The Work of Empire
Current Directions in Transnational Labour History

Thierry Drappeau

Explore this journal

Cite this note

The Work of Empire: Current Directions in Transnational Labour History

Thierry Drapeau

Abigail L. Swingen, *Competing Visions of Empire: Labor, Slavery, and the Origins of the British Atlantic Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015)

John Donoghue and Evelyn P. Jennings, eds., *Building the Atlantic Empires: Unfree Labor and Imperial States in the Political Economy of Capitalism, ca. 1500–1914* (Leiden: Brill, 2015)

Daniel E. Bender and Jana K. Lipman, eds., *Making the Empire Work: Labor and United States Imperialism* (New York: New York University Press, 2015)

HISTORICAL STUDIES ON THE NEXUS between slavery and capitalism have proliferated over the past few years, to a point that it is now considered a core issue in the emerging field of the so-called "new history of capitalism."[1] Following, though not always acknowledging, the well-trodden footsteps of pioneering scholars of African descent, this growing body of scholarship has considerably unsettled the stagist narrative of the origin of capitalism by illuminating at ground level the complicated and situational meaning of market freedom for

1. Joshua D. Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2012); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2013); Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic, 2014); Martin Ruef, *Between Slavery and Capitalism: The Legacy of Emancipation in the American South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Calvin Schermerhorn, *The Business of Slavery and the Rise of American Capitalism, 1815–1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, eds., *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). For a discussion of slavery's place in the new history of capitalism, see Sven Beckert et al., "Interchange: The History of Capitalism," *Journal of American History* 101, 2 (2014): 503–536.

workers, free and unfree.[2] Moreover, the transnational framework of analysis within which this corpus is operating has revealed – or aimed to reveal – a geography of the rise of capitalism more broad than the largely Eurocentric, if not Anglocentric, debates within the Marxian canon since the 1950s.[3]

Despite their differences, the three books surveyed here continue this tradition of scholarship, but move it forward by bringing the historical study of the interplay between unfree labour and capitalism to bear on the history of colonial empires. The three studies are joined by the ambition of the authors to untie the study of empires from diplomatic affairs and interstate politics and re-explore it instead through the lens of labour history. In *Competing Visions of Empire: Labor, Slavery, and the Origins of the British Atlantic Empire*, Abigail Swingen examines how transatlantic ideological debates on population and labour management among different sections of the ruling class in England and her Caribbean colonies during the second half of the 17th century contributed to generate competing, yet overlapping, visions of an empire foundationally based on the mobilization and exploitation of unfree labour. In *Building the Atlantic Empires: Unfree Labor and Imperial States in the Political Economy of Capitalism, ca. 1500–1914*, editors John Donoghue and Evelyn Jennings make a strong case that state mobilization and employment of unfree labour for imperial work from the 16th century onward proved integral to the rise of capitalism in the Atlantic world. Lastly, in *Making the Empire Work: Labor and United States Imperialism*, editors Daniel Bender and Jana Lipman reframe US labour history as an imperial story to illuminate how the American capitalist economy, from Reconstruction onward, has developed via the integrating of a wide spectrum of free and unfree labour regimes, both domestically and abroad. Contrasting these three books substantiates the value of the imperial analytic for labour history and adds new insights to the current transnational and even global turn in the field.[4]

2. Eric Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944). See also W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935; New York: The Free Press, 1992); C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938; New York: Vintage Books, 1989); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1972).

3. For instance, see T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Paul Sweezy et al., eds., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1978); Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2002); Spencer Dimmock, *The Origin of Capitalism in England, 1400–1600* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

4. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000); Jan Lucassen, ed., *Global Labour History: A State of the Art* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008); Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global Labour History*, vol. 1, Studies in Global Social History (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Leon Fink, ed., *Workers across the Americas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

The study of the rise of the English Atlantic empire and the study of the rise of African slavery in England's Caribbean colonies have generally been told as two separate stories. In the former, the prevailing mercantilist interpretation has led historians, such as David Armitage and Jack P. Greene, among many others, to emphasize the commercial, religious, and military underpinnings of England's first imperial expansion in the 17th-century Atlantic world, hence leaving the labour question out of the narrative.[5] In the latter, historians, such as Hilary Beckles, David Brion Davis, and Theodore Allen, have respectively focused on the economic, cultural, and political factors that led to the rise of African slavery in the Caribbean colonies, hence leaving the imperial question out of the narrative.[6] Swingen's *Competing Visions of Empire* seeks to bridge this gap by integrating English imperial history with the history of African slavery to illuminate how unfree labour in general, and Black racial slavery in particular, was from the outset central to England's imperial expansion in the Atlantic world. In doing so, she reframes the rise of African slavery and the transatlantic slave trade in the English Atlantic as an imperial-state story, in which the metropole was deeply implicated, generating long-lasting confrontations with the colonial constituencies about the very purpose of empire. By the same token, Swingen also reframes the rise of the early modern English empire as being inextricably connected to and shaped by competing, yet overlapping, imperial ideals of an Atlantic plantation system supplied with unfree workers, first indentured servants and then enslaved Africans. Through this integrative framework, she sets out to trace the ideological origins of the English empire as they were reflected in the transatlantic debates over unfree labour.

