



Groundings Undergraduate Academic Journal
University of Glasgow | Glasgow University Union

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Source: Groundings Undergraduate, April 2022, Vol. 13, pp. 65-75

Published by: University of Glasgow, Glasgow University Union Publications

ISSNs: 1754-7474 (Print) | 1755-2702 (Online)

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Regressive Modernity? Understanding the Role of the Caribbean in the Construction of the West

Euan Healey

Modern: a byword for new, sleek, or desirable. This paper discusses the origins of Western modernity and argues that contemporary understanding frequently ignores the painful past which has allowed for a modern world to exist. This essay argues that what we consider the hallmarks of modernity and the capitalist economy originated not in Europe but in the plantations of the Caribbean, discussing and contextualising these oft-ignored colonial roots.

Inherent to the historian's 'Early Modern' period is the suggestion of an arrival of 'modernity'. This departure from the 'middle' which gives the medieval period its name, and into a new epoch, implies a period of significant change and transition. What this change is, who perpetrated it and how it took place is an open question, and one that has been dogged by historiographical baggage since the birth of historical study. The challenge for post-modern analysis is how to unpick this concept of modernity from deeply misguided, now unpopular Whig ideas that history is a process moving in a particular direction towards the present as the perfect ideal, thus viewing change as necessary 'progress' to reach the capitalist ideal society.¹ This period, characterised by the development of the nation state, that stretches from the reformation to the industrial revolution saw the continual development of ethno-national identities. These delineations were constructed around ideals presented in academic writing and political declarations such as the English Bill of Rights in 1688 or the 1579 Union of Utrecht in the Habsburg Netherlands, with Europeans as new citizens of new nations asserting their universal claims to rights as individuals.² This

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1 There is extensive literature on the shortcomings of Whig methodologies, but none have surpassed Herbert Butterfield's 1931 essay: Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1931).

2 Jack Greene, 'Liberty, slavery, and the transformation of British identity in the eighteenth-century West Indies', in *Slavery and Abolition* (2000), 21.1: 1-3.

‘progress’ was hailed in the Europe of ‘modernity’; but at what cost?

Until very recent decades (as post-colonial and sub-altern studies have entered ascendancy and imperial historiography has in turn ebbed), the Europe of the Age of Enlightenment was viewed in total isolation to the plantocracies of the West Atlantic. The progress achieved in Europe was described as if unrelated to the horrors and experiences being suffered by African and American peoples in the ‘paradise’ of the Tropics. This demands a course correction: progress and change studied without careful critique of its causes and actors is to erase their agency in impacting the lives of others. ‘Progress’ at all times must be remembered as an active process.

This essay will build on recent important scholarship identifying the clear relationships between European modernity and the Caribbean, arguing that the progress of Western modernity cannot be separated from the systematic enslavement of Africans, an economic system in complete conflict with the supposed narrative of Enlightenment values and development. These contradictions and consequences can be seen clearly in economic progress and the development of capitalism, moral-political progress in the form of enlightenment political theory and the Age of Revolutions, and in scientific progress through apparent medical and biological breakthroughs alongside the pseudo-science of race. By means of these topical sections, this article will iterate the ways in which dominant historical narratives of modernity must be corrected.

First and foremost, in questioning our concept of modernity, attention must be given to the way in which the enslavement of Africans in the occupied Caribbean allowed for the development and inception of industrial capitalist hegemony. It has been well established in literature through the work of influential Caribbean scholars Eric Williams and Hilary Beckles that industrialisation was not developed and tested first in the major smoky cities of Europe, but in the fields of the Caribbean archipelago.³ Throughout the proto-industrial early modern world, the metropole was still largely reliant on the putting-out system by which manufacturing work was sub-contracted to rural artisans through slow urban-rural economic relationships.⁴ Meanwhile,

³ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, [1944] 1994), 98; Hilary McD. Beckles, ‘Capitalism, Slavery and Caribbean Modernity’, in *Callaloo* (1997), 20.4: 777-778.

⁴ Elizabeth W. Gilboy, ‘Demand as a Factor in the Industrial Revolution’, in *The Causes of the Industrial Revolution*, ed. R. M. Hartwell (London: Methuen, 1967), 170.

