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The Greater Caribbean: From Plantations to Tourism

The Greater Caribbean is one of the few regions on the planet defined by a common interior sea, although some people, for geopolitical, historical, or cultural reasons, push its boundaries into the Atlantic. It was long defined by the plantation, which, dependent on African slave labor for nearly four centuries (itself a key factor in the process of globalization that began with the arrival of Europeans in the Americas), exported the so-called “colonial fruits.” In the Antilles (its name taken from an Old World legend), sugarcane production was the dominant agro-industry well into the twentieth century. Other tropical crops were also significant, though, such as the banana plantations that began to cover large areas of insular and mainland Caribbean at the end of the nineteenth century.

The environmental conditions of the northern tropics were key to the formation of agro-export economies, despite the region’s vulnerability to natural disasters such as hurricanes and droughts. Extensive areas of forest promoted the accumulation of humus in the soil and provided wood for fuel, for shipbuilding (in Havana, for example), and valuable timber exports (from places like Honduras, Belize, and the Dominican Republic).

In an era in which the seas were of paramount importance to European powers, the Greater Caribbean stood at the center of the Atlantic world as the most commercially dynamic area. The struggle against Spain’s hegemony in the New World led five European monarchies to occupy parts of the region starting in the seventeenth century. This turned the Caribbean into a continental crossroads in the colonial period, something that explains its subsequent political and biocultural diversity. The road to political emancipation started with the independence of Haiti (1804), followed by South and Central American nations (in the 1820s), the Dominican Republic (1844), and Cuba (1902). Starting in 1960, various English colonies began to acquire sovereignty. Nonetheless, diverse ties of colonial dependency persist to this day.

Sugarcane, which helped create the Caribbean slave plantation complex, dominated the plains and rolling hills, radically transforming their ecologies. Symbols of monoculture and economic specialization, plantations were essential to the birth of indus-

trial capitalism in Europe and the United States (Moya 2008). The role of livestock, however, as a source of food, draft power, and intraregional commerce (legal or otherwise), should not be forgotten. As pastures began to multiply in the nineteenth century, ranching became a significant source of environmental change.

The history of sugar plantations in the Caribbean started in Hispaniola, where the collapse of the indigenous population led to the introduction of African slaves who, along with Europeans, formed the basis of the new creole population. But it was in the Lesser Antilles, occupied by England and France from the mid-seventeenth century, that the real sugar revolution occurred. The prototypical case was Barbados, where monoculture took hold quickly from 1640. From there, the new production model spread to the majority of other islands with similar social, economic, and environmental characteristics. By the eighteenth century, Jamaica and Saint-Domingue (Haiti) had become the largest sugar producers. In 1789, the population of Saint-Domingue included 452,000 black slaves, 40,000 whites, and 28,000 free mulattos. Europeans



Figure 1:
Flor de Cuba sugar refinery. Lithograph by Eduardo Laplante, in *Justo Germán Cantero, Los Ingenios. Colección de vistas de los principales ingenios de azúcar de la Isla de Cuba*, Imprenta de Luis Marquier, La Habana, 1857. This sugary refinery was founded in 1838 near Matanzas, Cuba's main sugar-producing region in the mid-nineteenth century. At the time, the refinery, already mechanized, was one of the largest in the world, with 603 hectares, out of a total of 1,246, planted in cane. Its barracks, which stand out in the center of the image, was also one of the largest, housing 409 slaves and 170 indentured Chinese, and later adding 150 additional workers.

considered it the richest colony in the world. This lasted until the great slave rebellion broke out in 1791, which ended with the formation of the Republic of Haiti and brought the organic, preindustrial cycle of the Caribbean slave plantation to a close.

In addition to human and animal traction, non-Spanish colonies made widespread use of wind and waterpower. Their size and the limited resources stimulated innovation to address the consequences of rapid deforestation: for example, using sugarcane bagasse as fuel, fertilizing with manure, and building irrigation works (Watts 1987). But such measures could not avoid the distortions of excessive economic specialization in what Humboldt called the “islands of sugar and slaves.” Such European imprudence, he thought, inverted the natural order by prioritizing export crops over the production of basic necessities. Despite his warning, the idea of the tropics as a supplier of foodstuffs and raw materials to power the new industrial age was reinforced by the birth of mass markets and new economic, scientific, and social theories (such as social Darwinism).

Since the nineteenth century, the history of the Caribbean has been marked by the growing influence of the United States as a critical export market and supplier. Although this process has led to varying degrees of dependence, the ties it forged are generally characterized as neocolonial. Starting in the twentieth century, efforts to control yellow fever, whose introduction and spread was tied to the plantation boom, secured this hegemony. The confirmation of creole doctor Carlos Finlay’s 1881 hypothesis that a biological vector (the mosquito *Aedes aegypti*) was responsible for transmitting the disease occurred during the first US military occupation of Cuba (1898–1902). This scientific discovery was followed by sanitation measures that facilitated the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914, a landmark in the northern neighbor’s “conquest of the tropics” (McNeill 2010).

Following the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), Cuba consolidated its position as the world’s largest sugar exporter by supplying the growing consumer market in the United States. The productivity of the slave-based sugar plantations on the western part of the island accelerated with the early adoption of steam power in the mills (1820) and the railroad (1837), making them pioneers of industrial agriculture in the tropics. Cuban sugar mills, which relied on slavery until it was abolished (1880–1886), expanded at the expense of forested areas, which offered soils with abundant organic material, fuel wood, and timber (Funes 2008).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, sugar production expanded rapidly as US corporations in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic constructed large-scale mills and sugarcane estates, partly by moving into areas where extensive forests remained. The previous form of itinerant production, in which sugar mills progressively sought out virgin areas, became ever more difficult as industrial technology upped the scale of production. This new stage, therefore, increasingly relied on the use of chemical fertilizers, agricultural mechanization, and hydraulic infrastructure, factors that caused hitherto unknown environmental problems.

