Testing the Chains

Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies
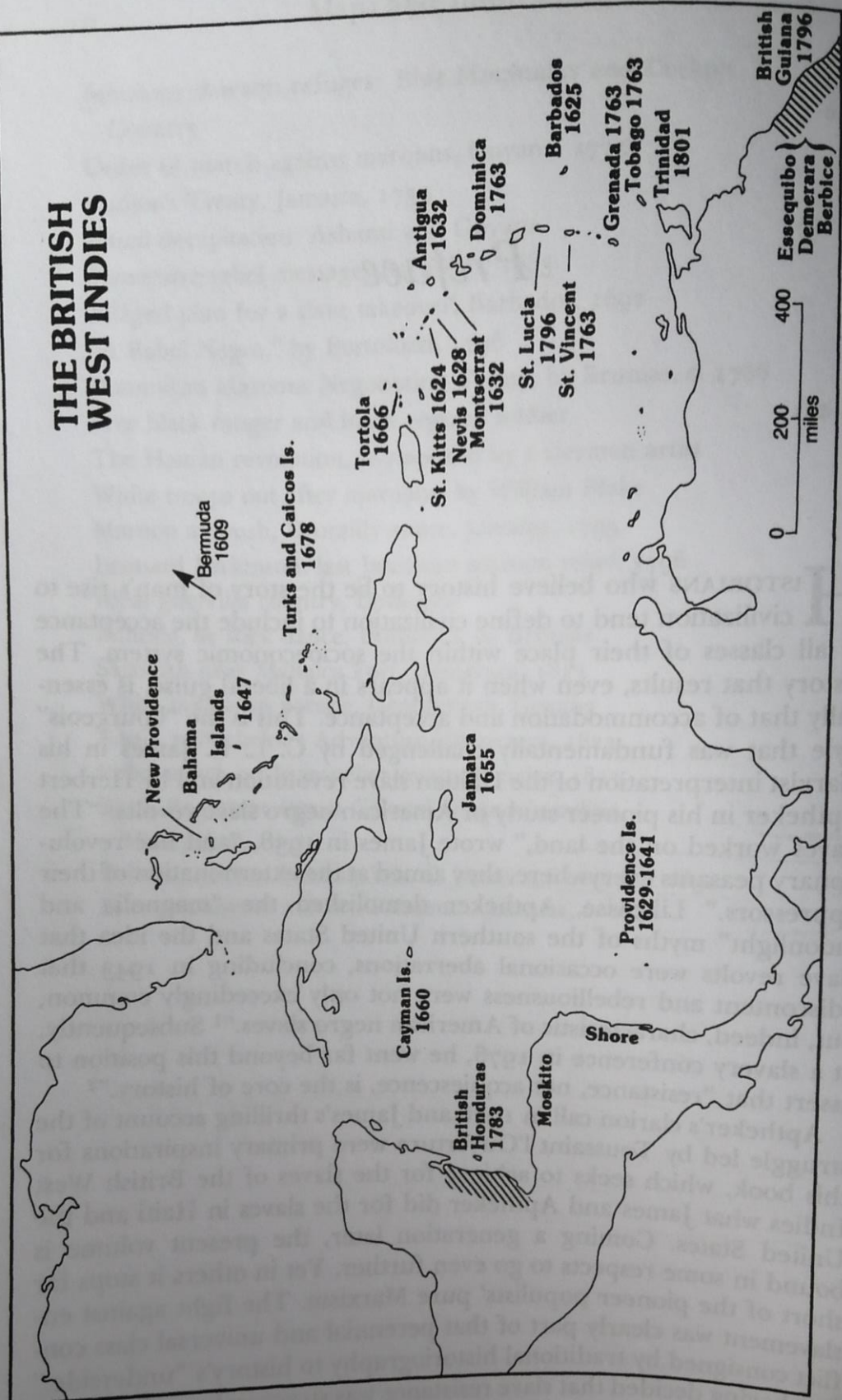
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Preface

