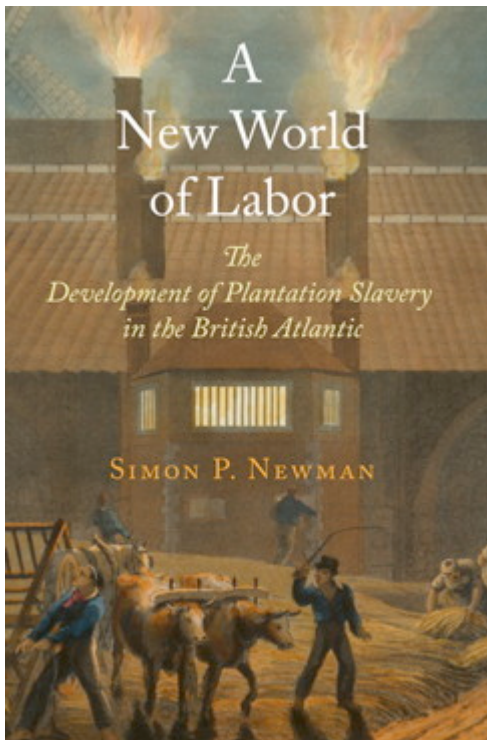


# “Barbadosed”: Class and Race in the British Atlantic



In this erudite, thoughtful, and at times sparkling study, Simon Newman—author of noteworthy earlier books on festive culture in the early republic and on the Philadelphia poor—turns to one of the perennial issues in early American history, namely the origins of plantation slavery in the British colonies. Rather than concentrating on the traditional sites of scholarly attention—the Chesapeake colonies of Virginia and Maryland—he turns the spotlight on the pivotal Caribbean island of Barbados which he sees, with considerable justification, as the real “laboratory of labor” in the British Atlantic (251). It was there during the early seventeenth century that a powerful planter elite first invented a radically new variety of bound labor to service an integrated plantation system that combined workers, land, and machines in an innovative fashion. Once established, he argues that this nexus did not simply remain *in situ*. Instead it was exported elsewhere, with this Barbadian model subsequently shaping the development of racial slavery not just on Jamaica and other Caribbean islands, but in South Carolina and its lower South neighbors as well. As he charts this compelling trajectory, two interrelated facets of Newman’s underlying approach become increasingly evident. First, there is his gloss on the classic question of the balance between economics and race in the causation of American slavery, which Alden T. Vaughan several years ago dubbed the “origins debate.” Second, in the process of addressing that issue, there is the way he places plantation slavery firmly in the context of other forms of labor—both unfree and free—characteristic of the early modern British world. His pursuit of this dimension propels him beyond the Caribbean and North

America to Britain and the West African coast in a work that becomes genuinely circum-Atlantic in scope.

With regard to the first question, Newman supports a socio-economic rather than a racial interpretation of the transition to black slavery. Although he freely acknowledges that a set of ideas and prejudices about race came to constitute the ideological underpinnings of slavery during the course of the eighteenth century, it was, nevertheless, “a class-based system of labor rather than abstract ideas of racial difference that provided the foundation for slavery in Barbados, and for a system that spread to Jamaica, the Carolinas, and beyond” (248). There is, of course, nothing particularly original in this assertion. It merely represents one of the well-established poles in a long-standing controversy. Where Newman breaks new ground is in the crucial role he ascribes to the importance of English precedents with regard to attitudes toward labor, the work imperative, and the treatment of the poor and vulnerable. In particular, the Vagrancy Act of 1547 occupies a central place in his narrative. Despite the fact that there is little evidence that the measure was actually enforced, Newman plausibly suggests that its precedents, its language, and the very fact of its passage are all of compelling significance. They indicate that English rulers and landowners, faced with the challenge of controlling a growing mass of under- or unemployed people, believed that in the right circumstances one individual could seize the body and labor of another, taking away liberty and independence and extracting work through violence.