As early as the colonization of Ireland in 1594 and the Jamestown settlement in Chesapeake Bay in 1607, merchants and colonial promoters in England articulated colonial endeavours as the remedy to a demographic problem at home. Land enclosures and other expropriative practices in rural areas had set in motion a mass of dispossessed and unemployed peasants who squatted on waste land or migrated to urban centres and port cities in search of work, where they created a surplus population causing a threat to social stability. To deal with and solve this problem, rulers and colonial merchants promoted the transatlantic migration of the poor as indentured servants to England's North American mainland settlements. In the following decades, as voluntary servitude decreased significantly, criminals, vagrants, and even potential offenders

---

5. David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Jack P. Greene, *Creating the British Atlantic: Essays on Transportation, Adaptation, and Continuity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013).

6. Hilary McD. Beckles, *White Servitude and Black Slavery in Barbados, 1627–1715*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race, vol. 2: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (London: Verso, 1997).

were shipped as convict workers across the Atlantic to supply plantation colonies with a servile labor force. This set an important precedent: the idea that people could be coerced to build England's Atlantic empire.

When Cromwell launched his Western Design in 1655 – an imperial military offensive against Spanish possessions in the Caribbean – many of the merchants who had made their fortune previously in the white servant trade held important positions within the state apparatus, from where they could not only promote but expand their hold on the growing transatlantic market in servile labour. "It was this ideal of conquering new colonies and creating new markets for unfree labor that the Western Design sought to promote."[7] Thus, the Western Design was not purely a military enterprise fueled by interstate rivalry, but a project of territorial acquisition necessary to expand an Atlantic empire with plantation unfree labour as its cornerstone. Envisioned and executed from the metropolis, this Atlantic imperium was thought to increase England's national wealth by putting English colonies under stricter control of the Protectorate's commercial laws and political authority, which provoked dissent in the colonies. In Barbados, planters and colonial merchants had relied on Dutch and other foreign creditors and merchants for capital investment in their plantations and to export the island's products, such as cotton, indigo, and sugar. More importantly, they had relied on foreign traders in Africans to make the transition from white servant labour to Black enslaved labour. As it sought to bring them into line for the benefit of the empire, the Western Design jeopardized their business in the Caribbean. The vision of the English empire developed on the colonial side of the Atlantic was not based on monopoly but on free trade, especially free trade in Africans as a solution to the growing problem of white depopulation.

From the 1660s onward, not only had poor English men and women lost interest in trying their luck voluntarily in the colonies, but government officials and metropolitan merchants had grown increasingly reticent about draining England of its population. Moreover, the dispossessed and mobile poor were no longer seen as a threat to the social order but as "an economic resource to be better managed and exploited" in the metropolis.[8] In this context, combined with the fact that sending and compelling criminals to work on Caribbean plantations had demographic and legal limits, it was crucial that London took charge of the transatlantic slave trade, as mobilizing and exploiting plantation unfree labour had been a direct concern of the imperial state since its inception. The creation of royal charted companies to manage the slave trade – from the Royal African Company of 1668 to the Company of the South Sea of 1711 – was central to an Atlantic empire built on unfree labour, and "served as the

---

7. Abigail L. Swingen, *Competing Visions of Empire: Labor, Slavery, and the Origins of the British Atlantic Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 40.

8. Swingen, *Competing Visions of Empire*, 28.

commercial arm of the royal prerogative in the colonies."[9] But royal monopoly over the supply of enslaved Africans to the English islands caused persisting resentment in the colonies, as planters had to not only accept higher prices for buying slaves, but also had to deal with an intermittent supply in the context of a booming labour demand. As such, to the extent that it began to eliminate a key component of the London-based imperial agenda, the opening of the transatlantic slave trade to separate merchants in 1688 represented a victory for colonial planters' vision of empire. For the African, however, it was a crushing defeat.

Competing Visions of Empire certainly complicates our understanding of the transition to Black racial slavery in the British Atlantic empire by illuminating the equal, if not greater, part that metropolitan rulers and merchants played in it along with their colonial counterparts. What the imperial framework brings to the fore is that it is impossible to separate slave labour demand concerns in the Caribbean islands from political-economic and population-management concerns in the metropolis, thus challenging the artificial separation between core and periphery. One of the book's greatest achievements is to show the persistent intricacies of merchant commercial and political ties with nonmerchant political forces in the development of unfree labour regimes in the British Atlantic empire, thus joining other important works of the kind by Robert Brenner, Russell Menard, and Larry Dale Gragg. While beautifully crafted and argued, Swingen's contribution is not without imperfections. Although her account is meant to be a political-intellectual history of unfree labour deployment and mobilization, it is unfortunate that the voice of those primarily implicated in this story – the workers – was not included at all in the imperial debates that Swingen examines. Readers of Christopher Hill, E. P. Thompson, or Peter Linebaugh will be dismayed by the indifference she displays towards people's resistance to the competing visions of empire that concerned them in the first place. These historians and many others have seen class conflict as a major driving factor in the rise of English imperialism in the 17th century. This is not to say categorically that this perspective is more valuable than the one privileged by Swingen. Rather, to make her argument more robust, she needs to engage, not sidestep, the historical scholarship that belies yet complements her thesis. For what she narrates is, indeed, a tragic human story, and yet those to whom the tragedy befell have been left out.

