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## FREEDOM AND OPPRESSION OF SLAVES IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CARIBBEAN\*

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*Characteristics of two different social systems, island government and the particular master-slave relationship, jointly determined the degree of freedom of slaves in the Caribbean in the late eighteenth century. The degree to which an island was "a slave society" depended on the dominance of sugar cane in the island economy, and whether planters were internally well-organized and were powerful in the empire government. The Bahamas and Santo Domingo (the Dominican Republic) had low planter power on both criteria; Barbados and Antigua had high on both. Within a slave society, the degree to which a slave was treated like a free man or woman was determined by the slave owner's need for the slave's consent and enthusiasm as a trusted agent. This varied within islands: Slave pearl divers, dock workers, fishermen, mistresses, hucksters, soldiers, or cowboys tended to be nearly free when slaves and were likely to be formally or informally set free, even if island governments strongly limited their freedom.*

Sociologists have had great trouble developing a sociology of freedom and of its opposite, slavery. Orlando Patterson started with the sociology of slavery (1967) and developed freedom as its opposite (1991). I follow Patterson in starting my investigations in the Caribbean at the height of slave society<sup>1</sup> in the late eighteenth century, before "amelioration" or "emancipation."

But I do not follow Patterson's mature work (1991). He shows how the history of

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<sup>1</sup> Goveia (1980 [1965]:vii), defined this term in a way slightly different from mine, but the main island she studied, Antigua, was one of the most "slave society" islands in the late eighteenth century by the definition I am using here.

the idea of freedom was shaped by the social and normative experience of its opposite, slavery. I treat freedom or liberty as the high end of a continuous empirical variable in the eighteenth-century Caribbean, a variable whose low end is slavery in the ideal-typical sense. In particular, I study how the restriction of the possibilities among which slaves could choose was greater in some slave islands than in others, and less among slaves serving some functions for their masters that required slave loyalty, enthusiasm, or discretion.

I define freedom as a set of liberties. As the argument develops, it will be clear that many of the decisions slaves in fact took freely were not protected by law. John R. Commons's (1924:92-100;11-46) definition of liberties enables me to conceive of slaves' freedom as a variable made up of the liberties they in fact enjoyed, whether or not they were defended in the law. Because of the way restrictions on slave liberties were defined, low slave freedom means high liberty of the slave owner to do as he or she likes with the slave.

By a liberty, Commons means a decision that someone can take even if the consequences damage or help others, so the decision may mean a loss to one other, but a gain to a third person. For example, Spanish law provided that if slaves of different owners married, one or the other owner had to sell