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Leslie Dooney

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Leslie Dooney
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Dr. Rector
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Slavery and the Caribbean Economy

The economy of the Caribbean in the colonial period was dependent on slavery. The Caribbean islands depended on slavery as the most cost effective and efficient way to harvest and produce the cash crops, mainly sugar, that their economy depended on. The Slave trade itself also became very important to the Caribbean economy. Slavery drove the colonial Caribbean economy and with the collapse of slavery the islands were forced to change the very structure of their economy and the society that was built on it.

As the economy in the Caribbean grew so did the number of slaves. Before the introduction of the sugar industry in 1667 the island of Barbados had 5,680 slaves. By 1698 there were 42,000 slaves, ten slaves for every white male on the island.^I The island of Jamaica also experienced the same rise in numbers that Barbados did. In 1658 there were 1,400 slaves in Jamaica, by 1698 there were 40,000 slaves.^{II}

Because of harsh conditions that the African slaves were forced to work under, the harsh environment of the

islands and the hardships imposed by their owners, the death toll in the Caribbean was high. By 1688 it was estimated that Jamaica required annually 10,000 slaves, the Leeward Islands 6,000, and Barbados 4,000 to maintain the number of slaves required to work the plantations.^{III}

Between 1680 and 1688 it is estimated that the Royal African Company supplied 46,396 slaves to the British West Indies, an annual average of 5,155.^{IV}

The African slave trade itself became one of the most lucrative business enterprises of the 17th century. Many companies such as the Senegal Company and the French West Indian Company established monopolies in the Caribbean, which made them very rich. By the end of the 17th century it is estimated that Britain's total profit from the slave trade amounted to 2,000,000 pounds.^V

The Caribbean was very important to the British Empire; the island of Barbados was itself more valuable in trade than the two colonies of Virginia and Maryland combined.^{VI} The Caribbean slave trade and the goods that those islands produced from the labor of slaves was the breadbasket of not only the British Empire, but the French and the Dutch as well.

Many historians have discussed the role of slavery in the Caribbean economy. In his article "Capitalism and

Slavery" Eric Williams discusses how the slave trade itself was a driving force in the Caribbean economy. He argues that the slave trade itself became more important than the sugar trade. That the combination of the American Revolution and the rise of abolitionism is what made the slave trade and thus the Caribbean economy decline. Seymour Drescher did not however agree with Williams's interpretation in his article "The Decline Thesis of British Slavery Since Econocide" Drescher argues that the decline of Caribbean slavery did not happen because of the American Revolution or the rise of abolitionism but because of a major shift at the time in the British political economy.

In " The Slave Trade and the Atlantic Economies, 1451-1870" Joseph Inikori argues that the development of the economies of the American Colonies is what led to the decline of the Caribbean economy. That the economy of the Colonies simply became more profitable than that of the Caribbean. There are many different arguments that strive to explain the decline of the Caribbean economy. One constant is true though; the decline of slavery is linked to the decline of the Caribbean economy.

Some scholars have asked, why sugar? There had been other crops raised in the Caribbean before sugar. Europeans

had flocked to the Caribbean to raise tobacco, cotton, indigo and ginger. Tobacco had been the biggest crop raised, it was quite profitable. Throughout the 1620's the settlers in the Caribbean, especially Barbados were making extraordinary amounts on tobacco. Tobacco had been an ideal crop for the Caribbean. It did not require much labor and its overhead costs were low.^{VII}

Development of tobacco plantations in the American colonies, which produced superior tobacco to the Caribbean, forced the Caribbean colonies to find a new cash crop. Between 1635 and 1640 tobacco values steadily decreased it was at this time that the planters in the Caribbean began looking for a new crop.^{VIII} Sugar was the answer, it grew well in the Caribbean environment and because of the growing popularity of rum it was a very profitable crop.

Sugar though, took much more equipment and manpower to produce than tobacco. You had to harvest and mill it before it could be shipped. This need for more manpower is what led to the increase in the numbers of slaves that were brought to the Caribbean. The greatest increase was on the island of Barbados where the sugar economy thrived during this time period.

Slave labor was the most cost effective way of harvesting the sugar. The average slave on Barbados in 1650

cost 35 pounds.^{IX} The average lifespan for a slave living in Barbados was seven years. The planters figured this into their cost predictions and it was still more cost efficient to buy a slave than to hire workers or procure indentured servants.^X

It was this short life span that drove the slave economy. As mentioned before in this paper it is estimated that Barbados itself needed 4,000 slaves a year to maintain the population needed to complete the annual sugar harvest. Slaves faced horrible conditions, if they survived the trip from Africa, which many did not they still faced horrible conditions. They were forced to work long hours harvesting and processing the sugar in heat and humidity. There were many tropical diseases and due to the hard labor and lack of food and other necessities the life span of slaves was very low.