One finds a different take on imperial labour history in *Building the Atlantic Empires*. Editors Donoghue and Jennings have assembled seven case studies that examine the interrelationship between the rise of capitalism, European imperialism across the Atlantic basin, and state mobilization of unfree labour between the 16th and early 20th centuries. They too seek to unsettle the metropolitan core/colonial periphery dynamic by foregrounding the spatially-stretched imperial state as an agent of capitalist development based on various

---

9. Swingen, *Competing Visions of Empire*, 58.

modalities of unfree labour, but from a different perspective than Swingen's *Competing Visions of Empire.* Away from transatlantic intellectual history concerned with unfree labour management, this collection seeks "to situate labor history within the history of European political economies of empire" in order "to illuminate how the expansion of global capitalism and state-driven, Atlantic empire-building unfolded as interconnected processes over the early modern (ca. 1500–1800) and modern eras."[10]

The book is divided into an extensive and theoretically based introduction from Donoghue and Jennings, followed by seven case studies covering all major Atlantic empires, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the English, and the French. More than simply informing the reader of the book's purpose and content, Donoghue and Jennings' introductory chapter outlines a theoretical framework that aims "to fuse imperial histories of the state with those of labor and capital."[11] Critically integrating and building from the approaches and methods of world-systems theory, Atlantic history, global labour history, and the new history of capitalism, they propose to ground the study of imperial labour history in the Atlantic world into what they call "constructive labour," that is, "the work necessary to establish and defend colonies, and build imperial infrastructure."[12] This approach is meant to shift the focus from the more conventional standpoint of "productive labor," when "the work results in a product that has value in a market," to a more extensive set of tasks in the public sector, including "extracting state-owned resources, building and sustaining settlements, constructing imperial infrastructure (ships, roads, forts, prisons, warehouses, governors' mansions), transporting trade goods, and defending those settlements on land and at sea."[13] From this vantage point, *Building the Atlantic Empires* aims to develop two lines of argument. First, the capitalist production of vendible commodities on markets was not the only factor driving the transformation of labour into a commodity – the work necessary to construct and reproduce empires was too, although here the commodification of constructive labour did not result from market but from interstate competition and colonial defence imperatives. Second, and correlatively, this type of work, or what they also call "the reproductive labor of empire," shaped the relations of empire-building workers with imperial states and ideologies of freedom, legitimacy, and citizenship in ways different than in studies focused on labour relations in the private sector alone.[14]

10. John Donoghue and Evelyn P. Jennings, "Introduction," in John Donoghue and Evelyn P. Jennings, eds., *Building the Atlantic Empires: Unfree Labor and Imperial States in the Political Economy of Capitalism, ca. 1500–1914*, (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 5.

11. Donoghue and Jennings, Introduction, *Building the Atlantic Empires*, 5.

12. Donoghue and Jennings, Introduction, *Building the Atlantic Empires*, 1.

13. Donoghue and Jennings, Introduction, *Building the Atlantic Empires*, 2.

14. Donoghue and Jennings, Introduction, *Building the Atlantic Empires*, 2.

Starting with Spain, Evelyn Jennings contends that the developmental trajectory of the Spanish American empire between the 16th and 19th centuries was distinctive from its other Atlantic counterparts. To begin with, Spain already had legal experience with enslavement as a mode of labour coercion on the Iberian Peninsula prior to the colonial conquests in the Americas, including slavery, labour tribute, and penal servitude. Spanish colonialists exported and adapted these forms of unfree labour to the American colonies after 1492. Although shifting over time, a state-run regime of labour tribute – the *encomienda* – was imposed on Spain's first conquered American subjects, the Amerindians, who were forced to mine precious metals throughout the Spanish Main. Additionally, the growth of a lucrative plantation and mining economy in the context of a persistent cycle of war in the Americas made the construction of land-based defences and naval infrastructure an imperial imperative. Madrid first mobilized its galley prisoners from the Mediterranean fleets to undertake the heavy work of constructive and defensive labour, joined later by the vagrants, beggars, and gypsies of its American colonies, all turned into convict workers through the manipulation of the criminal justice system. With the abolition of Mediterranean galley work in the mid-18th century, enslaved Africans, then becoming a major servile workforce throughout the Atlantic world, were recruited by Madrid as state slaves, toiling alongside free wage earners in a complex interplay of free and unfree labour regimes. Thanks to a paternalistic tradition of mutual obligation underpinning the slave-master relationship, no major servile rebellions occurred in the Spanish empire, at least not until the 19th century, as coerced and enslaved workers in the colonies were considered subjects of the crown imbued with rights to sustenance, humane treatment, and access (though limited in fact) to royal justice.

