

S. Karly Kehoe, Ben H. Shepherd, Nelson Mundell
and Louise Montgomery

Colonialism and the Caribbean: Wealth, Power and the British Imperial State

Introduction to the Module

Building the British Empire involved colonialism, which is when one country gains control over another country, region or people, and while this included the establishment of new settlements, institutions and civic structures, it also included the exploitation of people and natural resources for profit. In the European context of colonialism this can be seen very clearly with the Atlantic Slave Trade. The trafficking of Africans (the buying of slaves in Africa, transporting them across the Atlantic Ocean to the Caribbean and then reselling them to people who wanted cheap labour) was done by many European powers including Spain, Portugal, France, Britain and the Dutch.

If we look at the British Empire during the eighteenth century, we can see that it was working very hard to compete with the other European countries for power and money. The slave trade generated a lot of money and by 1800 Britain was the dominant European power involved in the slave trade. Personal ambition and the desire to amass fortunes inspired many Britons to become involved with an economy based on slave labour to produce sugar, cotton, indigo and rum. The development of the settler colonies abroad and of communities at home in Britain came to depend upon the money that was being generated by slave labour in the Caribbean. Generating the enormous profits that were being realised in the Caribbean required an assertion of power and the entire system of slavery there depended upon a series of power structures that were designed to emphasise the authority of Britain and Britons over other European countries, over landscapes, seascapes and people. The sources included below show how some of the power structures operated.

Sources

Source 1: Copy of Letter from John Roberts Esqr Governor of Cape Coast Castle, 26 July 1780.

The National Archives, Kew. Code: T70/32/136.

Preliminary remarks: Projections of imperial authority were not unique to the British – the French, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese were all active in asserting their cultural authority over the colonies they held and the territories they occupied. As the slave trade expanded and as competition for slaves increased, holding forts were established along the coast of West Africa. These forts, which were collection points for slaves brought to the coast before they were shipped across the Atlantic, were originally developed by the Dutch and, a little later, by the Portuguese who not only used them to provide slaves for their own colonies, but who also used them to supply the English and the French with slaves in the seventeenth century since neither was yet powerful

enough to establish their own African bases. In his landmark book, *The Slave Trade*, Hugh Thomas explains that:

*The conversion of the Caribbean into the archipelago of sugar which it remained for 200 and more years was largely a French and English enterprise, but, in the beginning, it was inspired by Dutch ideas deriving from Brazil, and it was powered by slaves made available by Dutch merchants.*³

As the trade matured and as English colonies like Barbados began to flourish, imperial economic competition increased and this prompted the English to establish their own forts so that they could provide their own slaves to their own colonies. One of these forts was Cape Coast Castle, which was located in present-day Ghana, and it was managed by a governor. It was often the case that the governors knew much more about what conditions were like on the ground than officials in London and their opinions were sometimes recorded in the reports and correspondence they produced. In the following extract, John Roberts, who was Cape Coast Castle's governor and the man responsible for reporting on its progress to colonial officials in London, explains his frustration with some of his English superiors who wanted to limit expressions of grandeur. He refused to follow an order which called for the restriction of the use of gunpowder to salute incoming British ships because it would adversely affect his ability to impress the local population and that would have a detrimental effect on the number and type of slaves he could secure. As his letter reveals, there was significant tension between the European imperial powers as competition for slaves and economic dominance increased.

Further gentlemen, I most humbly pray leave to remark in this private manner. In your Orders and Instructions page 11 under the Head of Stores furnished in Africa, you say "Neither is any gunpowder to be allowed for saluting his Majesty's Ships & c." It gives me great concern that I should have any orders from your gentlemen I cannot punctually obey, but in the present case, my feelings as a British subject and commander in charge of this Castle, induces me to act contrary to that part of your instructions for I cannot live in it. Should a British ship anchor in the road and salute the castle with any number of guns which are generally from 5 to 9 on an average and not return each salute, I would rather die than the British station should suffer such disgrace; Let me entreat you only to consider a moment this castle as the Principal British Settlement in Africa within three leagues of the principal Dutch Fort full in its view, and that a British ship should salute this Castle with seven guns and I not return five was it so I should become the ridicule of Europeans and despised by the Natives. – I think I can with truth venture to say the most penurious chief that commands a fort will return a salute tho' he did at his own expense; therefore hope you will take the matter under your consideration as it is of much more consequence to gain respect from the Native than can be conceived by people who never resided in this Country. The Dutch return every ship's salute with 2 guns less, and even salute the members of their Council when they arrive at Elmina and go from it with 15 guns each, and they are saluted with the same number at every Dutch Fort they call at which is what gains them consequence and respect from the Natives.

