Abolitionist Perceptions of Society after Slavery’ in J. Walvin (ed.), *Slavery and British Society, 1776-1846* (London, 1982), pp. 195-213.

20. Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, pp. 196-199; Alan H. Adamson, *Sugar Without Slaves: The Political Economy of British Guiana, 1838-1904* (New Haven, 1972) pp. 119-121; Stanley L. Engerman, ‘Economic Adjustments to Emancipation in the United States and British West Indies’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 13 (1982), pp. 200-201.

21. Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 146, 147; W.G. Clarence-Smith, ‘Emigration from Western Africa, 1807-1940’, in: P.C. Emmer and Magnus Mörner (eds.), *European Expansion and Migration: Essays on the Intercontinental Migration from Africa, Asia and Europe* (New York/Oxford, 1992), pp. 197-210.



Therefore planters recruited labour in Europe (mainly Spain and Portugal, some Germans) and in India and China. After a transitional period extending roughly from 1830 to 1870, most migrant labour to the Caribbean came from British India and Spain<sup>22</sup>. Why were the planters in the Caribbean so desperate to attract labour bonded to work for a certain period on their plantations? It has been suggested that the reason for the worldwide search for labour was of a political nature and not economic in origin. The planters in the Caribbean, it is said, had been used to working with unfree labour. Emancipation had created a free labour market, which the planters wanted to avoid and in order to achieve this they imported indentured labour from outside the region<sup>23</sup>.

New research on the plantocracy in the Caribbean sheds doubt on this supposition. Planters had been innovating their work methods both before and after the abolition of slavery. Unfortunately, it turned out to be technically impossible to save on labour in the fields, whether it be to plant or to harvest sugar cane, cotton or coffee beans. In view of that, most plantations needed a sizeable labour force, which lived on the plantations and could perform daily tasks in the field. In order to produce competitively, the plantations thus required a special type of labour. The only way to ensure its regular availability in sparsely populated areas without a market-driven supply of labour was to conclude labour contracts. The ex-slaves did enter into such contracts but increasingly withdrew from permanent positions as resident field labourers. A decreasing number of freedmen did remain available to work on the plantations on a seasonal basis as members of so-called “jobbing gangs” whose arrival on the plantation could not be planned with absolute certainty<sup>24</sup>.

There has been some debate among historians about the “flight from the plantations”. Did the ex-slaves go of their own volition or were they pushed by the planters? The answer is that a combination of the two occurred but that the decisions of the freedmen were the decisive factor. In principle, the situation was clear: many freedmen wanted to continue living in the ex-slave quarters where they always had lived even when they preferred not to work on the plantation. Planters, on the other hand, only wanted those freedmen to live on their estates who intended to provide more than an occasional day’s work. Others should leave or pay rent. Those, who provided neither labour nor rent, were accordingly evicted<sup>25</sup>.

Thus stated the options looked clear-cut. In practice, however, decisions to evict former slaves from the estates were not so easy to carry out.

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22. P.C. Emmer, ‘Immigration into the Caribbean: The Introduction of Chinese and East Indian Indentured Labourers between 1839 and 1917’ in: Emmer and Mörner (eds.), *European Expansion and Migration*, p. 251.

23. Eric Foner, *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and its Legacy* (Baton Rouge/London, 1983), p. 22.

24. Emmer, ‘The Price of Freedom: The Constraints of Change in Postemancipation America’ in: McGlynn and Drescher (eds.), *The Meaning of Freedom*, p. 30; Craton, ‘The Transition from Slavery to Free Wage Labour...’, p. 60 suggests that plantation managers forced the system of «jobbing gangs» upon the freedmen. However, Craton does not provide evidence that the freedmen were willing to offer their labour in any other way.

25. The classic article on evictions from the estates: Douglas Hall, ‘The Flight from the Estates Reconsidered: The British West Indies, 1838-1842’, in: Beckles and Sheperd (eds.), *Caribbean Freedom*, pp. 55-64.