In colonial Florida, as James Coltrain examines in his chapter, this complex legal relation of Madrid toward its unfree colonial subjects mobilized for fortification work enabled Indigenous peons, enslaved Africans, and free Blacks to carve out a space of autonomy for themselves and be part of the colonial community. This Spanish singularity resulted from a serious contradiction: putting the protection of the empire's boundaries in the hands of those coerced to build it. To prevent rebellion, local Spanish officials continually compromised imperial expectations to expand the community opportunities available to bond and racialized workers. For instance, they introduced race- and ethnic-blind pay scale systems for skilled bond manual workers, such as stonecutters, masons, and lime burners, by which they could rise somewhat above their racial status, sometimes even supplanting their Spanish social betters in professional positions. For enslaved Africans, the lowest of the low, Spanish officials sought to subvert order by making them full members of the Catholic Church and by allowing them to participate in the justice system and to testify in court, although not always on comparatively equal terms. Following Jennings' suggestion in her essay, Coltrain hypothesizes that it may be not coincidental that waves of slave unrest began to increase dramatically

precisely after Madrid conceded free trade in Africans to colonial planters in 1789, allowing the latter to break community ties among Black slaves and fully exert property rights in their bodies as capital.

Turning to the Dutch empire, Pepijn Brandon and Karwan Fatah-Black argue that state intervention was central to Dutch capitalist expansion in the early modern Atlantic world onward, thus challenging the prevailing non-imperial, commercial thesis in the historical scholarship on Dutch imperialism. The pitfall of that thesis, according to the two authors, derives from the wrong perception that, since the state initially outsourced both warfare and colonial administration to the East India Company and West India Company, Dutch imperialism was not a territorial but strictly commercial phenomenon. But as Brandon and Fatah-Black illustrate convincingly, "both the typical form of organization of these companies and the commercio-political networks of their directors in practice tied them firmly to the state."[15] These interlocking positions created "a complex form of cross-representation, that allowed especially the dominant merchant families of the Dutch Republic a tight grip on the commercially important naval affairs."[16] Having conquered state power, the Dutch capitalist class devised their *Groot Desseyn* (Grand Design), a master plan elaborated in 1623 to seize, albeit without full success, the Portuguese and Spanish colonial possessions in the Atlantic, in particular slave fortresses in Africa and sugar plantations in Brazil. The Grand Design required "a large scale mobilization of forces," especially "military men from all over Western Europe."[17] Although we could not learn much about them in a chapter-length essay, especially about the social-economic context of their mobilization, their labour was of "prime importance" for "the building of a productive empire based on enslaved African labor."[18] Although this chapter marshals some support for the editors' productive-constructive binary thesis, the analytical emphasis is less on constructive labour per se than on the brokerage form of the Dutch commercial expansion that impacted labour. Consequently, what was inherently capitalistic about the building of the *Groot Desseyn* is not directly addressed and explained beyond the fact that it paved the way for enslaved productive labour.

Turning to England, John Donoghue illustrates through a labour history approach that the creation of an English Atlantic empire during the English Revolution (1640–1660) was linked to a radical transformation in the form of state sovereignty, which translated into the dominion over the bodies and labour power of England's own subjects. While colonial transportation

---

15. Pepijn Brandon and Karwan Fatah-Black, "'For the Reputation and Respectability of the State': Trade, the Imperial State, Unfree Labor, and Empire in the Dutch Atlantic," in Donoghue and Jennings, eds., *Building the Atlantic Empires*, 86.

16. Brandon and Fatah-Black, "'For the Reputation and Respectability of the State,'" 89.

17. Brandon and Fatah-Black, "'For the Reputation and Respectability of the State,'" 91.

18. Brandon and Fatah-Black, "'For the Reputation and Respectability of the State,'" 98, 105.

existed prior to the making of the English imperial state, the ruling classes of England evoked the moral reformation principles that undergirded the English Revolution to legitimize the expulsion of vagrants and political resisters (domestically as well as in Scotland and Ireland), forcing them into indentured servitude in the Caribbean colonies. The English state was therefore "the first agent in the chattelization of the transported; the state sold each transported person to a merchant contractor; the contractor in turn, via the shop master they employed to trade in the colonies, sold the person at a profit to a colonial planter, who could then re-sell the servant at their discretion."[19] State-driven colonial transportation mobilized productive unfree labour on plantations, which also helped lay the foundations for Black racial slavery. Concomitantly, the English state altered the modalities pertaining to military conscription, which had been traditionally reserved for cases of domestic insurrection or foreign invasion, but not for imperial conquest. With the imperial turn of the English Revolution – first played out in Ireland, then at sea against the United Provinces over the control of trade routes and colonies, and finally in the Caribbean through Cromwell's Western Design against the rival Catholic Spain – forced service in the army and the navy was expanded for constructive labour necessary for empire-building – a shocking novelty. The state's claim to dominion over the bodies of its subjects sparked sustained popular resistance at home and within the land and naval troops, for it was "inconsistent with the principles of freedom and liberty," as mutinous sailors claimed at Portsmouth in October 1654.[20] They feared that conscription would result into outright bondage on colonial plantations, a scenario that materialized in Jamaica in 1655 – the Western Design's consolation prize – where English officers compelled their pressed soldiers to perform agricultural work, highlighting the extent to which the boundary between productive and constructive labour was blurry and situational, both types being in fact internally related.

