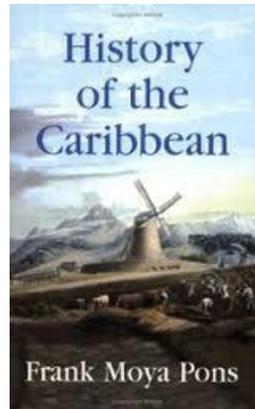


Frank Moya Pons, *History of the Caribbean: Plantations, Trade, and War in the Atlantic World* Princeton: Marcus Weiner Publishers, 2007. (Published in English and Spanish)

Reviewed by Norman Girvan



An alternative title of this book might be ‘A Concise History of Caribbean Plantation Economy’. Frank Moya Pons, the most widely read historian of the Dominican Republic, set out to write a book that reveals the structural similarities of Caribbean economies of diverse colonial affiliation and the continuities of their experience through historical time. His purpose is to restore balance to an historiography that feeds the perception of the Caribbean as a region of “kaleidoscopic fragmentation”; which is, in his opinion

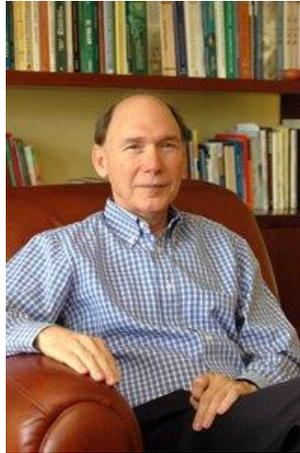
misleading, because when one looks closely at the structural continuities of the plantation system, one can understand the Caribbean only as an organic economic system, as a throbbing heart continuously pumping sugar and other commodities to the world market via the Atlantic, while at the same time consuming millions of lives forcefully extracted from Africa and other parts of the world. (x-xi).

The author’s intellectual debt to plantation theorists is evident, as is the influence of world systems theory. He returns to these themes in the Epilogue where he asserts

the plantation system (is) the underlying structure that made the Caribbean economies very similar to each other, despite ecological and political variations....The connections that linked the plantations in the Caribbean with Africa, Europe and North America, both before and after the Industrial Revolution, are crucial to understanding the emergence of capitalism as a world economic system.

No other institution played the role that the plantation did in integrating the Caribbean into the world economy. (309, my emphasis).

Moya Pons’s approach is that of the historian, but it is a history that is anchored on analysis of the economic motive for colonisation, war and forced migration; the structures that were created; the demographic shifts that came about and the social forces to which these gave rise. Behind the



Frank Moya Pons

sometimes bewildering succession of changes in colonial ownership, revolutions and restorations and ethnic interactions characteristic of the region's history; he seeks to show an underlying logic that constitutes the glue of the Caribbean experience. However, this is not a book of simple economic determinism. The particularities and variations that occur from size, topography, metropolitan idiosyncrasy, natural events and subaltern resistance are amply treated. Political developments in the Caribbean colonies form the backdrop--sometimes conditioned, at other times conditioning—to the evolution of Caribbean plantation economy; while social formations assume diverse forms.

The book is organised into twenty chapters whose subjects combine temporal sequence with thematic focus. This facilitates exposition of the underlying message. Each chapter is subdivided into sections which elaborate or nuance the chosen theme; the carefully titled section headings alert the reader to the flow of the narrative. Some chapters treat with the rise and fall of the Caribbean sugar economies as they evolved from the 16th to the early 20th centuries; highlighting the role played by colonial monopolies, free trade and slave trading; trends in production, exports and prices; and technological change leading to *centrales* and *colonos*. Others feature the role of privateers and contraband, trade and wars; the American, French and Haitian Revolutions; abolitionism and crisis; new peasantries; migration and proletarians; and the emergence of sugar corporations. The author does not overlook the role played by other commodities: gold, indigo, ginger, cattle, salt, tobacco, and coffee all appear on stage, even if eventually they become only side shows to sugar. The clarity of the exposition and the ability to maintain a connecting thread to the narrative is a remarkable accomplishment, given the vastness and complexity of the subjects covered. It could only be possible by an author who has total command over his material, as Moya Pons obviously does.