HISTORIANS who believe history to be the story of man's rise to civilization tend to define civilization to include the acceptance by all classes of their place within the socioeconomic system. The history that results, even when it appears in a liberal guise, is essentially that of accommodation and acceptance. This is the "bourgeois" style that was fundamentally challenged by C. L. R. James in his Marxist interpretation of the Haitian slave revolution and by Herbert Aptheker in his pioneer study of American negro slave revolts. "The slaves worked on the land," wrote James in 1938, "and like revolutionary peasants everywhere, they aimed at the extermination of their oppressors." Likewise, Aptheker demolished the "magnolia and moonlight" myths of the southern United States and the idea that slave revolts were occasional aberrations, concluding in 1943 that "discontent and rebelliousness were not only exceedingly common, but, indeed, characteristic of American negro slaves."[1] Subsequently, at a slavery conference in 1976, he went far beyond this position to assert that "resistance, not acquiescence, is the core of history."[2]

Aptheker's clarion call in 1976 and James's thrilling account of the struggle led by Toussaint l'Ouverture were primary inspirations for this book, which seeks to achieve for the slaves of the British West Indies what James and Aptheker did for the slaves in Haiti and the United States. Coming a generation later, the present volume is bound in some respects to go even further. Yet in others it stops far short of the pioneer populists' pure Marxism. The fight against enslavement was clearly part of that perennial and universal class conflict consigned by traditional historiography to history's "underside." But having decided that slave resistance was structurally endemic and

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THE BRITISH WEST INDIES

Bermuda 1609

New Providence

Bahama Islands 1647

Turks and Caicos Is. 1678

Tortola 1666

St. Kitts 1624
Nevis 1628
Montserrat 1632

Antigua 1632

Dominica 1763

St. Lucia 1796
St. Vincent 1763

Barbados 1625

Grenada 1763
Tobago 1763

Trinidad 1801

Essequibo
Demerara
Berbice
British Guiana 1796

Jamaica 1655

Cayman Is. 1660

Providence Is. 1629-1641

British Honduras 1783

Moskito Shore

0   200   400
miles

MAP 1

+ similarity/difference (handwritten)

that white writers have more often than not distorted the account, one is still left with the need to analyze the degrees of resistance open to slaves and the variations in revolts from place to place and from time to time. Doing so involves delimiting the indistinct boundary between resistance and accommodation, or between true political resistance and apparent accommodation. One must decide not just why at a given time some slaves rebelled, while others did not, but—most difficult and contentious of all—why, at every stage, some actually collaborated with the dominant class, while others risked all to rebel. Historians who seek to restore an independent ideology to the Afro-American slaves must acknowledge that such an ideology was surely more complex than the simple reactive ethos suggested by Aptheker and James.

Above all, the ideology of resistance to slavery in the Americas was not simply an extension of an external ideology, any more than Afro-American resistance was simply a phase in a progressive scenario dreamed up by certain Eurocentric historians. Yet the very idea that slave resistance was not an isolated phenomenon but part of a continuum is an aid to understanding. West Indian slaves inherited and melded traditions of resistance both from the Amerindians, whom they largely replaced, and from their own African forebears. They also bequeathed a tradition to their Afro-Caribbean descendants, who formed a downtrodden black majority even after formal slavery had ended. The Amerindian and African backgrounds form the substance of my Introduction; what happened to the former slaves after slavery ended is the subject of the book's brief Epilogue.

In considering actual slave revolts, I started with a rather oversimple formulation predicating a tripartite, sequential model of slave revolts and a set of four "conducive situations." I divided revolts into those of the maroon type, those led by unassimilated Africans, and the late slave rebellions led by creole (colony-born) members of the slave elite. My preliminary analysis borrowed from many different theories of popular rebellion and suggested that resistance might flare into revolt under conditions of extreme oppression, where unassimilable elements were found in the subject population, where the forces of control were weakened, or where slave expectations became frustrated.[3]

At the general level this analysis still has its merits, chief being its concentration on intrinsic forces and the playing down of abstract and extraneous influences, including all the ideologies of the Age of Revolution (1775–1815) that loom so large in many accounts. Yet as I wrote I found it necessary to refine and expand my initial analysis

considerably. The three-phase model was overly neat and needed overhauling, at least in its simple sequentiality, and the allegedly causal elements required much greater articulation, if not outright rejection where they were directly contradictory. The French and Haitian revolutions called for rather more emphasis than they had previously been given, although I was unable to go as far as Eugene Genovese's argument that they marked a decisive watershed between simple rebellions and true revolution.[4] On a narrower scale, besides, it was necessary to distinguish more clearly between mere plots and actual revolts, or rather, between different types of plot. All plots that came to nothing were clearly of a lesser level of political achievement than a prolonged revolt or a mass running away. But some plots were simply aborted revolts, at least potentially similar, while others were barely embryonic, mere mutterings of discontent, even figments of the masters' fears, rather than real threats to the regime.