By evicting a non-working family member the danger was that all the ex-slaves of that family would leave, some of whom might be valued workers. That is the reason why there were only "one or two" evictions in Guiana and the same seems to have been the case with Trinidad. The planters and the government did evict ex-slaves in Jamaica from both estate and Crown lands, but evicted squatters could move elsewhere or they could buy land, especially when the government had instituted a land grant scheme for the East Indian immigrant. The availability of land was the crucial factor. This explains why the eviction scheme failed to produce a new body of landless freedmen with no choice but to work on plantations<sup>26</sup>.

The replacement of slaves and freedmen by indentured immigrants took time. In the British Caribbean the first indentured labourers arrived after the end of the period of apprenticeship (1834-1838), which had artificially prevented the large-scale withdrawal of labour from the plantations. In the French and Dutch Caribbean slavery had not been ended when the British planters were already experimenting with indentured immigrant labour. In the Spanish Caribbean the use of indentured immigrant labour came to an end even before the slaves had been emancipated. In addition to the different timing of slave emancipation the ability of the planters to choose among the different possibilities varied widely. The British planters – mainly in Guyana – had been able to attract indentured labourers from the poor regions of Portugal, especially from the island of Madeira, which was economically very depressed at the time. In similar fashion, the Cuban planters could recruit from the poor regions of continental Spain as well as from the Canary Islands. Planters in the French and Dutch Caribbean did not have these options. Similarly, the British government did not allow the Cuban, Peruvian and Brazilian planters to recruit labour in British India, while this opportunity was granted to British, French, Danish and Dutch planters<sup>27</sup>.

In sum it seems that the planters continued their pre-emancipation drive to increase the productivity of their plantations in order to combat rising labour costs and international competition. They continued to apply their traditional successful formula by improving the milling and refining procedures. On the labour market, however, slave emancipation had made the Caribbean planter one of the most vulnerable employers in the Atlantic world, at least in the more sparsely populated areas of the region. There the planters had no choice but to adjust their demand for labour to the preferences of the freedmen. There is no reason to assume that by replacing freedmen by Asian immigrants they showed a penchant for creating a loyal rather than an economical workforce, in spite of the fact that in hiring indentured labour from Asia, they seemed willing to engage many more labourers than were required as a nuclear workforce. The extra labour must have been economically advantageous as the

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26. Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, pp. 297-300; Philip J. McLewin, *Power and Economic Change; The Response to Emancipation in Jamaica and British Guiana, 1840-1865* (New York/London, 1987), pp. 199, 200.

27. Stanley L. Engerman, 'Servants to Slaves to Servants: Contract Labour and European Expansion' in: P.C. Emmer (ed.), *Colonialism and Migration: Indentured Labour Before and After Slavery* (Dordrecht, 1986), pp. 270-276.

planters obviously wanted to move away from the system of the “jobbing gangs” composed of freedmen, who arrived irregularly and on short notice and were willing to perform only certain types of work. Generally speaking, the planters were unable to rely on additional labour from the ex-slaves and could expect little help from the colonial government in disciplining the freedmen. Lack of personnel, abolitionist pressures from the metropole, and the relatively easy access to land all made it impossible for the planters and the West Indian government to imitate the governments of Western Europe in their attempts to create a labour force responsive to monetary incentives. Draconian vagrancy laws did not work, as their implementations required the creation of a colonial police state, which – among other reasons – could not be financed<sup>28</sup>.

There remained a strong demand for labour on the Caribbean plantations despite the application of labour saving methods on account of the fact that – at least until the 1930s – the technology of harvesting sugar cane remained extremely labour intensive. In addition to this labour scarcity there was the problem that planters had little economic room for manoeuvre as protection for their products was progressively removed. The constantly diminishing number of plantations in the Caribbean is proof of the fact that the West Indian planter could, indeed, go bankrupt by offering higher wages, by providing for the ineffective family members, by allowing labourers more time to tend their private plots and by providing better housing and more social services in general<sup>29</sup>.

