

EDITOR'S REMARKS

When slavery was abolished in Jamaica in 1834, the colonial administration and local planters faced the problem of creating a steady and dependable supply of labor. Post-emancipation African-Jamaicans proved much more difficult to domesticate than English agricultural laborers. The former lived in a salubrious climate, with a surplus of land and shortage of labor, allowing them to leave the plantations, work on them part time, or set up self-sufficient small farms in spontaneously improvised villages. English farm laborers were constrained by a cold climate, land scarcity, and the inroads of industrialization on rural existence. In both mother country and colony, the authorities sought to domesticate labor through legislation and by indirect means. Central to their efforts was the attempt to institutionalize the family as social stabilizer and vehicle for conveying the social norms and economic needs of bourgeois society.

Persis Charles's highly suggestive controversy essay addresses British efforts to develop a new social and sexual order in Jamaica. Her argument is centered on three points: 1) that gender issues "are as fundamental to understanding post-emancipation Jamaica as the conflicts over the land and labor which have traditionally occupied historians"; 2) that "events in Jamaica exposed prominent fault lines of sexual and political ideology in Britain," raising the question of whether a presumed cohesive moral order really ever existed (as evinced by the running battle between John Stuart Mill and Thomas Carlyle); and 3) that the traditional monolithic view of colonialism as an expression of the dominant country and dominated colony neglects the breakdown of such distinctions in practice. Attempts to introduce and implement the law of affiliation and birth registration in Jamaica revealed that relations between the dominant and subordinate were interdependent.

Charles traces the generally futile attempts by Baptist missionaries, planters, and colonial officials to alter Jamaican family structure in order to create a disciplined labor force. Since the English Poor and Marriage Laws had no power in Jamaica, reform efforts were centered on the widespread practice of concubinage in the hope that birth and paternity registration would encourage formal family structures. Not only did the Jamaican peasants and workers resist these efforts through the counter-cultures of village life, but the reformers' ideology itself rested on a set of necessary fictions. If English values and practices were to be instilled in colonial society, the conflicts and contradictions within English society (symbolized in part by the struggle between Mill and Carlyle over autonomy and subordination) had to be denied. This flight from reality was current in Jamaica as well, where a very un-English, African-Jamaican concubinage had to be covered up—or at least disguised. Charles ends with a reflection on the sameness/difference problem extracted from the Jamaican experience and from gender relations in general. The colonists' attempt to make the colonized the "same," and

thereby to end their “difference” was as ambiguous, she maintains, as the position of the dominant element in gender relations, where the “be like us” coexists with the “you can’t be like us.”

Although the three critical commentators salute Charles’s attempt to give gender its due place beside land and labor as determinants of post-emancipation Jamaican society, they challenge her legally restricted theoretical formulation of gender, as well as aspects of her substantive argument. Catherine Hall maintains that “there was never one colonial discourse in England”: public opinion seesawed between emancipationism in the 1830s and the view that blacks were inferiors to be mastered in the 1860s. Emancipation for the abolitionists always was conceptualized in gendered terms. Male and female freedom were to be different. Men would own themselves and their property. Women would be protected (from sexual abuses of the past) and retreat into their sphere of duty. Freed slaves would become like the English: a civilized manhood expressed in the protection of women and children. This image of the new Jamaica was based on an imaginary England, which rejected the creole African legacy. Hall insists that Charles treats the vision of white male identity—the powerful fiction informing the whole imperial project—too lightly.

Tom Holt contends that Charles fails to demonstrate with specific examples from the Jamaican social landscape the relationship among gender, labor, and land. He also contends she fails to demonstrate the relationship between the ideological debate between Carlyle and Mill over subordination and autonomy, and the Jamaican debate over paternity. That debate, Holt notes, seems to have had little impact on the family life and sexual mores of Jamaica’s black majority, suggesting that the proposed laws on family and paternity were aimed, rather, at disciplining the Jamaican white elite in order to legitimize its continued rule. Seen in this light, the reform campaigns were an expression of an emerging bourgeois ideology in England according to which free labor would aspire to realize material desires in the context of the bourgeois nuclear family.

Dale Tomich finds that “the theoretical and historical assumptions of [Charles’s] argument and its narrow focus on the law create problems for understanding gender formation and its historical context.” That focus ignores the forms of community, culture, and collective action of Afro-Jamaicans during slavery. Moreover, legal norms of legitimacy and illegitimacy mask the construction of gender relations. Charles treats gender independently of kinship, property, labor, social status, and political power, ignoring the complex and contradictory ways these relations interact and shape each other. Tomich argues that Charles treats “actors as logically prior to social relations.” It would be more fruitful, he suggests, to consider the role of gender in post-emancipation Jamaica from the perspective of the social relations from which it emerges. In this light, gender subordination—the persistence of concubinage and resistance to compulsory birth registration, for instance—emerges as central to the creation of racial hierarchy and the maintenance of class privilege.

In this controversy over imperialist attempts to create bourgeois family norms in order to develop a free but self-disciplined colonial labor force, we should not forget that in England and other industrialized countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a similar effort was underway to create a stable industrial proletariat. According to the vision of bourgeois ideologues and capitalist reformers, workers were to be “civilized” from their disorderly forms of living to conform to the world view and social/cultural norms of the reformers. Even socialist reformers in these decades shared the view that workers still had to be “civilized.” The creation of an “orderly worker family” — decent, respectable, and disciplined — was central to socialist conceptions of cultural enrichment for workers, and their transformation into assertive and class-conscious actors in the ongoing class struggle. In both bourgeois and socialist conceptions gender, labor, and politics were intertwined and interactive.

H.G.