The Caribbean sugar industry began to be dismantled in the mid-twentieth century, with the process continuing despite the stimulus felt in some quarters following the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and the redistribution of the island's export quota to the United States. Due to its commercial relations with the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc, Cuba maintained high levels of production until 1991. Its input-intensive production model, however, was impossible to sustain following the breakdown of its market and supplier. The abrupt drop in imports of fuel, agrochemicals, and machinery turned the island into a laboratory experiment regarding the potential effects of peak oil, and paved the way for promoting organic agriculture on a national scale.

Next to sugar, coffee was the second most important export crop from the Antilles during the period of slave plantations. Production boomed during the second half of the nineteenth century on islands such as Puerto Rico and in mainland locations such as Venezuela, Colombia, and Costa Rica. The agro-ecological context of coffee was more diverse than that of sugarcane, but the preference of cultivating mountainous areas tended to increase the problem of soil erosion. Other traditionally significant commercial products included cacao and tobacco. Small- and medium-sized farmers, as well as peasants, were important producers of these three crops.

Extensive banana plantations spread through the Caribbean regions of Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, and Honduras from the end of the nineteenth century, and also on islands such as Jamaica. Powerful US companies ended up controlling extensive areas of cultivation as well as the trade networks that supplied the mass consumer markets to the north. Steamships, railroads, and technologies such as refrigeration overcame the challenges posed by the fruit's ripening process. The spread of disease, which affected the variety of banana demanded by consumers, accelerated the deforestation of cultivation areas and encouraged the application of chemical disease control methods, which

affected the health of plantation workers. Like sugar, bananas became an allegory of the Caribbean and of stereotypes about tropicality, epitomized by the pejorative phrase “banana republics” (Soluri 2006).

During the twentieth century, other export-oriented economic activities began to vie with the dominance of the plantation: important oil fields on the coasts of Venezuela and Trinidad; coal in Colombia’s Guajira peninsula; and iron, copper, gold, nickel, and bauxite extraction in countries like the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Cuba. These activities have had an impact on marine ecosystems, which also suffer from the effects of soil erosion, agrochemical runoff, and dumping of waste material. As industrialization and urban growth have increased marine pollution levels, modern fishing techniques have accelerated the decline of local fisheries.

With the exception of Caracas, only a short distance from the sea, the principal cities of all the mainland countries lie outside the Caribbean region. Nonetheless, the rise of industrial metabolism has encouraged the formation of large urban concentrations around island capitals, such as Santo Domingo, Havana, and San Juan. Urbanization has been driven by migration from rural areas and policies promoting industrialization and administrative centralization. Additionally, the increase in migrants from within the region and beyond was significant until the third decade of the twentieth century, when the tendency started to reverse.

The Caribbean became a principal tourist destination when petroleum-based revolutions in transportation opened up international travel beyond the privileged domain of elites from the industrialized world. Tourism in the region has long been tied to US interests; the steamships that exported agricultural products also brought down visitors. The main destination until 1958 was Cuba, particularly Havana. But from 1960, tourism really took off, with the boom of commercial aviation, mass tourism, and shifting tastes that favored sun and beach destinations. Given the importance of foreign investment in the sector, and the dependence on flows of visitors, mainly from the United States, Europe, and Canada, some consider tourism to be a new kind of “plantation economy.” The arrival of cruise ships, which bring in less revenue and generate waste, exacerbate the problem. Tourist enclaves have also affected ecosystems that had once been among the best preserved. While the tourist industry initially tended to ignore its own environmental impact, this has changed and environmental awareness is a growing part of the tourist phenomenon, as can be seen by the rise in ecotourism and ecological resorts.



Figure 2:

Airplane landing at Princess Juliana Airport, on the Caribbean island of Saint Martin (or Sint Maarten). Measuring only 87 square kilometers, the island is part of the Lesser Antilles and has been divided, since the seventeenth century, between France and the Netherlands. Its current population is about 85,000, which makes it one of the most densely populated regions in the world, with around 1,000 people per square kilometer. It also receives more than a million visitors per year. One of its main tourist attractions is the beach next to Princess Juliana Airport, on the Dutch side, where planes pass right overhead as they approach the runway. Source: Aurimas Adomavicius via flickr.

Due to the prolonged presence of plantations, Caribbean islands have some of the most degraded environments in the Americas. The threat that such degradation posed to continued agricultural production within small territories, along with climatic considerations, led to the creation of forest reserves as early as the eighteenth century. Since then, colonies and independent countries in the region have adopted measures to conserve their flora, fauna, and ecosystems, although such efforts are almost always too late or have a limited effect. During the second half of the twentieth century, the rise of the environmental movement and modern environmental practices has encouraged the expansion of protected areas.

While the decline of the plantation sector had serious social and economic consequences, it did reduce the pressure on the region's degraded agro-ecosystems. By contrast, the development of mining and of tourism has increased the risks to ecosystems that, due to their mountainous or coastal locations, tend to be more fragile. In

particular, those activities which dependent on seaside paradises are the most vulnerable to the risks that rapidly accelerating climate change could bring to the Greater Caribbean.

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