

## Two Languages of Slavery in the Colonial Caribbean

For researchers of Caribbean history, slavery might be the topic which draws the greatest attention during their investigation. The origins, rise, and fall of the region's slave systems, the slave economy, society and culture, together with the issue of slave resistance, abolitionism, have all been the subjects of intense debate. In fact, since as early as the sixteenth century, the word 'slavery' had appeared in several published works. It was initially used to refer to people who undertook severe toil or heavy labour, or to describe the fact of being a slave or the condition of slave. For example, Thomas More in his famous *Vtopia* mentioned 'In this hal all vyle seruice all slauerie...is done by bondemen'. Other writers such as John Fryer also discussed the fact that people used asses and slaves to carry their packs. The two key usages of this word, according to Oxford Dictionary, were i) to refer to the condition or fact of being entirely subject to, or under the domination of, some power or influence, or ii) (metaphorically) a state of subjection or subordination comparable to that of a slave.<sup>1</sup> These two definitions of slavery, correspondingly developed into two languages of slavery later, were frequently used by colonial people between the seventeenth to eighteenth century, in particular by the planter class, to defend the institution and society they built, and claimed their right as 'freeborn' Englishmen. This piece is an attempt to explore this phenomenon by analyzing the work of Edward Long, a Jamaican planter and a historian in the eighteenth century. His well-known book: *History of Jamaica*<sup>2</sup>, published in 1774, was a comprehensive work on the governance of the colony while also a controversial one for its racist description of American black slaves.

From the seventh century, slavery became an inseparable institution of the Caribbean plantation system and the backbone of the whole colonial economy. However, for the writers of colonial history at that time, slavery was such a given that they either chose to ignore the necessity to discuss it, such as the author of *History of Barbados*, John Poyer, who paid little attention to the institution, or to merely defend its rectitude, like Bryan Edwards, who was born in Britain but lived much of his life in the colony of Jamaica. He defended the necessity of slavery and of the slave trade in his book *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, and continued to support them during his later Membership of Parliament. In fact, Edwards' work was deeply influenced by Edward Long, and Long's famous but also disputatious work: *History of Jamaica*.

Long's language of slavery rested on racial terms. As a plantation owner, Edward Long showed an openly expressed pro-slavery bias and viewed the slaves as inferior by nature. In his *History of Jamaica*, he distinguished between Africa and the 'civilized

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford English Dictionary Online, <https://0-www-oed-com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/Entry/181498?rskey=oPedDB&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>

<sup>2</sup> Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica, or, A General Survey of the Ancient and Modern State of that Island*, London: T. Lowndes, in Fleet-Street, 1774,

world'. But he also considered slavery in terms of punishment and reform: "for as the Africans are naturally thieves and villans, though slavery is the certain punishment now on their conviction, the breaking up of the slave trade might indeed after the punishment to that of death, but would not reform them."<sup>3</sup> Besides, he argued, slavery was frequently used as a penalty: "in some places, offences of all sorts, except treason, are atonable with money; but, that being deficient, the penalty is slavery. In others all crimes and offences, great and small, are punished with slavery."<sup>4</sup> Long explained that slaves in general included: those captured in war, people who were sold by their parents or husbands, native slaves sold by their owners, and people who were free born, but condemned to forfeiture of freedom. Moreover, Long claimed African people should be grateful to the mother-country for her management of West-Indian properties, because 'these Africans know not what freedom is, until they enter our colonies; and therefore can have no passion for a state, whose qualities they are ignorant of.'<sup>5</sup> Slavery thus ironically, for Long, enabled ideas of liberty. Long was a strong pro-slavery advocate and regarded enslaved Africans as subhuman, an inferior species. He believed that transporting enslaved Africans to the Caribbean could help them build discipline in their lives.

However, there was another language of slavery that existed in Long's *History of Jamaica*. When he examined the constitutional disputes in Jamaica, such as the struggles in passing revenue bills in the Assembly and the conflicts between the Assembly and Council, Long claimed that there was 'one set of persons uniting its efforts to enslave mankind; and another set to oppose such attempts and vindicate the cause of freedom.'<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Edward Long explained the conflicts between the Assembly and the governors as a defense of local liberty and rights which colonists exercised as Englishmen. As he explained later, 'all the children of his natural-born subjects, to be born in Jamaica, should ... have the same privileges, to all intents and purposes, as the free-born subjects of England.'<sup>7</sup> In fact, as a 'Creole men', Long not only appealed for the natural liberties as Englishmen, but also claimed the native whites like himself were an outstanding group: they were 'sensible, of quick apprehension, brave, good natured, affable, generous, temperate, and sober; unsuspecting, lovers of freedom'.<sup>8</sup> This sense of identity was widespread in the colonial Caribbean, and became the cornerstone from which planter class to claimed for their rights.

The usage of 'slavery' to describe the disputes between the white elite could be frequently seen in contemporary colonial documents as well, especially when people complained about the arbitrary behaviour of the governors. For example, an

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica, or, A General Survey of the Ancient and Modern State of that Island*, vol. II, London: T. Lowndes, in Fleet-Street, 1774, p. 391.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, vol II, p. 388

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 392

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, vol I, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 64

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, vol II, p. 262

inhabitant of Bermuda complained in 1689 that people were under 'great slavery' because of the Governor's avarice, which had not only destroyed trade but lost the customs in England £3000 per annum.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the Committee of Safety of New York in a report of the same year mentioned 'The deputies of counties discoursed of their grievances, the oppression and slavery imposed by the late Governor and Council.'<sup>10</sup> And when the inhabitants of the Leeward Islands levelled charges against Governor Parke in 1713, they claimed he designed to make terms for himself only, and surrender the inhabitants to slavery. In this context, slavery was described as an evil tool of 'arbitrary administration'.

With the discussions of these two languages of slavery, the one applied to Africans and the other to constitutional issues, we can find they were to some extent both simultaneously deployed and in tensions with each other. On one hand the planter class insisted on their own liberty while on the other hand they denied liberty of the enslaved people (except the glimmer of freedom glimpsed through their own slavery). From Edward Long's work we find that the inner logic of these two languages was linked to the sense of planter identity and the ideology of race at that time; but how far contemporaries considered or resolved the contradictions between them still needs more work.

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<sup>9</sup> J W Fortescue ed., *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies: Volume 13, 1689-1692*, Henry Hordesnell to the Prince of Orange, Apr 12, 1689

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, Abstract of the proceedings of the Committee of Safety of New York from 27th June to 15 August, Aug 15, 1689