It was this need for slaves that drove part of the Caribbean economy. Because of the constant need for slaves a lucrative slave economy grew up in the Caribbean. Simply, the sugar industry could not exist without slaves and slavery would have not been as profitable if it had not been for sugar.

Jamaica experienced much the same growth as Barbados did when they began producing sugar. As the number of sugar

plantations went up so did the number of slaves. Jamaica needed at least 10,000 slaves a year to support its sugar economy.^{XI} Jamaica quickly became one of the largest producers of sugar as well as one of the biggest exporters of slaves.

The sugar economy and its dependence on slavery drove the Caribbean economy. When the British slave trade ended in 1834 it changed the economy of the Caribbean. The end of the slave trade changed the quality of the labor force. The proportion of African born slaves on the plantations fell, and the number of Creoles, locally born slaves, rose. Creoles were considered more valuable because they spoke the local language and had more skills. But, this also meant that the number of slaves in the twenty to forty year old ranges declined and there were fewer laborers.^{XII}

Sugar Planting in the Caribbean was profitable throughout the years of slavery. Sugar prices had come down in the later 17th century but still it was profitable. Between 1783-1807 there was a downturn in profits, trade shares, and the slave trade.^{XIII} The opening of world markets and the development of the sugar beet industry in Europe had an effect on the economy.

Another big effect on the sugar economy was the rebellion of slaves. During this time there were slave

uprisings in the Caribbean. On Haiti there was a slave uprising that was successful. Slaves and Creoles were able to establish their own republic and take over the island nation of Haiti. This effected the production of sugar in that part of the Caribbean.

If there was no one to work the plantations and harvest the sugar then the sugar could not get to market. Planters lost harvest and in the case of Haiti they lost land. The rebellion in Haiti resulted in the first independent black nation in North America.^{XIV} These rebellions combined with the decrease in the slave trade and the development of other trade routes all lead to the decline of the Caribbean economy.

The Caribbean economy could not handle the decline of slavery. They did not have the manpower or the money to replace the slaves. Because of this the decline such islands as Barbados and Jamaica suffered severe recessions. This did not mean that slavery ended in the Caribbean islands. Slavery continued, on most of the islands. Slaves were still used in Cuba, and other Caribbean islands.

The economy of the Caribbean was simply not prepared to deal with the changes that the decline of slavery brought. Their whole economy was based on the plantation system that depended on slave labor. All of their energy

went into producing the cash crops. On most of the Caribbean Islands food and other supplies had to be brought in from other areas because all of the land was used to raise sugar and other cash crops.

When slavery declined there was simply no one to work the land. Because of their dependence on slavery and the plantation system the Caribbean Islands economy went into decline. Because of this dependence they were ill equipped to deal with the changes in their economy and quickly fell from being one of the most productive economies in the world to one of the least

^I Williams, Eric, *Capitalism and Slavery in Caribbean Slave Society and Economy*, ed. Hilary Beckles and Verene Sheppard, (New York: The New Press, 1991), 121.

^{II} Williams, 120.

^{III} Williams, 120.

^{IV} Williams, 121.

^V Williams, 123.

^{VI} Williams, 123.

^{VII} Batie, Robert C., "Why Sugar? Economic Cycles and the Changing of Staples on the English and French Antilles, 1624-1654," *Journal of Caribbean History*, 8(2), 1976, 207.

^{VIII} Batie, 210.

^{IX} Beckles, Hilary McD., Andrew Downies, "The Economies of Transition to the Black Labor System in Barbados, 1630-1680," *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World* ed. Verene A. Sheppard and Hilary McD. Beckles, (Kingston: Ian Randal Publishers, 2000), 245.

^X Beckles, 247.

^{XI} Sheppard, Verene A., "Livestock and Sugar: Aspects of Jamaica Agricultural Development from the Late Seventeenth to the Early Nineteenth Century," *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World* ed. Verene A. Sheppard and Hilary McD. Beckles, (Kingston: Ian Randal Publishers, 2000), 253.

^{XII} Ward, J. R., "The Profitability of Sugar Planting in the British West Indies, 1650-1834," *Caribbean Slave Society and Economy* ed. Hilary Beckles and Verene A. Sheppard, (New York: The New Press, 1991), 84.

^{XIII} Drescher, Seymour, "The Decline Thesis of British Slavery Since Econocide," *Caribbean Slave Society and Economy* ed. Hilary Beckles and Verene A. Sheppard, (New York: The New Press, 1991), 146.

^{XIV} Fick, Carolyn E., "The St. Dominique Slave Insurrection of 1791: A Socio-Political and Cultural Analysis," *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World* ed. Verene A. Sheppard, Hilary McD. Beckles, (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishing, 2000)