

Collision of Cultures in the Americas: Subjugation and Colonization

Lecture Handout – HUM 2A: August 25th – G. Smay

Spain's Colonial Empire

The *Encomienda* System: imposing a semi-feudal system to harness native labor

Haciendas & Rancheros: appropriating native lands

The Mission System: conversion, acculturation, and other functions

Competition in the New World

Portugal - focus on the Far East

France - fur trading settlements with limited populations

England – religious conflict and commercial interests create populous colonies

The Netherlands – a short lived N. American venture ends in conquest, but makes a lasting impression

The Empire of Sugar

The Caribbean becomes the main focus of European attention because of sugar

Sugar's long history: sugar comes to the Caribbean by way of the Far East

Early difficulties: early attempts to cultivate sugar in the W. Indies run into labor issues

Both natives and Europeans are susceptible to tropical diseases

Enslaved natives escape; Europeans unwilling to do the work

The solution: African slaves offer European sugar planters a solution to both problems

Slave Labor in the New World

Demand for Slaves: Sugar was a “killing crop” which consumed enslaved workers; these needed constant replacement.

Supply: Slaves were forced to undertake a long journey full of horrors to reach the plantations. Typically captured by fellow Africans, marched to the coast, then taken on pestilential slaves ships to the Americas. Many perish on this “Middle Passage”, part of the so-called “Triangular Trade”. Many more perish in their first years of slavery when first exposed to their new conditions.

Effects in Africa: Africans left behind were affected by the slave trade too. Because Europeans preferred males, gender imbalances were created in Africa, with lasting effects. The entire continent suffers demographic shocks where are also still felt today. And slavery dramatically changes the social and political trajectory of huge areas, creating whole societies molded by the slave trade.

Colonial Slavery

Slavery has a very long history, and has existed in some form in most human societies.

But, the practice of slavery in the American colonies was unique in certain key respects.

Scale: In most societies, slaves have made up small percentages of the population; in many parts of the Americas, they formed large majorities.

Impersonal nature: In many slave owning societies, slaves and slaves work and live together; the massive scale of operations makes this less common in the Americas.

The racial divide: In many slave owning societies, masters and slaves come from the same ethnic and racial population, fostering at least a limited sense of shared humanity. In the Americas, race firmly divides master and slave.

Ideology: To justify the mass enslavement of Africans, Europeans develop an

elaborate ideology of slavery that asserts the innate inferiority of Sub-Saharan Africans and holds, against all the evidence, that slavery existed for the protection and moral and cultural improvement of the slaves by benevolent masters.

Olaudah Equiano

Debate: Some questions whether he was in fact born in Africa, and whether the first part of his story is authentic

His Life as Representative: In some respects (capture, Middle Passage) it clearly is. In others, it is clearly exceptional

His Role in Abolitionism: His autobiography is written at a key moment in the history of slavery in the Americas, and written with this fact in mind, as a contribution to the cause of abolitionism.

The Case Against Slavery

Relating horrors: Many in Europe not fully aware of the horrors inflicted on slaves

Humanizing Africans: Putting a human face on Africans by describing African culture and relating it to the Bible, by providing insight into the emotional lives of Africans and the effects of slavery upon them, and by proving his own worth in European terms by displays of erudition and piety.

Critiquing Europe: Equiano also undermines the ideology which Europeans created to justify the enslavement of Africans, both by showing paternalism to be a fraud, and by forcing readers to ask whether slave holding was consistent with the teachings of Christianity.