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Reseña de “Three Ancient Colonies: Caribbean Themes and Variations” de Sidney W. Mintz  
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Three Ancient Colonies: Caribbean Themes and Variations
By Sidney W. Mintz

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010
257 pages; $27.95 [paper]

REVIEWER: Aarón Gamaliel Ramos, Universidad de Puerto Rico—Río Piedras

Anthropologist Sidney Mintz has been part of Caribbean studies since the early years of this field of scholarship during the middle of the twentieth century. Mintz began his academic journey with his ethnographic work in Puerto Rico with the team of researchers led by Julian Steward in 1948, followed by ethnographic work in Jamaica (1952) and in Haiti (1958). The extent of his contribution to knowledge about Caribbean societies throughout the latter half of the twentieth century has been enormous. This lifelong history of research and writing has come together in this brilliant meditation on the peoples and cultures of the Caribbean.

This book is the product of a series of conferences about the Caribbean in honor of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois that Sidney Mintz delivered at the Du Bois Institute of Harvard University in the spring of 2003. Mintz briefly reviews Du Bois bindings with his Haitian ancestors, and his knowledge of the Caribbean through reading and travel disclosing that while Du Bois “recognized the historical significance of the Antilles” (p. 4), he also acknowledges that his fascination with Africa outweighed his interest in this region. For Mintz, the significant connection between Dubois and the Caribbean lay in his intellectual concern with “the meaning of the immense scale of slavery” (p. 1). In this elegantly written work, Mintz reflects on the diverse histories of enslavement in the Caribbean, the cultural losses infringed upon the enslaved, and the creation of new and original societies through the mixing and synthesizing of their cultures.

The main arguments are laid out in the first and final chapters. In Chapter 1, “Caribbean Anthropology and History,” the author discusses the importance of history in anthropological research, drawing attention to the significance of the Caribbean region in emerging world capitalism and the rise of the modern world, and the equally important relationship between history and cultural theory for understanding peoples lives. In Chapter 5, “Creolization, Culture and Social Institutions,” the author engages the reader in a discussion of the human effort to create the hybrid cultural institutions in the context of slavery that are the foundation of Caribbean societies. In the middle chapters (2, “Jamaica,” 3, “Haiti,” and 4, “Puerto Rico”), the author compares and contrasts the three societies in which he did ethnographic work which he sees as the “testifiers” of the noticeable differences of the cultures of the Caribbean. The book also includes various photographs of the people he worked with during his fieldwork in the three settings and a list of references.

Mintz reviews the old debate about the role of history in anthropology. He argues that while there are differences between what historians and anthropologists do, there are historical processes that may be relevant to the present. For Mintz, it is the historical ingredient in anthropological research that sheds light on the sociological features of the different Caribbean societies and in the conceptions that people have about themselves (p. 22). He proposes that the variations in the local settings
in Jamaica, Haiti, and Puerto Rico can be traced to two pivotal ingredients of Caribbean economic history: slavery as the source of labor and the plantation as the instrument of production (p. 27). The different histories of slavery in British, French, and Spanish colonialism provide the keys for understanding the distinctive features of these three Caribbean societies.

The chapters on Jamaica, Haiti, and Puerto Rico recreate his own fieldwork in the region, validating his assertion that anthropological fieldworkers never forget the people they work with in the field (p. xiii). For the author, the life of Tom and Leah Belnavis in Jamaica reveals the harshness of the Jamaica plantation, since “nowhere was the local impact of the rise of the sugar economy greater than in the island of Jamaica” (p. 45). In his description of the emergence of church-led peasant villages after emancipation in this ancient British colony, Mintz sees the impact of the economic dynamics of slave society, the continuity of the social hierarchies founded on race, and the workings of a fabric of social relations created by a Caribbean peasantry that “quite unlike other peasants elsewhere . . . first learned to be peasants while still enslaved” (p. 74).