3 Thomas Hugh (1997): *The Slave Trade. A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade. 1440–1870*. London, 188.

Glossary

Cape Coast Castle: This was a trading and holding fort where slaves were gathered and kept before being sent across the Atlantic. Cape Coast Castle was England's first coastal trading fort and was run by the Royal Africa Company from the 1660s until it was taken over by Britain's Company of Merchants Trading to Africa in the late 1720s. Today it is on the UNESCO World Heritage List – for more information, see: <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/34/>>.

Ghana: Today it is known as the Republic of Ghana, a nation on the west coast of Africa on the north side of the Gulf of Guinea. It is named after the medieval West Ghana Empire. See: <<http://www.ghana.gov.gh/index.php/about-ghana/ghana-at-a-glance>>

Chief: In this source, chief refers to the commander of a European slave-holding factory; it does not refer to an African leader in this context.

Elmina: This refers to Elmina Castle, perhaps the first slave trade fort in West Africa for European traders. Built by the Portuguese at the end of the fifteenth century, it was captured by the Dutch in 1637 and became their main slave trade fort until it was taken over by Britain in early nineteenth century. It too is on the UNESCO World Heritage List: <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/34/>>.

Source 2: Letter from Alexander Baillie, Isle of Nevis, to his cousin, Alexander Baillie, Dunzean, near Inverness, “North Britain”, 18 March 1752

Highland Council Archives, Inverness. Code: HCA/D456/A/1/28.

Preliminary remarks: The sexual exploitation of female slaves was a common feature of plantation life. While it demonstrates significant abuse on the part of white men towards enslaved black women, it also reveals another aspect of the process of colonialism: sexual exploitation. Plantation society was an arm of colonization and female slaves were vulnerable. Not only were they used for field and domestic labour, but they were also used for the sexual gratification of the white male population and for their ability to produce the next generation of slaves. In a ground-breaking book entitled Britain's Black Debt, Hilary McD. Beckles provides the following synopsis:

The slavery system built by the British in the Caribbean led to the legal and customary institutionalization of the slave owners' right to unrestricted sexual access to enslaved women as an intrinsic and discrete product. The circuitous route of wealth accumulation within slavery recognized no clear distinction between the production of material goods and the delivery of sexual services.⁴

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, as the voice of the abolitionists grew louder, the British government began to look for new ways of continuing with plantation slavery without the trans-Atlantic trade element. One of the points debated was the possibility of increasing the number of slave women to permit a “natural” population increase; what this meant was using slave women to birth the next generation of slaves. In this and

4 Hilary McD. Beckles (2013): Britain's Black Debt. Reparations for Caribbean Slavery and Native Genocide. Jamaica, 76.

many other respects, the reproductive ability of slave women became an issue of political interest. In 1792, Henry Dundas, a Scot and a senior government advisor, suggested that planters and merchants be encouraged to “try fairly the scheme of rearing a sufficient number of native Negroes to answer the purpose of cultivating the plantations”.⁵ While this was debated but ultimately rejected by the House of Lords, a tax incentive for bringing in female slaves under the age of 25 was introduced by Jamaica’s legislative assembly.⁶ The source below comes from a private letter that was exchanged between cousins from the north of Scotland. The author, Alexander Baillie, came from a very influential Inverness-shire family that had acquired significant wealth and influence during the second half of the eighteenth century because of their Caribbean interests.