#### THE SUPPLY OF ASIAN LABOUR: PUSH OR PULL ?

As the elasticity of the supply varied widely, it took some time before it became clear which region or area could best provide migrant labour at competitive prices. The migration of Portuguese labourers came to a sudden halt when economic conditions improved in Portugal and when more promising destinations such as Brazil opened up. Similarly, the supply of “free Africans” dried up when the number of those freed from slave ships by the Royal Navy declined. The Atlantic slave trade had been the main supplier of indentured Africans recruited from among former slaves landed in Sierra Leone from slave ships. In contrast to the supply of Europeans and Africans for work in the Caribbean, the supply of Asian labour remained elastic throughout the entire period<sup>30</sup>.

The emigration of Chinese and Indian contract labourers to overseas destinations was part of a long-term push-movement, which seems to

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28. Unfortunately, I have not been able to find the data allowing me to calculate the percentage of military and police per 1000 inhabitants in the North Atlantic World. As there must have been a general increase during the 19th century my suggestion is that the ratio still remained much smaller in the Caribbean than in Western Europe.

29. Roberta M. Delson, ‘Sugar Production for the Nineteenth Century British Market: Rethinking the Roles of Brazil and the British West Indies’ in: Bill Albert and Adrian Graves (eds.), *Crisis and Change in the International Sugar Economy, 1860-1914* (Norwich/Edinburgh, 1984), pp. 59-82 The importation of foreign sugar in Britain increased from 0% in 1844 to 42% in 1860.

30. Emmer, ‘Immigration into the Caribbean’, pp. 255-258.

have increased dramatically during the course of the nineteenth century albeit for different reasons.

In the case of China, a rapid demographic increase seems to have been a dominant factor: between the years 1650 and 1850 the Chinese population trebled in numbers. During most of these two hundred years, an increased efficiency in agriculture helped to feed the growing population, assisted by a continuous emigration to the overseas Chinese communities around the Indian Ocean littoral. From the earliest stages, the Chinese became important minorities in the Asian empires of the British, the Dutch, and the Portuguese. During the nineteenth century, Chinese emigration to destinations within Asia itself increased rapidly. It has been estimated that between 1847 and 1874 approximately 1.5 million Chinese, out of 430 million, left for foreign shores. This amounted to 0.3 percent of the Chinese population. Of these 1.5 million Chinese emigrants only around 160,000 went to the Caribbean, amounting to little more than ten percent of the total<sup>31</sup>.

The push to emigrate out of India had not been caused by a corresponding increase in population, as had been the case in China. The *stimuli* for migrating out of India are usually described as economic, rather than demographic. Indian emigration was of a much more recent date than Chinese and was clearly linked to the penetration of the expanding world market, in part a consequence of India's incorporation into the British empire. This penetration favoured an increase in the size of landholdings, and the consequent "enclosure movement" pushed considerable numbers of small farmers into a state of landlessness. Meanwhile Indian urban growth was rapid, for reasons not unlike those operating in parts of Europe at the time<sup>32</sup>.

Overseas emigration from India was closely connected with this internal long-distance migration. Important destinations for the migration overland were the recruiting offices of the colonial army, the tea gardens of Assam, and the textile industries of Bengal. The volume of this internal long-distance migration within India was much larger than that of the government-regulated migration overseas. It has been estimated that about 20 million Indians, or 6.7 percent of the Indian population (estimated at 300 million), participated in long-distance migration during the nineteenth century. Of these 20 million only 1.25 million went overseas under government-supervised schemes, half of whom went to the Caribbean<sup>33</sup>.

In summing up the available evidence on long-distance emigration out of Asia, the following observations can be made:

- 1) The migration of contract labourers to the Caribbean constituted only a minor percentage of the population of China and India;

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31. Emmer, 'Immigration into the Caribbean', p. 252.

32. Gail Omvedt, 'Migration in Colonial India: the Articulation of Feudalism and Capitalism by the Colonial State', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 7 (1980), pp. 185-212; Armand A. Yang, 'Peasants on the Move: A Study of Internal Migration in India', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 10/1 (1979), pp. 37-58; Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labour, Caribbean Sugar; Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918* (Baltimore/London, 1993), pp. 20-37.