Remaining in the English Atlantic world, Anna Suranyi further develops the theme of 17th-century colonial transportation. She argues that the shipping of servants into indentured servitude in the colonies was not an exceptional case but a systemic practice. From the outset of colonization, the Atlantic colonies held by England were seen by state officials as a dumping ground for undesirable populations, including vagrants, poor, and rebels, where they could be morally uplifted and productively allocated. But while moral imperatives were initially determinant in the government's support of colonial transportation of servants, economic gains soon rose as the prime motive underpinning it. Capitalist entrepreneurs, colonists, and servant trade contractors held top positions within the English state apparatus, where they "exercised great

---

19. John Donoghue, "The Unfree Origins of English Empire-Building in the Seventeenth Century Atlantic," in Donoghue and Jennings, eds., *Building the Atlantic Empires*, 122.

20. Donoghue, "The Unfree Origins of English Empire-Building in the Seventeenth Century Atlantic," 128.

governmental power" and "retained influence through the governments of Charles I, the Interregnum and into the Restoration."[21] The long-lasting grip of such capitalist entrepreneurs on the state from within explains, according to Suranyi, not only the persistence of the servant trade even in context of domestic population decline, but also the inertia of state to eradicate kidnapping and other inequitable indenture practices vis-à-vis servants, including children and Irish.

The final chapter on the French Atlantic empire by Elizabeth Heath offers a case study of the shifting citizenship status of African-descended workers in post-abolition Guadeloupe. For Heath, the deterioration of the French civic status of former slaves hinged directly on shifts in the global capitalist economy and the international labour market, and must therefore be understood within that wider context. As she argues, "French colonial policy in Guadeloupe was driven by two conflicting goals: a republican ideal of political and social assimilation for Guadeloupean citizens of color; and the economic advancement of a labor-hungry colonial sugar industry."[22] Sugar producers on the island and state officials in the metropolis negotiated these two competing demands in three successive stages. Firstly, following the 1848 emancipation proclamation in Paris, Guadeloupean planters attempted to juridically undermine the enjoyment of political rights by their former slaves to continue to force them into plantation labour – a reactionary offensive consolidated by the despotic regime of the Second Empire (1852–1870). Secondly, starting before but overlapping with the establishment of the Third Republic (1870–1940), the growth of an international market of indentured labourers from West Africa and mostly India provided a new opportunity for sugar producers to substitute their former slaves with another racialized and coerced plantation workforce bound to serve between five- and ten-year contracts in the sugar industry. The recruitment of foreign labour allowed state officials in Paris to reconcile the republican ideals of citizenship with economic development in Guadeloupe by incorporating Black Guadeloupeans into the French civic nation while simultaneously transferring to imported indentured labourers the negative racial stereotypes once applied to their predecessors. Thirdly, the crisis of the international sugar market in the 1890s and early 1900s, combined with Britain's ban on importing indentured Indians into the French Antilles in 1888, led to a new shift toward privileging economic development over republican ideals. Forced to look for an internal solution for supplying their fields with cheap labour, sugar producers petitioned Paris to bring in economic and social

21. Anna Suranyi, "Indenture, Transportation, and Spiriting: Seventeenth Century English Penal Policy and 'Surperfluous' Populations," in Donoghue and Jennings, eds., *Building the Atlantic Empires*, 139–140.

22. Elizabeth Heath, "Citizens of the Empire? Indentured Labor, Global Capitalism and the Limits of French Republicanism in Colonial Guadeloupe," in Donoghue and Jennings, eds., *Building the Atlantic Empires*, 161.

reforms that deprived Black Guadeloupeans of any social assistance as well as the right to unionize and engage in collective action, thus compelling them back on plantations, or face hunger and imprisonment. In doing so, the Third Republic created in Guadeloupe "a new set of marginally-free laborers from its own citizenry."[23]

The effort that Donoghue and Jennings have put together in editing *Building the Atlantic Empires* offers an illuminating view of imperial labour histories in the Atlantic-world economy of the early modern and modern eras. As they point out in their conclusion, one of the collection's greatest achievements has been to move labour history beyond the conventional standpoint of private, employer-employee or master-servant/slave relationships to lay bare how imperial states, both in their own right and under the pressure of capitalist entrepreneurs, were also instrumental in mobilizing and commodifying people's labour in unfree work regimes across the Atlantic world. I agree with the two editors that this may constitute a new methodological departure in labour history, completing studies focused on work relations in the private economy.

