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A New World of Labor: The Development of Plantation Slavery in the British Atlantic by
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A New World of Labor: The Development of Plantation Slavery in the British Atlantic.

By Simon P. Newman. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. 327. \$55.00 cloth.)

Simon Newman takes a broad approach to the development of plantation slavery, placing it in a broad Atlantic context, and understanding it in relation to English and African traditions of labor, as well as by the unique conditions of English colonies. The book focuses on labor in three separate contexts, England, the Gold Coast, and Barbados. Newman argues that plantation slavery should be seen in the context of an Atlantic labor regime in which most labor was dependent, bound or coerced: furthermore, structures of labor around the Atlantic world were dynamic rather than static. Slavery is distinguished from other forms of labor by the degree of coercion, not its presence. Using archival records from London, Barbados, and Ghana, as well as a broad synthesis of secondary literature, Newman shows how structures of labor changed over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Plantation slavery was, at its center, a “class based system of labor” (250), that built on the system of exploiting white bound laborers in Barbados.

The book has four sections. The first focuses on the three places that are the focus of the study; the second looks at British bound labor in Barbados and Africa; the third section examines slave and free labor on the Gold Coast; and the final section analyzes plantation labor in Barbados. The sections on the Gold Coast are particularly illuminating: in Africa, the English had to respect local structures of power and customs; slave labor was framed by African customs, not those of the Americas; and free laborers managed to have significant autonomy. In Barbados, where there were no external constraints, the English were able to develop a far more exploitative system.

The focus on systems of labor allows Newman to demonstrate the blurred boundaries between categories of labor – free and unfree, black and white. In both the Gold Coast and Barbados, the English initially expected to use British artisans as skilled workers, but by the end of the seventeenth century, as a result of high mortality and difficulties of recruitment, African workers dominated skilled labor. While plantation slavery was a deeply racialized system, it was also a flexible one that adapted to a variety of different contexts. By the end of the 18th century, for instance, enslaved soldiers fought for the British in the Caribbean – a model that owed less to plantation slavery, and more to the practice of the Gold Coast forts.

Newman’s focus on slavery as a labor system illuminates the complex and connected nature of all labor in the early modern British Atlantic. Yet the focus on systems of labor also renders other differences less visible. For instance, while the English did not initially follow Spanish and Portuguese systems of labor, their later use of slavery may owe more to these models than his attention to English roots suggests: the word used for slaves, “Negro”, was a Spanish one. Newman also occasionally glosses over differences. White servants were exploited and overworked in Barbados, as were slaves, but one form of bound labor was heritable and the other was not; one was perpetual and one was (at least in theory) not. It is difficult to know the impact of these existential distinctions, but they are not irrelevant. The laws of Barbados make subtle distinctions between slave labor and the labor of white servants, and these are invisible in Newman’s account.

These caveats are relatively minor. Newman has done a fine job of presenting bound labor in an Atlantic context, and drawing attention to the continuities of labor practices in Britain, Africa, and the Americas. This is an

exemplary study which enriches our understanding of the dynamic process of labor exploitation in the British Atlantic.

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