33. Emmer, 'Immigration into the Caribbean', pp. 253, 254.

- 2) The migration of indentured labourers from India and China to the Caribbean never amounted to more than 10 percent of the Indian and Chinese overseas emigration in general ;
- 3) The migration of about 500,000 indentured labourers from India, 30,000 Java and 150,000 from China to the Caribbean was not halted because of a diminishing demand for migrants. In all three cases migration came to an end because of political decisions<sup>34</sup>.

The emigration of indentured labourers from China was halted in 1874 by the Chinese government after publication in the Western press of horror stories about the conditions aboard the “coolie ships”. The emigration of Indian emigrants was halted in 1916 by the viceroy of India under pressure from the Indian nationalists and the emigration of indentured migrants from Java ceased in 1939 due to the outbreak of WWII.

These data alone are sufficient evidence to suggest that in general Asians were not misled into migrating to the Caribbean, which was simply one of many destinations for Asians chosen because its plantations offered comparatively attractive conditions for living and working. By signing a contract of indenture they invested in the opportunity to obtain a better life. As the overwhelming majority of Asian indentured labourers came from India, the following comparison between the freedmen and migrants will be based on the data pertaining to indentured labourers from India.

#### FREEDMEN AND INDIAN INDENTURED IN THE CARIBBEAN MARKET PLACE

By around 1900 some remarkable differences had become evident between the position of the freedmen and those of the Asians who had stayed after the termination of their contracts of indenture. After arrival, the Indians had shown remarkable demographic growth, while the Africans had only ceased their centuries-long demographic decline. Second, the Asians had almost monopolized jobs in the sugar plantations, even the temporary ones. Third, the Asians had been disproportionately successful as small farmers whether producing food for the local market or cash crops such as sugar cane and cocoa for export<sup>35</sup>.

How was it possible that the Indians seemed to have profited so much more from the Caribbean economy than the freedmen who had the advantages of being there first and of knowing the opportunities and pitfalls of the region better than any other group? In order to answer this question economic strategies of the freedmen and the Indian ex-indentureds will be discussed *vis-a-vis* 1) plantation agriculture ; 2) small-scale farming and 3) family “resource pooling”.

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34. Joseph Arnold Meagher, ‘The Introduction of Chinese Laborers to Latin America : The ‘Coolie’ Trade, 1847-1874’ (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Davis, 1975), pp. 307-346 ; Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, pp. 334-367 ; Joseph Ismael, *De Immigratie van Indonesiërs in Suriname* (Leiden, 1949), pp. 66-76.

35. Eric Hanley, ‘The Guyanese Rice Industry and Development Planning. The Wrong Solution for the Wrong Problem?’ in : Jean Besson and Janet Momsen (eds.), *Land and Development in the Caribbean* (London, 1987), pp. 172-193.

The differences between the freedmen and the Asian immigrants with regards to plantation agriculture are striking. Time and again researchers have pointed out that the ex-slaves tried to leave the plantations as quickly as possible while the immigrants only left when they had firm proof that they could earn more outside the plantations than in. In some of the older historical interpretations the "flight from the plantations" was considered to be economically advantageous for the freedmen. Plantations were a thing of the past, losing propositions well before the slaves were emancipated. However, as has been pointed out, more recent research has indicated that the Caribbean plantations had a strong potential for growth and that they were able to compete with the producers of tropical cash crops elsewhere. That means that the freedmen were cutting their ties with the most expansive sector of the economy and thus foregoing considerable amounts of income.

In discussing the problem of evictions in one of the previous sections, it was pointed out that in general the freedmen were not compelled to leave the plantations but voluntarily chose to break their ties, thus disconnecting themselves from the most reliable employment sector in the region. It was also pointed out that the break with the plantations was not immediate and never quite complete. That is true; it took several decades before the Asian immigrants became the main source of hired labour, but in view of the centuries-old link between Afro-Caribbeans and the plantations, the dramatic decline in creole labour supply can justly be described as a "flight" which prevented the freedmen from profiting from the readiness of the planters to pay a market wage<sup>36</sup>.