One of my basic assumptions is that the slave system was shaped largely by the slaves. But one must not understate the complexity of the shaping. The first, and shortest, of this book's five parts analyzes plantation slave society and reevaluates forms of resistance short of rebellion with the slaves' influence on the system in mind. I attempt to go beyond the simple analysis of day-to-day resistance first proposed by Raymond and Alice Bauer in 1942 and the rising scale of non-cooperation proposed by Kenneth Stampp in 1956 to adopt many of the refinements made by George Frederickson and Christopher Lasch in a seminal article in 1967.[5] Not only can slave antagonism toward imposed labor and the master class (feelings like those of all subordinated people) be divided into simple noncooperation and true political resistance, but slave attitudes can be seen as resulting from choice and calculation. Different decisions could make the same slaves under different conditions appear cringingly docile, simply content, annoyingly troublesome, or implacably rebellious. By emphasizing the effects of change, my view dismisses the simple dichotomies between accommodation and resistance, accommodators and resisters, and sheds light on the issue of whether slaves were more likely to rebel if driven on tight reins or on loose. But I stop short of the conclusion of Frederickson and Lasch that stability and a sense of belonging on the part of the slaves were the slaveowners' chief allies and that change itself was most dangerous to them.

Part One is an extended prolegomenon. The core of the book is, naturally, a consideration of actual slave plots and revolts. Though I confine myself to the British West Indies, which never comprised more than a third of the Caribbean region or included more than a

quarter of the total of Afro-American slaves, this work cannot hope to be definitive. Such an enterprise would require several volumes. The present book describes all major revolts and nearly all serious plots and supplies a comprehensive list in a chronology at the end. Yet I have, inevitably, been selective. My choice was determined not by the admitted patchiness of source materials but by a conscious decision to give due prominence to the salient outbreaks while otherwise selecting examples that would most vividly illustrate themes and variations. Constraints of space also led me to concentrate on the true plantation colonies, excluding, for example, details of the many plots and small-scale outbreaks that occurred in the nonplantation colonies of Bermuda and British Honduras and unrest short of armed rebellion in the "marginal" colonies of The Bahamas, Tortola, and Antigua that occurred at the same time as serious revolts elsewhere late in the slavery period.[6]

Following my original formulation, Parts Two, Three, and Five deal successively with maroons (especially the Jamaican), with African-led revolts, and with the revolts that rose to a climax in the formative period between the ending of the British slave trade in 1808 and the freeing of the British slaves in 1838. Part Four provides the rather more extended treatment I now think necessary of the transitional period that coincided with the American, French, and Haitian revolutions. These four core sections emphasize the interrelation, rather than the separation, of types and phases of revolt. They illustrate how the maroons continued to provide an admired example for rebellious slaves even after most maroon groups had come to terms with the slaveholding class and show that the pull of Mother Africa remained strong even after the umbilical cord had been cut in 1808. These sections also show that creole and elite slaves were prominent in slave unrest far earlier than has previously been thought: the two groups dominated the Jamaican slave plot of 1776 and were of critical importance in the Antiguan slave plot forty years earlier. Indeed, in Barbados, the first of the British sugar colonies, Governor Willoughby as early as 1668 said, in effect, We can control the Africans by mixing the tribes, but what will happen when all our slaves are creoles?[7] The discoveries that I have made all contribute to the devaluation of outside influences upon slave attitudes and behavior.

