

THE SLAVE EXPERIENCE IN THE CARIBBEAN: A COMPARATIVE VIEW

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1. Introduction:

I will attempt in this summary essay to narrate the basic findings about African slavery as they apply to the Caribbean, and then to offer explanations as to how these slave systems varied from region to region. As will be evident from my presentation, I see this institutional history of slavery, especially as it is related to sugar production, as a common one throughout the American colonies and republics at least in terms of its economic organisation and utility. I do see, however, important variations in each society due to differing patterns of demographic social and cultural organisation, all of which are evident in differing social and economic outcomes for the exslaves both before and after emancipation.

2. Early American Colonial Labour Systems:

The European conquest of the American hemisphere did not automatically guarantee the expansion of African slave labour to the New World. Africans within Europe and the Atlantic islands were still a relatively minor part of the European labour force, and even sugar production was not totally in the hands of Black slaves. At the same time, the existence of at least 20 to 25 million American Indians provided the Europeans would have an abundant supply of labour available for the exploitation of their new colonies. Finally, Europe itself was experiencing major population growth in the 15th century, and could probably rely on migrations of its poorer peasants and urban dwellers for its American labour needs. Yet despite these alternative labour supplies, America became the great market for some 10 to 15 million