Caribbean planters were developing massive sugar, cotton and tobacco complexes worked by bondage labour with integrated growth, preparation and shipping centres on the same sites focussed on high-speed mass production, which would become indicative of the industrial capitalist workplace.⁵

These “landmark experiments”, as described by historical anthropologist Sidney Mintz, were not merely test cases for a new business model, but also locations in which new hierarchical structures of labour were proposed, populated by enslaved ‘workers’ each of whom had a specific and limited role.⁶ It was here that capitalist principles of labour as a tool, as a means for profit, were first realised fully.⁷ Capitalism, the supposed crown-jewel of developmentalist histories for liberal and Whig scholars and twentieth century Western economic historians, was developed not in Europe but in the Caribbean. This economic structure, pre-dominant through to today’s world, supposedly providing the citizenry with better opportunities for work, was perfected around the suffering bodies of the enslaved worker in clear contradiction to the narrative offered in popular culture, something championed by European capitalists seeking a disposable workforce.⁸

Another way in which economic modernity must be rethought as a result of Caribbean study is the way in which the globalised economies and planetary empires notorious in the Early Modern period were pursued by and for slavery. Maritime empires developed as domestic traders raced to find ways to ship more slaves, at higher speed and lower costs from Africa to the Caribbean to fuel the plantation economies, while government (and private chartered companies) sought to expand its colonial possessions to increase a market for the Caribbean production beyond their domestic borders.⁹ The interconnected international economy dominated by export profits and imported luxury goods was the direct and explicit consequence

5 Joseph Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Economic Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 481.

6 Sidney W. Mintz, ‘Enduring Substances, Trying Theories: The Caribbean Region as Oikoumene’, in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (1996), 2.2: 295.

7 Lindon Barrett, *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity*, eds. Justin Joyce, Dwight McBride and John Carlos Rowe (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 11-12.

8 Carla Gardina Pestana, Marlene Daut, Stephen Wilkinson and Ada Ferrer, ‘Is Caribbean History the Key to Understanding the Modern World?’ in *History Today* (2021), 71.5: paras. 1-2, 9.

9 David Scott, ‘Modernity that Predated the Modern: Sidney Mintz’s Caribbean’ in *History Workshop Journal* (2004), 58: 191.

of African kidnap and dehumanisation. Eric Williams goes to great lengths to clearly identify how this new globalised market allowed for the expansion of the businesses – such as banking and heavy industry – which would come to typify the success of the capitalist economic model in the ‘modern’ eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁰ The wealth created here was inseparable from slavery, and so then was the modernity this wealth represented. A 1789 pamphlet in support of the Royal African Company’s monopoly on slave trading aptly makes this connection arguing there was ‘no other way to occupy their Grounds, raise their Products, or manufacture their Commodities, but by hard Labour, and that not to be endur’d in such a sultry Climate by any but Negroes.’ Contemporaries understood that the Caribbean, and the commodification of black bodies therein, was transparently the means to their modern world’s ends.¹¹

Beyond economic conceptions already considered, we must next consider the philosophies that were formed concurrently with capitalism, in order to understand the Caribbean’s impact on those ideas in the early modern world. As described, European citizens increasingly asserted their rights as individuals throughout this period, pushing for varying forms of freedom, republicanism, and democracy across the imperial continent. In each of these forms the ‘enlightened’ of the Age of Enlightenment claimed that individuals were entitled to provisions and privileges by virtue of their birth as humans, citizens, or countrymen. The most influential European political thinkers were all hugely influential in this process, such as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Voltaire who designed and progressed the theories of liberalism, empiricism and rationalism which drove the predominance of the intellectual and promotion of scientific methodologies.

Simultaneous to these arguments, all three advocated for the freedom and liberty of the individual, but at the same time also sanctioned the ownership of slaves often referring to the ancient Greek traditions of barbarian enslavement.¹² This showcases the cognitive dissonance employed by thinkers in Europe placing a racialised and geographic delineation between the rights of Europeans and others, in order to exempt the Caribbean from the revolutionary and transformative ideas their work

¹⁰ Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 98.

¹¹ *A True State Of the Present Difference Between the Royal African Company, and the Separate Traders* (London: 1710), 32.

¹² David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 391-393.

inspired. The post-reformation framework of both religious and secular humanist morality was celebrated as progress over the historic rule of divine right of kings and serfdom, instead promoting a society in which each voice was (at least in theory) equal and everyone had intrinsic identity. This was felt by contemporaries and later historians (particularly nineteenth century proponents of 'great man theory') to be a huge forward movement in the development of the social order. This 'progress' nonetheless was of little relevance to the practicalities of life in the West Indies in this period, as four black Africans continued to be imported to the Americas for every white person that arrived up until as late as 1830.¹³ As Europeans were staking claim to their own humanity, Africans were continuing to be exchanged as commodities.