Wisely, in a book of this kind, Moya Pons has chosen not to clutter his text with footnotes or endnotes or with bibliographic references in the body of the text. Instead, he has furnished the reader with an appendix containing a bibliographic guide to each chapter. This guide itself is a resource worth having. The list runs to twenty six printed pages, or at least 400 entries, mostly of books, in three regional languages. He tells us, perhaps ambitiously, that this is "essential reading"! Another pleasing result of this is that data on production, prices and labour flows are

woven into the narrative, rather than placed in separate statistical tables. The emphasis is on telling the story, not on proving a case. The drawback is that it is difficult to easily compare data, say, on sugar production from country to country or from time period to time period. In that sense, while this is a book of great scholarship, it is not, strictly speaking, a scholarly book. The researcher can use it as an introduction to the subject and as a guide to further reading on the particular subjects of interest. The student of plantation economy will use it as a concise overview of its evolution through time.

Historians will, undoubtedly, find specific statements of fact or historical interpretation to take issue with in Moya Pons's text. My own interest is that of a development economist with a long standing interest in the theory of plantation economy. From this standpoint it would have been useful to see more discussion of the economic consequences of the plantation system on the local economy in the different permutations highlighted in the book. The subject is discussed in a chapter on Caribbean Sugar Economies in the Eighteenth Century (Ch. 8). The author stresses that at each stage of the cycle in the sugar business, the benefit accrued to the entrepreneur; and that the financing of the sugar colonies, initially coming from European capital, "ended up reversing itself". The profits helped to finance the development of commercial and industrial capitalism in Europe, and very little was invested in local infrastructure (p. 106). The chapter on Caribbean Trade Circuits in the Eighteenth Century (Ch. 9) also shows how the sugar economies were enmeshed in the evolving world system of capitalist trade and production. Throughout the book, we also see how the collapse of commodity-based export economies leads to prolonged depression and crisis in the local economy. In some cases, especially in the nineteenth century, the rise of 'new peasantries' is directly attributable to this. However, the author does not return to the issue of development consequences in the context of the decline of the 'old' sugar economies in the British and French West Indies, and the rise of the 'new' sugar economies in the Spanish and U.S. Caribbean, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here, as elsewhere, the focus is on the associated demographic and social changes.

One is cautious in suggesting this subject should have been treated, however, for to do so would have imposed an additional burden of content and length on a book whose breadth and depth are already quite considerable. The author is well aware of this book's limitations, as he tells us that he had to omit important social and cultural subjects including how the slaves lived their lives, the role of families and women, many political events, health and education, and cultural and religious phenomena (p. xi). As he rightly says, to have dealt with all this would have necessitated a multi-volume work: in order to show the structural uniformity of Caribbean economies, he had to restrict himself to some basic variables.

The story ends with the impact of the Great Depression of the 1930s. The author sees this as great turning point: after this, Caribbean sugar goes into secular decline and the structural uniformity of the regional economies fades away. Theorists of Plantation Economy will argue that the structural uniformities continued, in the form of the new industries established by multinational corporations in the Caribbean in the twentieth century. That is the thesis of the recently published book co-authored by Lloyd Best and Kari Polanyi Levitt¹. Moya Pons's book serves as an excellent companion to Best and Levitt, in providing the actual historical contours of the ebb and flow of Caribbean plantation economies over four and a half centuries. Other scholars will see the divergence in Caribbean economic trajectories as starting much earlier in

historical time. Diversity of experience is one of the central features of Bulmer-Thomas's recent book on Caribbean economic development since the Napoleonic Wars²; which deals in detail with the evolution of production and trade in individual Caribbean economies. For a book of this kind, Moya Pons's text acts as both introduction and provider of the 'Big Picture'. To this reviewer, therefore, Moya Pons's book succeeds both as a complement to historically-based economic theorising; and as an introduction to detailed history.

¹ Lloyd Best and Kari Polanyi Levitt, *Essays in the Theory of Plantation Economy*. Mona: UWI Press, 2009

² Victor Bulmer-Thomas, *The Economic History of the Caribbean since the Napoleonic Wars*. Cambridge, 2012