I have some reservations however with regards to their theoretical framework, which distinguishes constructive labour in the public sector from productive labour in the private sector. Space limitations prevent a full engagement with the theoretical disputes one could take up here, but suffice to say that in consigning productive labour to the production of material vendible commodities only, Jennings and Donoghue obscure more than clarify how constructive labour could, too, form part of productive labour in the Marxian sense. "The concept of productive worker," Marx wrote, "implies not merely a relation between the activity of work and its useful effect, between the worker and the product of his work, but also a specifically social relation of production, a relation with a historical origin which stamps the worker as capital's direct means of valorization."[24] It is obvious, then as now, that state-built fortifications, ports, roads, settlements, and so on, are not bought and sold on the market as typical commodities and that, at this level of analysis, they do not create surplus-value. Yet, at a broader level of analysis, that is, at the level of the social relations of production, the so-called constructive labour that building imperial infrastructures entailed from the early modern era onward was nonetheless inscribed in an emerging capitalist market structure that shaped the social organization and the time socially necessary for their realization and maintenance, thus stamping constructive workers as capital's direct means of valorization, as productive workers. But to examine this specifically capitalist feature of constructive labour would have required entering into and investigating changes in the labour process of imperial work, such as division of labour, tool ownership, labour-saving technology, work intensity, and so on,

23. Heath, "Citizens of the Empire?" 179.

24. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 644.

which *Building the Atlantic Empires* unfortunately resists doing. This is an important shortcoming in my view, for it limits the story to the sphere of state-led commodification of unfree labour, thus side-lining the equally crucial part where constructive labour – which, indeed, was common to all imperial epochs, from the Roman to the current American hegemonic period – was transformed qualitatively into value-producing labour.

The third book reviewed here explores the interplays between labour and imperialism in the US context. Following the lead of early political scientists like William Appleman Williams and others, Bender and Lipman's *Making the Empire Work* frames the United States as an imperial polity, although one that developed not during the territorially-acquisitive Spanish-American War of 1898, as it has been commonly held by scholars, but thirty years earlier with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1865 that freed enslaved African Americans and thus ended the civil war. As the two editors point out in their introductory chapter, the abolition of slavery marked a "seismic shift" in US labour relations, forcing former Southern slave-holders, as well as Northern industrialists and financiers who had profited enormously from the enslavement of Black workers, to reimagine ways of mobilizing and compelling former slaves to return and work in the fields as free men and women.[25] Such a challenge immediately spurred new questions about the necessity of importing migrant workers on the mainland as much as exploiting cheap labour abroad through corporate control or outright territorial acquisition. Thus, labour is and has always been central to United States imperialism, and centring the experiences of those who have built, formed, and maintained as much as resisted the US empire domestically and overseas expands our view of the so-called "American" working class to include new workers and workplaces located way beyond US borders. What this book brings to the fore is that the American working class was also an imperial phenomenon, which nation-centric approaches have occulted.

Unlike the two other books reviewed above, *Making the Empire Work* engages with and builds on the literature on imperialism, a welcomed distinction. This body of scholarship has distinguished between "formal" and "informal" empire whereby the former type means direct, state-led political and military control while the latter means private, corporate, and cultural power. But as Bender and Lipman argue, "that artificial binary obscures the nature of working-class experience as well as the braided deployment of state, military, and corporate power and sovereignty" because "for workers this distinction … did not always reflect the threat of state violence or the potential for

---

25. Daniel E. Bender and Jana K. Lipman, "Introduction. Through the Looking Glass: U.S. Empire through the Lens of Labor History," in Daniel E. Bender and Jana K. Lipman, eds., *Making the Empire Work: Labor and United States Imperialism*, (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 10.

worker control."[26] Imperialism as labour history, therefore, requires transforming how one sees empire, namely, as "a project of labor mobilization, coercive management, working-class politics, and a multifaceted military workforce."[27] Thus, empire needs to be defined both "by its geographic boundaries *and* by its labor systems."[28] From this standpoint, the US empire re-emerges as an uneven, spatially-stretched and -differentiated system "that disciplined labor, structured new conditions of work, and linked cultural formations, notably race, to the experience of work."[29] Additionally, this standpoint foregrounds the diversity of labour relations that the US empire undergirds in order to be made and maintained on a daily basis. As the two other books, *Making the Empire Work* claims the centrality of military and coerced or unfree agricultural labour for the US imperial project, but pushes the analysis further by shedding light on affective labour, that is, domestic personal care and sexual work, thus providing a fuller panorama of the US empire's working-class history.

The collection comprises thirteen chapters, which can be covered only selectively in the space provided here. They are organized in four parts. Concerned with the theme of solidarity and resistance, the first part develops a nuanced account of affinity ties amongst US empire builders, illustrating that class solidarity is never fixed and reliable, but always shifting and ambiguous. Julie Green demonstrates this aspect in her essay. Building on David Roediger's concept of "wage of whiteness" – the set of psychological benefits that white workers received by aligning with the ruling class thus undercutting interracial working-class solidarity – she proposes the idea of "wage of empire" to broaden the interpretive application to flows and dynamics of class formation that stretch beyond the continental limits of the United States. The Native wars of the postbellum era over the acquisition of Indigenous lands, Green maintains, provided the tactical and operational blueprint for military-led overseas expansion in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawai'i, and the Philippines in 1898, and elsewhere afterwards. Common soldiers had to constantly make sense of the bloody work they were compelled to perform abroad, but the reflection was different whether one was white or Black. White soldiers embraced more easily the privileges of empire rooted in fantasies of masculinity and national superiority, African Americans occupied a more complex position, finding themselves in a situation significantly less harsh and dangerous – proportionally speaking – in the army than in the segregated civil life of Jim Crow America, yet one that required their labour to fight and tame equally racialized and oppressed peoples seeking independence. While the sense of

