

5.9 Looking for the Next Worst Thing: Emancipation, Indentures, and Colonial Plantations After Slavery

Nineteenth century Western societies were unmatched in their faith that free markets and human freedom generally went together. And there were few prouder achievements of that liberal faith than the abolition of slavery: in the British Empire in 1833–1834, the United States in 1865–1866, and elsewhere at various points in the nineteenth century. Although many people wanted abolition at any cost, others went along in part because they were sure that relying on free labor would not only prove more moral, but more profitable. But when things did not turn out so neatly, abolition—and labor policies more generally—took some strange turns.

Colonial sugar plantations posed the biggest problems. As emancipation neared in the British Caribbean, Lord Elgin confidently predicted that wages would make ex-slaves work even harder, and would convince slaveholders worldwide to abandon the whip. But he probably had no idea how hard many slaves actually worked. (Consider that on some U.S. plantations, slaves ate more than 5,000 calories a day—more than you use climbing Everest—without getting fat.) Given a choice, they preferred anything else—subsistence farming on unclaimed hillsides, renting better land to grow crops for local markets, or leaving agriculture altogether. (Men who were newly emancipated, and thus had become “real” household heads, were often particularly eager to keep “their” women out of the fields.) Desperate to keep labor costs down, some colonial legislatures mandated “apprenticeships” on plantations for the newly freed—though nobody had to teach them how to cut cane. For decades to come, colonial authorities repeatedly argued that Africans and Afro-Caribbeans were an exception to the universal rational self-interest that they believed would make all other people work hard and budget adequately if the alternative was hunger; consequently, ex-slaves still “needed” forced labor until they were ready for a market-driven world. Once in place, this idea was also applied to Africans in new colonies who had never been slaves: it rationalized forced labor in mines in Natal, on Senegalese roads, and elsewhere. In fact, though many Africans—among others—chose not to focus exclusively on maximizing their earnings, many others were unavailable for plantation work precisely because they were busy producing for local markets. (Early twentieth century British colonies in southern Africa were all too aware of this—and banned black small farmers from growing market crops to protect the profits of white settlers.)

But such measures still did not suffice—so old and new tropical colonies imported indentured servants. More than 2 million such people, mostly from India and China, were transported to plantations in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean, Hawaii, and East Africa. Even more went to Southeast Asia, though under conditions so varied that it is hard to tell how many count as “indentured.” Like the indentured whites who had come to early colonial North America, the newly indentured had their passage paid in return for a set term of labor (usually five years); unlike those whites, the bonus awaiting them at the end was not usually a piece of land, but a ticket home, which many declined.

From the beginning, some people called this a new slavery—which it both was and wasn’t. Workers had finite obligations, were paid wages, and had signed contracts (though what they knew when they signed is hard to tell). Since they remained legal persons, rather than private property, some governments regulated their treatment in ways that mattered. Ships and passengers headed for the British Empire got at least a minimal health inspection, and death rates on those voyages were one-third those on the essentially unregulated route from China to Cuba. Some colonies insisted that a third of those imported be women—which allowed the indentured to create something much more like other immigrant communities. Most importantly, where laws were enforced, masters were much less likely to extend indentures or dock wages illegally. (Wages eventually reached almost the level of those of farmworkers in the poorer parts of Europe—well above those in India or China.) But the law was still mostly the bosses’ tool—absenteeism, for instance, could lead to prison, making it hard to call this “free labor.”

But still plantation owners could not recreate what they had under slavery. In the British Caribbean, they regularly complained that indentured Indians did barely half as much per day as enslaved Africans had. Even allowing for some nostalgia, this suggests just how much work slavery had squeezed out of people and how impossible it was to duplicate that, once coercion was even somewhat limited. By 1920, both China and India had banned the “coolie trade,” and indenture disappeared as a legal way of recruiting labor (though it survives underground even today). While it lasted, it made big profits for some; and some of those indentured bettered their lives as well. It certainly changed the ethnic mix of many parts of Africa, the Americas, and other places. But in another sense it was bound to fail—an embarrassing reminder that merely calling slavery “backward” didn’t dissolve the reliance of some very modern enterprises—and their customers, bankers, and others—on forced labor.