Slave revolts, particularly their leadership, were seldom as blind and insensate as the master class averred. At every stage there was far more planning and calculation than any whites recognized. Just as Caribs consciously played the English off against the French, and maroons cannily played off white smallholders and ranchers against

the owners of the capital and labor-intensive large plantations,[8] so within the plantations slaves secretly preserved their private integrity, exploiting the planters' fear of rebellion with constant threats, which cost the slaves less than actual revolt. Anansi, the spider-trickster of West African and Afro-Caribbean folklore, was as significant a hero to the slaves as were the real-life heroes Cudjoe, Nanny, and Tacky. Slave leaders were quite capable of utilizing the ideologies of the Age of Revolution when it suited them and were able to use the support of sympathetic liberals without subscribing to liberal ideas in more than a superficial way. The slaves even molded and used Christianity in ways beyond the imagination of earnest and self-deluded mission-aries.

What, then, motivated slaves? And what was their ideology? In brief, slaves always resisted slavery and the plantation system, rebel-ling where they could or had to. Their aim was that of all unfree people—that is, of the vast majority throughout history—freedom to make, or to re-create, a life of their own in the circumstances in which they found themselves. This desire, simple and informal though it was, amounted to a popular ideology even more important than that which justified and explained the slaves' subjugation.

The four situations conducive to slave rebellions that I originally identified possibly mislead as much as they inform. They do not ad-dress themselves as much to the causes as to the occasions or forms of slave revolts. Because they ignored the underlying ideology—or cul-ture—of resistance they were bound to seem contradictory and thus to perpetuate in the analysis the ignorance and puzzlement of con-temporary whites. Surely, some slaves—like all subject peoples—might rebel when they were treated too harshly; some slaves might rebel more readily than the others, and some might look especially for opportunities offered by the temporary weakness of the masters, while others might rebel only when their slow, insensible gains were threatened. Yet none of these conditions was necessarily conducive to uprising. In their arrogant assumption of cultural superiority and superior power, whites were lulled or confused by those slaves who worked well under severe conditions, by those slaves thought to be implacable who actually collaborated, by the numbers of slaves who volunteered for colonial defense or to fight against rebels, and above all by the slaves who appeared content with the gains they had achieved, or had been granted, in the last and creolizing phase of formal slavery.

At the very least one should reformulate the four conducive situa-tions, turning them around so as to see them not from the white masters' viewpoint but from that of the Afro-Caribbean slaves. A

more satisfying summary might conclude that oppression on the part of the masters was particularly likely where unassimilable elements were found but that violence nearly always provoked counterviolence and that the forces of control had to be constantly on the alert, for even where the planters accommodated the creolizing tendencies of their slaves, the planters did not tame the slaves or deflect forever their will to freedom.

When I look back over servile resistance in the British West Indies, two overall interpretations seem possible. In one sense there was clearly a continuum of active slave resistance, which connected the Amerindians' defense of their heritage and the Africans' resistance in Africa to shipboard "mutinies" on the Middle Passage, resistance in the plantations short of rebellion, maroon activity, African-type rebellions, and the more sophisticated late Afro-Caribbean revolts. In another sense, one might argue that all these forms of resistance worked inexorably toward a climax that resulted in slave emancipation when the time was ripe.

Of the two interpretations, the latter can be plausibly argued, but I prefer the former, because whether or not the slaves were instrumental in the passage of the emancipation acts of 1834 and 1838, the notion that an unequivocal victory was achieved at this time is an exaggeration, if not a dangerous myth. Only if one were gifted with Marxist optimism could one conclude that history did, and does, go forward, that the former slaves formed a class of independent commodity producers in the essential intermediate phase, and that the Revolution is around the corner, if not quite here. Certainly Amerindian, maroon, and slave resistance has already entered the official mythology of independent countries throughout the Caribbean region, along with worthy campaigns to bring dignity and respect to Afro-Caribbean peasants and their culture. It is somewhat doubtful that the spirit represented by the splendid statue *Le marron inconnu* in front of Duvalier's palace in Port-au-Prince is quite the same as that expressed in the designation of Cuffy, Nanny the Maroon, Samuel Sharpe, and Julien Fédon as Heroes of Guyana, Jamaica, and Grenada or in the official attitude of the Cuban regime to Hatuey the Arawak and Esteban Montejo the runaway slave. But what the following chapters can do for such heroes, and for the masses they led and symbolize, is to disentangle myths from reality, whether the myths are those of former masters or those of former slaves.

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