Asian immigrants, by contrast, displayed a quite different attitude towards plantation labour. First, it should be pointed out that most immigrants were forced to offer their labour to the plantations by the very nature of their indentures. All contracts stipulated that indentured labourers should stay on the plantations to which they had been allotted for a period of five years. In order to qualify for a free return they were compelled to stay in the colonies to which he had been brought for a period of between five and ten years<sup>37</sup>.

In view of these stipulations it can be safely assumed that virtually all Asian immigrants offered their labour to the plantations during the first five years of their residence. If that behaviour was the result of choice, it was not a choice based on the economic opportunities within the colony of residence but on a choice based on the difference between working and living on a Caribbean plantation and staying in India. That same choice was available after the expiration of the contracts of indenture<sup>38</sup>.

Virtually the only alternative to plantation labour was small-scale farming. This type of farming could have two objectives: self-sufficiency

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36. The ups and downs of the estate wages in Jamaica are analyzed in Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom; Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Kingston, 1992), pp. 126-128.

37. K.O. Lawrence, 'The Evolution of Long-Term Labour Contracts in Trinidad and British Guiana, 1834-1863' in: Beckles and Shepard, *Caribbean Freedom*, pp. 141-151.

38. An interesting account of one return voyage to India and an evaluation of the return voyage system from Trinidad to India: Marianne Soares Ramesar, 'The Repatriates' in: David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo (eds.), *Across the Dark Waters; Ethnicity and Indian Indentij in the Caribbean* (London, 1996), pp. 175-200.



or production for the market. Usually, small-scale farmers produced crops with both these objectives in mind. Unfortunately, there are no statistics, which allow us to compare the performance of the creole and Asian farmers in the Caribbean. In most of the literature concerning those Caribbean colonies with a sizable Indian component, the formerly indentured labourers are depicted as very successful, whereas the creole farmers are shown to have done less well. This difference would explain why in the present-day Caribbean a much larger percentage of Afro-Caribbeans have moved out of agriculture altogether whereas the Indo-Caribbeans have not. The explanation for this difference could be found in the fact that in the past both groups had had a different education for small-scale farming. The vast majority of Indians had been small-scale farmers or sharecroppers in India, while the creole farmers had been slaves. Thus, the Indians had been used to a market system, while the Creoles had been operating in a non-market, redistributive economic system.

As has been pointed out in a previous section, by their very nature the small-scale farming activities could not have prepared the slaves for the post-emancipation market society. Research reveals the fact that the slaves sold at least half of their produce on local markets, which one might have thought would have tutored them for a life as farmers after emancipation. As long as the planters were obliged to provide the basic necessities of life, the garden plot production of the slaves remained something extra. The slaves were not obliged to maximize yields and incomes, because they were not dependent upon their garden plots for their survival. In fact, it could be argued that the garden plot system provided the slaves with a type of education that was a hindrance rather than a help in their post-emancipation lives<sup>39</sup>.

This is demonstrated firstly by the attitude of the freedmen to land. In spite of the fact that the slaves had the constant use of their own plots of land on the plantations, which they even could transfer to others, the freedmen often left the plantations in order to live together in villages based on the collective ownership of land. The results are clearly visible to day: "The practical outcome of this situation is that land in African villages can become very poorly utilized as control and ownership remain unclear. This is demonstrated very dramatically from the air where, for instance, the one wholly African village in the West Demerara stands out as a tangle of largely uncultivated land in the midst of thousands of acres of sugar estates and rice cultivation in Indian villages"<sup>40</sup>.

Second, in their haste to leave the plantations, the freedmen seemed to have been more interested in the production items, which they could themselves consume. Unlike the Indian farmers, the Creoles seemed to have had little interest in producing foodstuffs, which they could sell to replace the expensive imports from abroad such as flour, salted meat and

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39. Two authors viewing the slaves as «proto peasants»; Sidney Mintz, 'The Origins of Reconstituted Peasantries', in Beckles and Shepherd (eds.), *Caribbean Freedom*, pp. 94-99 and Woodville Marshall, 'Notes on Peasant Development in the West Indies since 1838', in: Beckles and Shepherd (eds.), *Caribbean Freedom*, pp. 99-107.