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The commodification of labor that this step represented only gained pace in the early seventeenth century as the settlement of Barbados got underway. On the island itself, the planter elite—unchecked by any lingering legal and social constraints—created the exploitative plantation system characteristic of sugar cultivation and brutally utilized first English indentured servants and then black slaves. The former served for far longer periods than English laborers and they were bought, sold, and traded in a manner unknown in Britain itself. What encouraged this tendency was an infelicitous combination of factors. First, indentured servants were in plentiful supply owing to the volatile economic, social, and political conditions in the metropolis and, second, an increasing proportion of those sent across the Atlantic were already unfree and enjoyed scant legal rights and protections. They were, in effect, “white slaves”—vagrants, criminals, and prisoners—whom planters viewed more as inferior and contemptible commodities to be exploited than as free-born individuals (71). According to Newman, their treatment laid the foundations for the late seventeenth-century development of black slavery, whose operation he then analyzes in some depth using an array of contemporary sources familiar to Caribbean historians, including Richard Ligon’s *True and Exact History* (1657),

Henry Drax's instructions, and the records of the Codrington and Newton estates. Although this is, perhaps surprisingly, the most conventional section of the book, Newman, to his credit, is at pains to stress how dynamic the institution was in Barbados. It was not static, but changed over time as planters adopted rather double-edged "amelioration" policies during the eighteenth century, promoted natural increase and family life, and encouraged the development of a more diverse, highly skilled and trained black workforce. He is also acutely aware of the gender dimension to life and labor on a West Indian sugar plantation and of the role that female slaves played in the fields. Finally, Newman rightly emphasizes the extent to which, with the rise of slavery, white servants and their descendants—the so-called "redlegs"—were marginalized in Barbados to a degree that was unusual even in other regions of the Caribbean.

For Newman this slave system was genuinely distinctive. It stood out from working practices in other parts of the British Atlantic world. Plantation slavery really did constitute "a new world of labor," to repeat the evocative phrase in the book's title. In order to underline this point, Newman focuses not just on earlier English precedents, but also on conditions in British-occupied West Africa and especially the Gold Coast, a region that had close connections with Barbados through the Atlantic slave trade. There, because of the primacy of the trading relationship and the demographic imbalance between Europeans and Africans, Britons were compelled to respect the local residents and their working practices. As a result, they had to engage with, understand, and utilize free and bound labor in ways that differed quite dramatically both from the early modern British Isles and the developing plantation society of Barbados. The Gold Coast was not a slave society akin to those that would evolve in the Americas, and until the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries slavery in coastal communities remained relatively small-scale, without any large and distinct slave class or caste. In addition, the existence of pawns, or voluntary and (at least in theory) temporary slaves, further blurred the lines between free and enslaved. Viewed in this wider context, then, the Barbadian experience was truly exceptional. While categories and forms of labor were extremely complicated elsewhere, on this particular Caribbean island more rigid definitions of labor and subsequently of race usurped the more fluid ideas and practices characteristic of the larger British Atlantic. What accounts for this outcome? Embedded in Newman's text are several possible explanations: the strength of English precedents and attitudes towards labor; the fact that the initial settlement of Barbados coincided with a period of economic, social, and political turmoil in England; the resulting influx into the colony of British (principally Irish and Scottish) unfree convicts, vagrants, and prisoners of war; the unchecked power and freedom of the Barbadian planter class; and the evaporation with the Atlantic crossing of more fluid, flexible African definitions of slavery. For this array of reasons, according to Newman, the ideas and practices of plantation slavery actually owed more to England than to Africa, and more to class than to race.

This is, therefore, an interesting, suggestive book that merits a wide

readership, particularly from those with an interest in Atlantic slavery and labor history broadly defined. Although there is a slightly repetitive quality to the discussion, with many of the same themes resurfacing at different points, the study's clear linear structure anchored around discrete sections on the various Atlantic contexts, British bound labor, African bound labor, and finally plantation slavery, succeeds in driving the argument forward in a compelling fashion. Also, while the study covers some familiar ground in its discussion of Caribbean, British, and African labor practices—and owes a distinct debt to earlier scholars such as Richard Dunn, Hilary Beckles, and Russell Menard—the triangular, comparative nature of his analysis enables Newman to develop his own rather novel argument concerning the distinctive nature of plantation slavery in British America. Here the one element that is perhaps missing is a clearer awareness of the significance of the inevitable entanglements with the Iberian and Dutch Atlantics. That important caveat aside, Newman nevertheless succeeds in highlighting the centrality of labor to our understanding of the early modern world and, as the best Atlantic historians do, raises important questions about the complex, fluid relationship between developments in the Americas, Africa, and Europe.