26. Bender and Lipman, "Introduction," *Making the Empire Work.*, 4.

27. Bender and Lipman, "Introduction," *Making the Empire Work.*, 2.

28. Bender and Lipman, "Introduction," *Making the Empire Work*, 4. Emphasis in original.

29. Bender and Lipman, "Introduction," *Making the Empire Work.*, 8.

patriotic duty prevailed for some US Black soldiers, for many others the moral obligation to solidarize politically with colonial freedom seekers was too irresistible, leading many to desert across the front line and, for some, even fight against their former brothers-in-arms.

The book's second part explores intimacies in US colonial spaces as a site where the work of empire-building is not performed by soldiers but by foreign women in the form of sexual labour. Following in the tradition of feminist scholars like Cynthia Enloe and Ann Laura Stoler, just to name two, Seungsook Moon demonstrates through a comparative analysis of World War II western Europe and cold war and post-cold war East Asia that the US imperial industry of killing has always been closely tied to the industry of sexual pleasure as a safety valve to regulate and manage the sexual anxieties of the predominantly white male military workforce. US soldiers' interaction with (hetero) sex workers, but also with wives, lovers, domestic servants, camp followers, and so on, was not only tolerated but fostered on the ground by US armed forces personnel, who supervised sexual relations by medically inspecting sex workers, distributing condoms, and setting prophylactic stations. The foreign woman was portrayed as "an eroticized feminine other" who was inherently "primitive, immoral, and sexually loose," a gendered and racialized ideological construct that served to legitimize white male domination over foreign female bodies.[30] Thus, women's sex work, paid and unpaid, "can be reframed as a specific form of reproductive labor, parallel to and intrinsically linked to productive labor and military labor, which empire as a political entity relies on for its expansion and reproduction both physically and discursively."[31] As such, Moon's essay sheds light on the extent to which the reproductive labour of empire was not only constructive, as Donoghue and Jennings have stressed in *Building the Atlantic Empires*, but also affective, performed in carnal ways in the shadow of forts and bases.

The third part investigates the interplay between empire building and labour mobilization through flows and circuits of migration to the United States. California and Florida are locally situated imperial places, as Andrew T. Urban, Dorothy B. Fujita-Rony, and Cindy Hahamovitch substantiate in their respective essays. Looking at working-class mobilizations against the employment of male Chinese domestic servants in the golden state, Urban demonstrates that ideals about white settlement in the US West hinged in great part on a gendered vision of the home as a workplace, where young white women's jobs offered a training of sort on how to run a household while awaiting the opportunity to marry. In this sense, the hiring of cheap male Chinese servants disrupted the white majority's framework of settlement with regards

30. Seungsook Moon, "Sexual Labor and the U.S. Military Empire: Comparative Analysis of Europe and East Asia," in Bender and Lipman, eds., *Making the Empire Work*, 142.

31. Moon, "Sexual Labor and the U.S. Military Empire," in Bender and Lipman, eds., *Making the Empire Work*, 138.

to domesticity, family values, and women's labour. Rural California, as Fujita-Rony argues, was as much an arena of empire for Filipina/o workers, who were pulled across the Pacific by the labour demand that restrictions on Chinese and other Asian workers provoked in the US West, especially in the agricultural industry. Migrating as "US nationals" – the Philippines were by then an incorporated U.S. territory – Filipina/o workers were nonetheless excluded from citizenship, a status that made them highly exploitable as racialized workers, but one that could also provoke suspicion, paranoia, and even violence among whites about their political loyalty as non-Americans. In Florida, as Hahamovitch documents, Black Jamaicans migrated as temporary agricultural guest workers, who found themselves in situations of unfreedom that were reminiscent of indentured servitude. Renewing old imperial connections to the Caribbean, guestworker programs in the US were "a way to bring the periphery to the metropole, while sparing the latter from having to integrate the former."[32] Thus, as shown in California and Florida, the US empire was "a moving phenomenon" capable of adapting and grounding its colonial logics and functioning in its very heartland.[33]

The fourth and last part reverses the standpoint of the third one, exploring the export of US labour systems abroad to incorporate cheap labour within the imperial realm. In the German colony of Togo, as Andrew Zimmerman observes, African American members of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute contributed their technical expertise to help develop a cotton growing project inspired from the model of the US South's new racial order of labour regime based on segregation, disenfranchisement, and sharecropping. In spite of sharing ancestral roots in Africa, those Black Tuskegee Institute scholars viewed themselves primarily as Americans and the African continent as a backward and primitive space, which not only hindered racial solidarity with dispossessed Togolese but authorized their coercion into unfree agricultural work, thus contributing to "an Americanization of African relations of production."[34] This case of technical imperial labour in German-occupied Togo reveals a geography of US imperialism existing beyond territories formally subjected to US state-imperial or corporate rule. In Central America, as Jason Colby argues in his essay, US-based transnational corporation, United Fruit Company relied on the discourse of tropicality – representing the so-called tropics as a homogenous uncivilized territory yet one full of natural riches to be exploited – to frame and therefore legitimize corporate imperialism as progressive work in the region in the 1910s. In this construct, putting

32. Cindy Hahamovitch, "Slavery's Stale Toil: Indentured Labor, Guestworkers, and the End of Empire," in Bender and Lipman, eds., *Making the Empire Work*, 243.