In Haiti, he sought to understand the importance of the country’s popular market system as a national institution within the framework of Haiti’s particular trajectory in Caribbean history. In his reflection on the history of Haiti, Mintz considers the marks left by French colonial slavery, with the complex structure of social differentiation left by the plantation, upon the new black peasant republic. He also compares and contrasts the Jamaican and Haitian peasantries, highlighting the problems faced by Haitian cultivators since the beginning of the new black republic, as they produced for their own subsistence and for the creation of surplus for exchanging goods. Through the work of Nana as a market woman in a regional marketplace in the north of Haiti, the author reflects on the role of women in Haitian economic life in Haiti and how it translates into gender relations and the economics of family life. Mintz believes that, contrary to women in markets elsewhere in the Caribbean, the Haitian market women resemble those in the countries of West Africa, suggesting that “such transoceanic similarities argue for a common cultural heritage” (p. 131).

Puerto Rico was the first Caribbean society Minz visited as a young anthropologist, the one that the author knows best, and where the author became a Caribbeanist. The island is also of interest for the author because of its “deviant history” when compared to the sugar islands of the Caribbean. Mintz explores the peculiar path followed by Puerto Rico in Caribbean history that led to the absence of a plantation system during Spanish rule, and to a population consisting of a majority of Europeans, leading to race demography with predominantly European descendants and freed people of color: “The staggering majorities of people from African origins and phenotype, typical of Jamaica and Saint Domingue, never developed in the Puerto Rican case” (p. 147). Mintz argues that this, in turn, led to particular forms of race relations typical of Caribbean Hispanic countries, and in contrast with the pattern of race relations in the colonies managed by North European powers. Mintz also argues that Puerto Rico’s history is out of the ordinary because of the invasion and occupation by the United States very late in Caribbean colonial history. U.S. domination changed rural life in the island by effacing the small family-owned estates that used resident labor, and introducing a plantation system that converted peasants into proletarians.

For Mintz, the lives of Taso Zayas and Elí Villaronga in Barrio Jauca, Puerto
Rico, reveal the continuities and discontinuities between Spanish and United States colonialisms, as well as the particularities of Puerto Rico’s agrarian history. (He had already portrayed these two in one of his most salient works, *Worker in the Cane*. ) Stressing the distance between Puerto Rico’s agrarian history with respect to the British historical path, Mintz suggests that, “If peasants and proletarians could be said to mark the two poles of Caribbean rural life, then [Jamaican] Tom Belnavis stood at one and Taso Zayas at the other” (p. 163). In his thoughts about his ethnographic work in Puerto Rico, the author also underscores the particularities of gender relations in Puerto Rico, the contrasting conceptions about gender, and the cultural norms for dealing with violence that he discovered while doing research in Puerto Rico during the late forties.

However, it is in race and race relations where the author sees the most dramatic contrasts between Puerto Rico and Jamaica and Haiti, and where he tests his theses on creolization. Mintz argues that a main factor explaining the differences between Puerto Rico and the other two societies is in the demographics of race. For Mintz, a key to understanding Puerto Rico lies in the failure of Spain to develop a slave plantation system of the sort that became prevalent in the British and French Caribbean colonies during the period 1650–1800. In contrast with Jamaica and Haiti, the colonial economy of Puerto Rico under Spain was not seated upon the classical plantation economy. Taken together with a majority of people being of European descent, “Puerto Rico developed a large, free, physically mixed, landless population” paving the way for its unique and warmer social relations with respect to the other two societies, “all of which have made Puerto Rican race relations less toxic.” Although Mintz considers that there is a broader acceptance of color differences in Puerto Rico, he concedes that it has done nothing for the economic and political equality of all people of color” (p. 181).