40. Hanley, *The Guyanese Rice Industry....*, p. 185.



fish, which the management of the plantations had traditionally provided for their workers<sup>41</sup>.

A third observation regarding small-scale farming regards the location of the creole settlements. The majority of the ex-slaves preferred to move away from the plantations, thus reducing the opportunities for obtaining medical care and education and for selling their produce. Indians, on the other hand, instead of moving into the hills, usually settled on lands close to the plantations, which allowed them, among other things, to produce sugar cane. In addition, a much larger share of the Indian food production was marketed than that of the Creoles, who preferred to grow a variety of crops and only in small quantities. Of course, it should be realized that the Caribbean did not constitute an ideal testing ground for such comparisons. At the time the ex-slaves were setting themselves up as small farmers the antagonism between the planters and those freedmen not willing to work on the plantations was still considerable. Also, right after emancipation most schemes to provide the ex-slaves with land of their own were executed by missionaries, whereas most ex-indentureds obtained land in a scheme set up by the government<sup>42</sup>.

Yet, that same spirit of antagonism could, at least technically have also resulted in a more strident, a more organized creole peasantry. True, a small group of creole farmers managed to become successful entrepreneurs, but that elite did not become a model for the poor creole peasantry in experimenting with new crops and agricultural methods or introducing new machinery, marketing methods and credit institutions<sup>43</sup>.

The last item on our list of differences between freedmen and Asian immigrants is the family. Why did the Creoles fail to use the post-slavery period to create two-headed households, while the Indians did achieve this once the percentage of women in their community started growing?

The first explanation that springs to mind is the difference between the conditions of free peasants and slaves. By pooling resources and income Indian men and women were able to get ahead. The two-headed family proved able to produce enough offspring to overcome the relatively high child mortality of the region, allowing the parents to survive in old age with the help of their remaining children. For the slaves the conditions had been quite different. On the plantations, the distribution of food, medical care and housing did not make the two-headed family an appropriate instrument for survival. Each member of the workforce could survive by him or herself, the very young children excepted. Women slaves were not economically dependent upon their male counterparts. Elderly slaves also received food, housing and medical care. Offspring as an insurance against old age were not a necessity. In sum, Indian society made the two-headed family an important instrument of physical survival, which the Caribbean slave society had not done. In the Caribbean the Indians returned to the two-headed family structure as soon as the

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41. Douglas Hall, *Free Jamaica, 1838-1865; An Economic History* (Aylesbury, 1978), p. 165.

42. D. Wood, *Trinidad in Transition* (London, 1968), pp. 274-277 and Adamson, *Sugar Without Slaves*, pp. 94-98.

43. J.R. Ward, *Poverty and Progress in the Caribbean, 1800-1960* (London, 1985), pp. 56-60.

number of women allowed for it. The freedmen, on the other hand, preferred to cling to social organisations that had been moulded in response to the individually distributed incomes that came with plantation work rather than adapting themselves to the new demands of the post-slavery economy<sup>44</sup>.

#### CONCLUSION : ‘A SPIRIT OF INDEPENDENCE’ OR THE WRONG EDUCATION FOR THE MARKET ?

When the American journalist William G. Sewell toured the post-emancipation Caribbean in 1861 he was elated. The abolition of slavery had brought nothing but progress and had improved Caribbean society no end. The sooner the United States emancipated its slaves the better. However, in some rare moments even Sewell had to admit that the emancipation of the slaves sometimes had worsened their plight : “The people of Jamaica were not cared for ; they perish miserably in the country districts for want of medical aid ; they are not instructed ; they have no opportunities to improve themselves in agriculture or mechanics ; every effort is made to check a spirit of independence, which in the African is counted as a heinous crime, but in all other people is regarded as a lofty virtue, and the germ of national courage, enterprise, and progress.”<sup>45</sup>