33. Dorothy B. Fujita-Rony, "Empire and the Moving Body: Fermin Tobera, Military California, and Rural Space," in Bender and Lipman, eds., *Making the Empire Work*, 221.

34. Andrew Zimmerman, "The Colonization of Antislavery and the Americanization of Empires," in Bender and Lipman, eds., *Making the Empire Work*, 281.

migrant West Indians, mostly Jamaicans, to work on banana plantations fitted this narrative well, not only because the hard labour they performed uplifted them socially and culturally, as it was claimed, but also because it transformed the untamed tropics into a work paradise. Later, when those Black migrant workers began to organize against their bosses, they were replaced by Spanish-speaking Central Americans to curb collective solidarity on plantations. As the corporation's workforce became gradually Central American instead of West Indian, the rhetorical discourse of tropicality gave way to that of consumerism of the nascent Fordist era, which now embodied corporate-driven progress in the tropics. The divide-and-rule strategy based on race being irrelevant in practice, small wage and managerial concessions to Central American workers sought to hold collective action in check. Thus, Colby shows that US Fordism was not contained within US national borders, but intersected with imperialism and race as a strategy of labour management and control abroad.

Making the Empire Work has succeeded in transforming our understanding of the American empire as an interlocked system of labour regimes, management, and worker mobilization. As such, the collection contributes to the prevailing thesis in political science that the American empire's historical feature has been to perform the role of facilitator and superintendent of global capitalism by reminding us that overseeing and managing capital always means, dialectically, the overseeing and managing of labour.[35] It would be foolish to criticize this volume for what it did not cover, but one can only wonder what the results of its approach might bear on the current neoliberal era. For while *Making the Empire Work* stops the inquiry in the cold war period, the American empire has continued to this day to rule over the globe, and perhaps even more so than ever before, as some have suggested.[36] Internationally, one wonders how the US imperialist interventions in the Middle East since the early 1990s – a region oddly ignored by the collection – would look like if seen through the lens of labour history. Domestically, and conversely, one could think of the new insights that could be produced through an imperial labour reframing of the interconnection between the explosive growth of the carceral economy in the US and the mass incarceration of the American Black and Brown population. In sum, the history of United States imperialism is not just a labour history – it is also a history of the present.

Over the past two decades or so, transnational and global approaches to labour history have proliferated to break with nation-centric methodologies and emphasize fluidity, connections, and exchange across space. In doing so, the state has been abandoned as a counter-intuitive framework unable to capture and cope with transnational processes. In bringing the imperial

35. See, for instance, Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (New York: Verso, 2012).

36. Sean Starrs, "American Economic Power Hasn't Declined—It Globalized! Summoning the Data and Taking Globalization Seriously," *International Studies Quarterly* 57, 4 (2014): 817–30.

state back in labour history, the three books surveyed above confirm that this waiver may have been made too quickly. While their approaches differ, the books make a strong case that an imperial approach to transnational labour history may be fruitful, not only to grapple with the imperial origin of capitalism, but also with its inherent dependence upon coerced or unfree workers. As such, the three books have potentially charted a way for an imperial turn in labour history.

BC STUDIES
The British Columbian Quarterly

Free Your Mind, Tania Willard
(BCS Cover, Spring 2017)

Peer reviewed multi-disciplinary multi-sensory BC.

OPEN ACCESS CONTENT - DIGITAL BC

SOUNDWORKS - New alternate scholarly form - a sound recording and accompanying peer-reviewed essay.

BLOGS - Along with our *BC Places and Voices* blog, we have begun a collaborative blog with BC archivists. See *Archives Matter.*

NEW MEDIA - A section focused on emerging technologies used in educational and artistic projects. Includes original essays, New Media reviews, and Exhibition reviews.

DIGITAL POSTCARDS - Online gallery of videos and photos that depict diverse areas of BC. The "monuments" section considers how public history is marked across the province. Digital Postcards are accepted on an ongoing basis - we welcome your contribution!

MAPS - Featured articles, photo essays, and digital postcards located on a map of BC, Fraser River Goldmines and their Place names, First Nations of BC, and more.

CASE COMMENTS - seek to interpret the significance and importance of recent legal decisions affecting British Columbia.

Subscriptions - back issues - news - photo essays - reviews - reflections - forums - audio articles - maps, and so much more.

www.bcstudies.com