One of the most engaging meditations is to be found in the last chapter on creolization, culture, and social institutions. In explaining his usage of the term creolization, the author discusses the various meanings of the term “creole” in Caribbean history, from its older denotation as something European being transformed by the New World, to the reference to Europeans and Africans being born in it, its use with respect to the original languages of Caribbean peoples or the more contemporary idea of mixing or blending. As opposed to broader meanings of “creole,” Mintz defines creolization as a creative cultural synthesis taking place in the New World, “by which new social institutions, furnished with reordered cultural content, were forged to provide a basis for continuing cultural growth” (p. 190).

The author believes the slaves in the New World tropical plantations colonies mainly underwent this synthesis. Creolization, as the creation of a new culture from the ruins of slavery, took place in colonies like Jamaica and Haiti, but not in Puerto Rico, since the two ingredients fostering that process—slavery and the plantation form of production—were weak phenomena in this Spanish colony. To support his argument, Mintz draws attention to the relationship between language and social relations. The author believes that the nonappearance of Creole languages in the societies of the Hispanic Caribbean is a reflection of a social homogeneity in the Spanish colonies contexts that was not present in the social systems of the other colonial powers (p. 193). For Mintz, a key to understanding Puerto Rico lies in the failure of Spain to develop a slave plantation system of the sort that became prevalent in the in the British and French Caribbean colonies during the period 1650–1800. He argues that this historical fact “says something about the social communities in the
Hispanic Caribbean into which slaves entered and within which their children grew up (hence something, too, about the demography of these places)” (p. 194).

While Mintz describes his book as “a meditation, a personal look back—not weighty scholarship” (p. 24), social scientists, and scholars of Caribbean studies in particular, will enjoy his reflections on Caribbean anthropology, on the impact of slavery on the culture of the people of the Caribbean, and his inner thoughts and anecdotes of his life as an ethnographer in Jamaica, Haiti, and Puerto Rico. His profound knowledge of the Caribbean and his deep familiarity with the three distinct societies borne out of French, British, and Spanish-United States colonialism belie his modest intentions.

Land Reform in Puerto Rico; Modernizing the Colonial State, 1941–1969
Ismael García-Colón
163 pp; $69.95 [cloth]

REVIEWER: Emilio Pantojas-García, Universidad de Puerto Rico—Río Piedras

The objective of this book is to examine “how the U.S. colonial state in Puerto Rico transformed the lives of its landless subjects by establishing resettlements from the 1940s through the 1960s” (pp. 2–3). Moreover, García-Colón wants to go beyond previous studies of populism and land reform to understand resistance and accommodation of the subaltern classes (agregadas/os and parceleras/os) to state programs (p. 3). The author uses ethnography and history to describe and explain the process by which the colonial state in Puerto Rico endeavored to transform landless peasants into modern workers using agrarian reform to incorporate them into the larger project of modernization and industrialization. He further proposes to examine this transformation from rural subject to urban, modern citizens using the Gramscian notion of hegemony. In doing this, García-Colón defines the relation between the state and landless peasants as an open process of negotiation of space and identity: “space is the social arena where rulers and subalterns struggle to impose their meanings upon each other” (p. 5). To achieve these objectives, he focuses on a part of the agrarian reform program known as the parcelas program (inspired by the United States homestead program), and the experience of a community of parceleros where he grew up; parcelas Gándara in Cidra.

This is a readable book about a likeable small question research issue: how people use state policies to transform their lives in ways unanticipated by both, the people and the state agents. Although the title gives the impression that the book is about the state and land reform in Puerto Rico, the book reads more like an intelligent life story that politicizes personal experience. A more suitable title would have been, From Agregados to Parceleros: Land Reform and the Transformation of Landless Peasants in Puerto Rico.

In analyzing the political significance of the Agregado Resettlement Program (ch. 4), the author discusses the dialectics of power and resistance and the agency of subaltern classes, aiming to go beyond past studies. However, in attempting to connect the story of parceleras/os to the larger structural context, the author slips repeatedly into an instrumentalist view. He asserts that in spite of resistance to the Popular