As this paper has shown, Sewell was mistaken. The “spirit of independence” among the freedmen resulted in a number of wrong choices, which cost them dearly. The Asian immigrants made better choices. Their “spirit of independence” made them leave India and sign a contract of indenture by which they sacrificed some of their independence in order to invest in a better future. The Indians succeeded in reaping some of the profits in exploiting the – admittedly diminishing – geographical advantage of the Caribbean in the production of tropical cash crops. The “spirit of independence” also made the freedmen move, but their movements usually did not help them to obtain improved living and working conditions. Out in the hinterland of the plantation belts, freedmen tried to eke out a livelihood without education, without improving their primitive agricultural methods and without medical care. The range of products they offered for sale was traditional and did not cut into the range of imported products. Those, who moved to towns, did not succeed in developing an artisan sector, which could have substituted for imports from Europe and North America.

In contrast, Indian immigrants in the Caribbean on average were able to improve their standard of living considerably. In the beginning their income and land ownership compared favourably with what they had left behind in India. Towards the end of the 19th century the prosperity of the Indians was on a par if not ahead of, that of the freedmen and their descendants.

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44. Sidney Mintz, ‘Black Women, Economic Roles and Cultural Traditions’, in : Beckles and Shepherd (eds.), *Caribbean Freedom*, pp. 238-245.

45. William G. Sewell, *The Ordeal of Free Labor in The British West Indies* (London, 1968), p. 178.

Other Asian immigrants were also successful, but not to the same extent. The Chinese could not match the Indian example because there were hardly any women among them and this prevented them from becoming a sizeable community. The Javanese indentured labourers, imported into Suriname only between 1890 and 1939 under the same conditions as the Indians, did improve their material and demographic well being, but never as rapidly and as fully as did the Indians<sup>46</sup>.

The Indian success story was not limited to the Caribbean. Indian immigrants were equally successful in South Africa, Uganda, Mauritius and Fiji. Thus, the culture of the country of departure must have been the driving force behind the advancement of Indian migrants rather than the culture of the receiving areas. The three centuries of plantation slavery might have given birth to a "spirit of independence", the African, European and Caribbean cultural mix it produced somehow failed to educate its workers for the market society, which suddenly came into existence after the end of the slavery. The ex-slaves were not prepared to face the ups and downs not only in the market for labour but also in the market for consumer goods. Consequently, the rebellions and riots against the pressures within the slavery system were replaced by riots and rebellions against the vicissitudes of the market economy. The Asians on the other hand, never rebelled against the system of indentured labour as such<sup>47</sup>.

So we are back to the question as to why the ex-slaves were so disappointed about their life in freedom, whereas most Indians seemed grateful to have migrated to the post-emancipation Caribbean. The answer must be that their perspectives were different. The Indians had left India behind with its poverty and caste system and found the West Indies a relatively agreeable place to live. The great majority of them showed no inclination to return to India. Most ex-slaves, however, experienced economic decline after emancipation. Moving away from plantation agriculture caused a decline in well being as virtually every alternative economic activity in the Caribbean provided less income.

India taught its inhabitants to like those activities, which brought in most money and to maximize their incomes. The Caribbean plantations seem to have done the opposite. The slave plantations produced for the market, even for the world market but had for centuries shielded their workers from the impact of those market forces which they would have needed to understand and exploit if they were to improve their lives as freedmen.

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46. P.C. Emmer, 'Asians Compared. Some Observations Regarding Indian and Indonesian Labourers in Surinam, 1873-1939', *Itinerario*, XI (1981), pp. 149-154.

47. Freedmen and their descendants rebelled against 'white oppression' in general according to Michael Craton, 'The Incidence of Unrest Among Ex-Slaves in the British West Indies, 1838-1876' in: Beckles and Shephard (eds.), *Caribbean Freedom*, pp. 192-206, while Indian indentureds sometimes protested against the working and living condition on their particular plantation: Kusha Haraksingh, 'The Worker and the Wage in a Plantation Economy. Trinidad in the Late Nineteenth Century', in: Mary Turner (ed.) *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves; The Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas* (Kingston/London, 1995), pp. 224-238.