This imbalanced concept of liberty flooded political discourse and became an essential part of debates around justice and society. Communication between colonial legislatures and the metropolitan parliament was one producer of this kind of language, as plantation owners in plantocracies bemoaned their alleged mistreatment and a loss of rights. One such document is a 1651 declaration from Barbadian politicians in complaint about the English Parliament's enactment of legislation which would hollow-out Caribbean political assemblies in favour of centralised control from London. The Governor of Barbados, which at the time was the richest British Caribbean possession and the prison for some 20,000 African slaves being held by a white population of the same number, complained: 'Shall we be bound to the Government and Lordship of a Parliament in which we have no Representatives [...] In truth this would be a slavery.'¹⁴ Once again we recognise an assertion of political rights typical of this period, as dominant philosophies encouraged resistance against power, but an assertion by white Europeans refusing to acknowledge the political rights of the 'other'.

In the same vein we can identify a number of American revolutionary leaders demanding their rights as citizens while simultaneously being slave owners at the dawn of the Age of Revolution, with these same leaders then going on to be silent in the black-led Haitian revolution. For example, General Rochembeau (a decisive figure

¹³ David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 73.

¹⁴ Richard Dunn, 'The Barbados Census of 1680: Profile of the Richest Colony in English America', in *The William and Mary Quarterly* (1969), 26.1: 8, Francis Willoughby and the Council of Barbados, 'A Declaration of Independence' (London: Brown, 1651).

in latter parts of the American revolutionary war and the French Revolution of 1789) even went on to lead troops to oppose the self-emancipated slaves asserting their rights to self determination on the battlefield.¹⁵ Haiti is illustrative of how Western modernity's revolutionary movements were almost entirely exclusionary of black and Caribbean voices and were not struggles for their rights, but instead narratives of European revolutions seldom include conversation about the significance of Haiti despite its aims (a struggle by oppressed people against an occupying power which resulted in the creation of an explicitly black nation) baring similar intellectual origins as the revolutions fought in Europe. This must form a stark reminder for the early modernist that abolition was not a political movement that originated in European humanism as revisionist narratives would suggest, instead abolition and freedom were achieved by the painful and dangerous praxis of Afro-Caribbean people bloodily asserting their rights, a true foil to the European radical and revolutionary movements.¹⁶ The Haitian Revolution was a statement that liberty must mean liberty for all, or it is not liberty, but Western historiography has excluded it from the rich tradition of revolutionary study. The story of the French Revolution is told in popular culture in total isolation from the Haitian Revolution, despite the deep colonial connections, a fact which influential theorist Michel-Rolph Trouillot extends to historiography, arguing Haiti has been placed on the 'historical backburner'.¹⁷ What a rethinking of modernity demands is a consideration of how active opposition to the Haitian national struggle resulting in black, self-emancipated slaves being ignored despite their nation pre-dating major modern nations such as Germany, Belgium and Italy.

Furthermore, as the west's ethics and economics were contorted to justify slavery, so too was society's new saviour: science. The scientific enlightenment, driven into popularity by the spread of empiricism, saw research in physics, chemistry, botany, and human medicine expand in all directions, increasing in speed throughout the early modern period. Enslavers used the destruction of the population of indigenous populations, and then high mortality rates of Africans on plantations, to justify the continued slave trade, suggesting an inherent weakness and poverty of skills

15 Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, 3-4.

16 Beckles, 'Caribbean Modernity', 781-782, Pestana et. al., 'Caribbean History', paras. 4, 9-12.

17 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 9

amongst the black population.¹⁸ This corroborates Ibrahima Thiaw and Deborah Mack's study of interacting systems that produced the context for slavery to succeed arguing that scientific knowledge systems were 'strategically mobilised to intrude, search, analyse, dissect, and ultimately consume Black bodies according to European demands, needs, and standards.'¹⁹ In addition, the Caribbean itself was characterised as 'inherently diseased' by planter-scientists unfamiliar with the new climate and diseases experienced by settlers.²⁰ As a result of this definition, it was argued then that black bodies were the most suitable for work in the archipelago: polluted bodies for a polluted place. Here we see an academic methodology attempting to co-opt new forms of thinking to justify the continual oppression of Black individuals; the sciences of modernity were hijacked by the enslaving class, with the express intention of using racialised empiricism to scientifically justify inhuman practices.