You’ll expect that before I finish my letter, I shall say something of the Ladies, being full of making my fortune that way before I left Scotland, well, then, you must know that I have not yet had the pleasure of seeing many whose charms made any Incurable Impression on my heart; I don’t know whither it is owing to the disagreeableness of being restricted to one continuall[sic] bedfellow in these hotter climates & almost suffocated with the Effluvia of Tobacco, or to their fortune’s not answering Expectations but I protest the Negro wenches are much handsomer & cleaner in my eyes in all respects & for all the purposes you please, and I’m sorry to observe that in all appearance the married men think so too, for their honour be it spoken there is not one in forty of them but keeps one or more of them in chinks and calicoes out of the field, and for what purpose I leave you to judge.

Glossary

Abolitionists: These were people who campaigned to bring an end to the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. They included politicians, businessmen (there were not very many businesswomen at the time), ex- or escaped slaves, and clergymen.

Effluvia: This refers to stench, bad or strong and unpleasant smell.

Chinks and calicoes: The meaning for chinks is a bit unclear, but it is likely relating to some kind of chain-like adornment that would pass for jewellery. Calicoes refers to a kind of cotton cloth, originating in India, that was often coarse, plain white or printed with a simple pattern.

Source 3: Letter to the Duke of Portland, Secretary of State, from Alexander Houstoun, Grenada, 15 October 1796.

The National Archives, Kew. Code: CO 101/35/5–7.

Preliminary remarks: The Fedon Rebellion broke out on the island of Grenada on 2 March 1795 and was led by Julien Fedon, a “free mulatto of French extraction” who had been influenced by the ideals of the French Revolution. While this rebellion cost the planters millions and the government was obliged to step in and help them, what is particularly interesting about this source is that it reveals that in spite of the risks involved, Fedon

5 Sasha Turner (2011): Home-grown Slaves. Women, Reproduction, and the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Jamaica 1788–1807, in: *Journal of Women’s History*. 23.3, 44.

6 *Ibid.*

and his followers chose to oppose British authority. It is written by the colony's lieutenant governor, Alexander Houstoun, and highlights how the "free mulattos" used the fact that Britain was engaged in another major war with France to further their own agenda of increased rights and political inclusion. What this source also shows is how slaves were co-opted into military service in defence of the British Empire during war.

The spirit of resentment manifested by the bulk of the inhabitants, not only against the Rebels, but against all Foreigners resident here, I am sorry to say, has not abated so much as could have been wished, which has occasioned me much trouble and vexation. It is in vain that I attempt to show them the illiberality, and still more in many instances, the impolicy of their conduct. [...] The executions that have taken place since my letter to your Grace of 30th July have been chiefly of coloured people – very active dangerous characters, who had continued out in the woods, and were brought in from time to time. [...] The Court of Oyer and Terminer is still sitting, under a new Commission, as soon as it breaks up, I will furnish your Grace with a list of those condemned and of those who have been executed. As the most guilty were brought to trial first, I hope very few, if any more examples will be found necessary. I shall grant a respite on every occasion, when it can be done with any degree of safety – in doing this, I am happy to think, I shall act consonant to the magnanimous and merciful disposition of His Majesty. [...] I am sorry to say, the troops in spite of every precaution and attention still continue sickly. I intend to propose that the meeting of the legislators, to form militia companies of trusty slaves in addition to our present black corps, by calling from each Estate certain proportion of their Negroes. They ought for various reasons to have white non-commissioned officers, who cannot be found from amongst the inhabitants in the present state of the population of the island. I could therefore recommend, if the West India black regiments do not go on it may be put in the option of the Colony to retain some of the non-commissioned officers, with their own consent. And as I conceive this measure will add greatly to the safety of the island, and be a considerable relief to his Majesty's regular troops.

Glossary

Fedon Rebellion: This rebellion broke out on the island of Grenada on 2 March 1795 and was led by Julien Fedon, a man of French and African descent who owned an estate on Grenada. He was not a slave, but he was very angry at how the British exercised their authority in Grenada; he was influenced by the ideals of the French Revolution.

Free Mulattoes: These were people of mixed Black and White ancestry who were not enslaved; they were free.

Alexander Houstoun: He was the grandson of a Scottish trading merchant who made a fortune through his interests in the West Indies. He served as lieutenant-governor of Grenada, an island in the Caribbean and one of Britain's colonies, from 1796–1802, and then entered parliament as a member of Britain's House of Commons.

Court of Oyer and Terminer: This is a court convened to hear a criminal case.

