"Now Designed to the Worst": English Captive Labor and Perceptions of Slavery in the Interregnum

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The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For the full text, please visit https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/undergraduate_honors_theses/r207tq82t or scan the QR code.

Abstract

In 1659 Parliament heard a petition alleging that 72 Englishmen arrested for participating in the Salisbury Rising had been enslaved in Barbados. These allegations were made and heard in the context of increased amounts of captive labor flooding into the Caribbean, some of it state sanctioned, and popular rhetorical use of 'slavery' to mean political oppression during the English Civil War. The petition was both shocking to the English nation, and made its claims using language the English would have already been very familiar with. By examining the development of norms of captivity for enslaved people on Barbados, analyzing the 1659 petition, and tracing the further development of norms of captivity after the Interregnum, this thesis will demonstrate how the instability of the Interregnum contributed to an unstable definition of 'slavery' in England in the seventeenth century.

[...]

Conclusion

"Barbados Merchandize" was published when the use of captive labor was increasing throughout the Caribbean. It was also published during a time in which the populations that made up that captive labor force were changing. Throughout the Interregnum, the English government expanded its policies of involuntary transport, moving greater numbers of people to its colonies and adding to the populations that were able to be involuntarily indentured and transported. This increase in, largely White, indentured labor in the English Caribbean occurred at the same time as increased English involvement in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, as the Navigation Acts made it easier for English ships to make money off the trade. Some of the men who made profits off of the traffic in enslaved people, such as Martin Noell, were also heavily involved in the transport of involuntarily indentured servants to the Caribbean. The forced transport of 'undesirable' White populations and the mass enslavement of Africans were, in this period, connected by the destinations of these labor forces, the people involved in their transport, and the laws that governed them.

"Barbados Merchandize" was certainly not the first published work during this time to use the language of slavery to describe the political and physical disenfranchisement of White Englishmen. Indeed, it followed in a tradition of rhetorical writing that many members of Parliament would have been familiar with from the republican pamphlets of the English Civil War. It was also not the first work to allege slavery could be a possibility for Englishmen in the seventeenth century. As Mediterranean attacks by Barbary corsairs proved, slavery could very much affect Englishmen, though a different form of slavery than that which affected Africans in the English Caribbean. Instead, "Barbados Merchandize" is significant in the ways

it reveals the instability of the language of slavery during the seventeenth century, and the ways in which the English government attempted to deal with this instability. Parliament's discomfort with the idea of English slavery, in their denial of it and their attempt at redemption for the petitioners, reveals the way in which definitions of slavery were shifting at the time such that English slavery was racialized. Slavery as rhetoric was normal, and acceptable. The idea of literal slavery affecting Englishmen was discomfiting.

English governments attempted to reject the idea of the enslavement of Englishmen in the Caribbean, creating new slave codes and servant laws that more clearly delineated the differences between servants and enslaved people. The Lords of Trade rejected even the implication of 'bondage' for White servants with their request that Jamaica remove the word 'servitude' from its servant laws. Where before, indentured servants and enslaved people in the Caribbean had been governed by the same laws and had sometimes worked in similar positions in the earlier days of colonization, now the English government was invested in including indentured servants in a history of 'service' that enslaved people were excluded from.[1] This delineation was accompanied by an increasing idea of racial division and 'White' as a coherent, legally distinct group in the Caribbean. By the 1670s, working alongside African enslaved people became a punishment for disobedient White servants, and the word "white" began to be more frequently used to discuss groups of non-Black indentured servants, where before the common term had been 'Christian'.[2] Slavery was becoming increasingly racialized in the Caribbean, even as the English government shrank from the word 'slave'. Through all of this, the English West Indies remained a place of potential White enslavement in the imagination of the English public.

This was true during the tail end of the Interregnum, as public response to "Barbados Merchandize" accepted the petition's premise of the enslavement of the petitioners, and it was true after.... Despite the English government's attempts to retreat from the idea of English slavery, the public in England was able to accept an imagined Caribbean where White slavery existed.

Even with the English government's attempts to clearly define slavery, its attempts to distance itself and its policies of transport from slavery, and the long history of 'slavery' as a political metaphor in England, the public imagination conceived of the term 'slavery' very literally, and applied it to White English men and women in the Caribbean. The disconnect between the attempts to legally define slavery as a racialized category and popular understanding that many different forms of captivity were capable of being named 'slavery' highlights the degree to which captive labor and unfree labor were important to England. They supported its most valuable colony, its military achievements, and its functioning back home.[3] Captivity was, in some sense, an ever-present component of seventeenth century English life, made only more so by the increase in captive labor that occurred during the Interregnum.

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1 Susan Dwyer Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society, 1640-1700*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 250.

2 Amussen, Caribbean Exchanges, 86; Edward B. Rugemer, "The Development of Mastery and Race in the Comprehensive Slave Codes of the Greater Caribbean during the x`Seventeenth Century," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2013): 446-448.

3 Carla Pestana, *The English Conquest of Jamaica: Oliver Cromwell's Bid for Empire*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 93-108.