One key example of the way in which science and medicine were openly used to justify racism was in the case of the creation of racial difference between white and black people, inventing a way to enforce slavery as a native or natural state for Africans.²¹ One anonymous Jamaican slave-owner wrote 'it is better to be the Slaves of Christians, than the Victims of Heathen Ferocity'²², while a missionary seeking to describe the black existence wrote 'all the nègres of Guinea are extremely limited; many seem idiotic [...] machines that must be rewound whenever one wants to make them move.'²³ These are just two examples from an archive rich with writings of a pseudo-scientific nature, populated by Europeans fascinated by Africans, once again trying to consume each part of the existence of black people they encountered to feed their own greed.²⁴ This scientific greed sought to discover everything in the natural world

18 Davis, *Human Progress*, 66.

19 Ibrahima Thiaw and Deborah Mack, 'Atlantic Slavery and the Making of the Modern World: Experiences, Representations, and Legacies', in *Current Anthropology* (2020), 61.22: 145

20 Emily Senior, *The Caribbean and the Medical Imagination, 1764-1834: Slavery, Disease and Colonial Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 8.

21 Toyin Falola, *The African Diaspora: Slavery, Modernity, and Globalization* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2013), 6.

22 A. Planter, 'Commercial Reasons for the non-abolition of the Slave-Trade in the West India Islands by a Planter and Merchant of many Years Residence in the West Indies' (London: W. Lane, 1789), 10

23 Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix and Jean-Baptiste Le Pers, *Histoire de l'isle Espagnole ou de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 2 (Paris: H.-L. Guérin, 1730-31), 499.

24 The archives in question are almost exclusively populated by elite writings. The primary material referenced in this paper are entirely written by white hands either across both metropolitan Europe and the colonial possessions themselves. Almost all of the records we have of enslaved life in the Caribbean (particularly in a literary sense) are of this sort in the form of formal and informal 'top-down' writings of the invading white populations.

that could be exploited. Horrifyingly, the pseudo-scientific consensus on black people was that they could be used up like animals due to their alleged lower intellect, with the language of seasoning: that is, training a black body to be used for slavery in terms akin to the processes of animal husbandry. It should be noted that these practices also came to corroborate eugenicist ideas which were increasing in popularity through the early modern period, arguing that some humans were genetically predisposed to certain traits, with slave owners pursuing these ideas in terms of breeding strategies and quality of 'product' among the slaves they owned.²⁵ Similarly, medicine saw the opportunity for its own consumption of black bodies as many planters and ship's doctors assaulted, tortured and murdered black enslaved men, and frequently women and children, for the 'progress' of their 'modern' medicine.²⁶ Even a cursory glance over the manipulation of science for the ends of slavers is enough to indicate a real need for the rethinking this essay has been discussing, as we grapple with the way the pillars of medical modernity were developed at the expense of black lives.

In conclusion, Europe's 'golden age' of expansion, globalisation and knowledge was evidently a direct product of slavery. This paper has traced the ways in which existing literature has highlighted the global consequences of state sanctioned ethnic violence against African and indigenous Caribbean peoples, drawing that research together into a direct critique of the methodologies by which we view our contemporary world and history. The interaction of wilful ignorance, active intolerance, and capitalist greed across all the areas of society which interacted to allow chattel slavery to take place is clear; any analysis that omits the Caribbean from the 'progress' in Europe must be understood as an active erasure of black lives, deaths and sufferings. In the roots of science and medicine, throughout the work of continually influential political philosophers, and engrained deep in the racialised capitalism we see Western modernity poisoned by roots that run deep inside the devastating history of colonialism and Caribbean oppression. These ideas of racial difference were driven wide open by capitalism and other forces which sought to exploit them for economic and political gain, and as a result, these narratives persist to this day long after the abolition of transatlantic slavery.²⁷ As a consequence, understanding our own

25 Richard B. Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 227.

26 Kirsten Block, 'Science and slavery in historiographical evolution', in *Slavery and Abolition* (2018), 39.4: 757.

27 Catherine Hall, 'The Slavery Business and the Making of "Race" in Britain and the Caribbean', in *Current Anthropology* (2020), 61.22: 175.

modernity cannot be done without analysing the path Western societies have taken since Columbus' invasion on the beaches of Ayiti, and a blind or unthinking response to this fact is a deeply privileged disrespect for the historical record.

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