Embedding the Module in a Sequence

The students should have learned about plantations and be familiar with the reasons the Atlantic Slave Trade and the plantation system continued to grow and evolve. Some work should have been done on slavery resistance.

The students should go on to learn about slavery resistance in more detail, looking at specific examples such as the Fedon Rebellion.

Learning Aims and Competences

The purpose of this lesson is to help students to gain an understanding of the power structures at play in colonial settings. In this lesson slavery in the Caribbean is used to highlight some of these power structures and to show how the system of slavery was actually enforced.

The process of colonialism included multiple power dynamics that extended throughout the slave colonies. The mind-set of slaves will not be examined, but the pressures bearing down on them can be seen in the sources. Not only were slaves confronting powerful masters, but they were being exposed to a powerful European culture of colonialism which centred on economic power and the assertion of cultural authority. Symbolic gestures such as the firing of cannons, the sexual exploitation of female slaves, and the swift and brutal repression of rebellion will all be highlighted in the sources above as a way of helping students to explore how power structures were established and maintained.

Many of the activities are based on skills that are used in both exams and essays, but they are also applicable to life and work: source analysis; group work; and being able to see situations from different perspectives.

The plenary is focussed on getting students to appraise critically their own society. They have studied slavery in the past but they should think about why it still exists today. Is there a comparison to be made between plantation slavery in the Caribbean and present-day workers in the Apple factories?

Tasks

1. Group activity where deep analysis of sources is undertaken.
2. Paired work where the students use one of the new sources to create an exam question and marking scheme.
3. Questions about the operation of power structures within the context of slavery.

Expected Student Answers

Upon examination of the sources the students should have a clearer idea of how cultural authority was exerted upon slaves. The historical enquiry questions (who wrote the source, etc.) should be straightforward for the students and help with their depth of understanding of both source handling and the different types of cultural authority exercised by the plantation owners.

The exam question task should produce some insightful questions, and setting these as a homework task (and then getting the students to mark them) will provide useful exam revision.

Design of the Learning Process

| Steps/ Phases/ Methods | Factual aspects | Learning aims/ Competences | Commentary/ Explanation |
|---|--------------------|---|---|
| Introduction to lesson and starter | | Sets clear in the student's mind the learning intention for the lesson and its place within the course; central question here: "What is colonialism?" | This starter will give an idea of how advanced the students' thinking about colonialism is. Students are tasked with coming up with as many words as they can that are associated with colonialism. The poster/paper the words are collected on can be returned to at the end of the lesson, with students adding any other words they wish (in a different colour). |
| Elaboration phase 1: Group activity | Sources 1, 2 and 3 | For students to fully comprehend at least two of the sources, as well as work on their history enquiry skills | These five points form the foundation of the historical enquiry of sources. Students should be well versed in answering these questions, and in some detail. The class is split into groups. Each group will analyse source 3, and they will consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Who wrote the source? - When was it written? - Why was the source created? These questions should get them thinking about the reliability and value of the sources. They should then think about these questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What does the source tell us? - What other information do we need to develop substantive conclusions? They will then look at either source 1 or 2, without the historical context. This will test them in a way source 3 did not. The source they did not have time to analyse could be part of a homework exercise or covered briefly in the class discussion. |
| Securing of the results: Class discussion | | To affirm or correct their answers from the previous task | The class come together to discuss the sources – their merit, the information within and what it tells us about how cultural authority was used to subjugate the slaves. |

| Steps/ Phases/ Methods | Factual aspects | Learning aims/ Competences | Commentary/ Explanation |
|--|-----------------------|---|---|
| Elaboration phase 2: Paired activity | Sources 1, 2 and 3 | To put themselves in the exam marker's shoes, to understand exactly what markers are looking for | In pairs, the students must now produce a question and marking scheme for one of the three sources. This task helps students work through the form of questions that will appear in their exam. Students could be assigned a different type of question depending on their level: These could be given to other pairings as homework, or the best could be set as class homework. |
| Conclusion: Plenary | | To have students morally examine slavery and the slave trade, in the period studied and today | The students are given a series of questions: What were the justifications for slavery in the eighteenth century? Why was it so difficult to bring an end to slavery in the Caribbean? |