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Reseña de "Three Ancient Colonies: Caribbean Themes and Variations" de Sidney W. Mintz
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It makes sense to think of the Caribbean as a region, as a series of islands whose lush tropical beauty fed a long history of colonialism and forced labor migrations. But the search for a unified account of “the Caribbean” may prove maddening, because of the ways an array of colonizing powers set in motion the very different chronologies that encompass, for each island, the unfolding processes of slavery and emancipation and the forging of bonds to a global economy. There would seem to be no need to rehearse, in this venue, the intricacies of Caribbean history and culture. Yet a revisiting and delicate probing of historical themes and variations is precisely Sidney Mintz’s project in his splendid new volume. Together with a pensive introduction and a provocative conclusion, chapters on Haiti, Jamaica and Puerto Rico accomplish many things given their relative brevity. As Mintz returns to the sites of his original research and remembers the individuals at the core of his field work, he offers methodological guidance, delivers detailed accounts of each society in question, and constructs a sweeping comparison that comes to rest, eventually, on the nature of language and, as he suggests, a mode of cultural invention that was nothing less than a “collective, social kind of uniquely human achievement” (p. 199).

Mintz’s concern, as it has been for a long and brilliant career, lies with the legacies of slavery as lived, inhabited experience. For the most part, he writes of this troubled history in measured tones, allowing the evidence to speak for itself. But occasionally, a different voice intrudes, full of disgust for certain human capacities and behaviors. With regard to racial discrimination, after sketching the racial economies that inform the treatment of offspring of planters and slaves in Haiti, Mintz reveals what he really thinks: “the genealogical obsession with who was white, who wasn’t and how much, resonates with what has happened in all of the other places in the world where people have been driven close to madness by the difference between categories on paper and the living social biology of our perennially fertile species” (p. 107). His point, that despite this “cruel nonsense” (p. 107), Haiti produced an economically powerful population of free people of color while Jamaica did not, buttresses the
book’s overarching argument about the range of social formations that gave rise to distinct racial and gender hierarchies.

The book’s deceptively simple structure becomes criss-crossed with both variations and comparisons. The lives that enslaved people carved for themselves outside of the rigors of plantation life are at the center of his account. In both Haiti and Jamaica for instance, enslaved people were allowed to grow their own food, and in most cases, to market the surplus. In this context, the possession of land and its cultivation became profound anchors of identity. Emancipation, argues Mintz, turned the slave work force into a peasantry because along the way they had become farmers. The divergences in these two societies stem from the ways the elite treated this peasantry, as a Jamaican planter class exhibited scorn and contempt for the descendants of slaves, while the Haitian elite, composed in part of wealthy people of color, directed their energies towards imposing a harsh system of exploitation. While both islands shared a “violent and degraded past” (p. 132) that Mintz argues is one of the Caribbean’s deepest unifying themes, they created substantially different societies in slavery’s aftermath. In Puerto Rico, by contrast, a relative delay in sugar’s predominance had important implications for constructions of race and power. The Hispanic Caribbean in general became a sugar-producing region much later than Jamaica or Haiti. And while Cuban planters began to grow sugar in earnest in the 19th century, Puerto Rico remained largely outside of the “plantation frenzy” (p. 212) until the 20th, when U.S. interests fostered the creation of a monoculture economy. Thus far fewer slaves arrived to Puerto Rico during the years preceding the sugar boom, and its population was more evenly divided among people of African and European ancestry. Since slavery was no longer an option in the 20th century, Puerto Rican planters created work forces out of the poor and landless regardless of color or race. Mintz argues that as a result people of all races experienced oppression during Puerto Rico’s sugar years.

One of the most interesting and subtle threads running through the book follows gender relations. A long and fascinating account of Haitian market women demonstrates the complexity of their transactions as they run and sustain the subsistence economy. Much more than marketers of produce, they act as merchants, purchasing goods in the city which they will sell to their neighbors in villages. Their independence and control over financial transactions has engendered, argues Mintz, a degree of equity and respect. Men are willing to uphold a division of labor in which women not only manage most of the income, they also move freely about the countryside, spending four or five days at a time away from home. In Puerto Rico, where men would find this kind of behavior unacceptable, the difference stems from divergent traditions with regards to the
longstanding ubiquity of subsistence farming in Haiti and its absence in Puerto Rico. Mintz seems to imply that the nature of the violence he witnessed derives from related entanglements of gender and honor. Here, it would have been nice to see a more overt assessment, as he is largely silent on questions of violence in Haiti and Jamaica.

But the book is more than a series of comparisons. Mintz works in nuance and detail, lingering on close observation of a passing remark or a flicker of thought. As he recalls a little girl’s notebook with racist caricatures and his own reaction to that, or a man with several tiny plots of land who contemplates whether the seeds of a rare treat, an apple, will yield anything, he offers a methodology to navigate the boundary between anthropology and history. In an almost novelistic distillation of the work of his life, carefully drawn portraits encourage readers to stop and think, one person at a time. Considering the ways institutions or events do or do not become part of the narratives that people tell about their lives, his attention turns to words and tones: “often it is in the timbre and volume of voice that we hear (if we are listening) how the past is summoned” (p. 17). In the end, the voice becomes a fulcrum, anchoring a closing argument about the creation of creole languages as a way to narrow and refine the use of creolization to define the Caribbean. The existence of creole languages in Haiti and Jamaica and their absence in Puerto Rico stands in the final instance as an indicator of the heterogeneity at issue. And echoing Kamau Brathwaite, who insisted on the importance of listening to the sounds of the Caribbean, Mintz takes us to the voice, as an ending and a beginning.


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This is the second edition of William Boyer’s book America’s Virgin Islands: A History of Human Rights and Wrongs, first published in 1971. The book covers the whole history of the region from Christopher Columbus to the present, but places emphasis on the American period, from 1917 onward. This second edition contains, in