

PETRAS, ELIZABETH MCLEAN. *Jamaican Labor Migration. White Capital and Black Labor, 1850–1930*. Westview Press, Boulder, London 1988. x, 297 pp. \$ 31.50; £ 23.50.

Elizabeth Petras's book neatly combines careful historical scholarship with an analytical framework derived from an appreciation of the political economy of the island – in its national, regional and international context. Her starting point is the dynamics of migration seen from the Jamaican end. In this sense, her account complements and ramifies previous work that has either seen Jamaican migration from the perspective of the labour-importing country, or has tackled only a small episode in the migration history of the island.

In her opening chapter, Petras shows how a surplus population arose with the collapse of the plantation system and the inability of the former Jamaican slaves to constitute themselves as a viable peasantry. The explanations for this failure are complex, but they included the capacity of white capital to restrict the amount and quality of black land ownership and to interpose itself at the profitable end of sugar production – continuing to refine and market cane grown by small proprietors. But the endeavours of Jamaican plantation owners were only part of the story – free trade and the competition from beet (which took one quarter of the world market as early as 1860), dethroned “King Sugar” precisely as emancipated blacks sought to compete. Finally, a point not made quite so clearly by Petras, Africans in Jamaicans were not, of course, an indigenous peasantry that had been displaced by capital (a common pattern); instead they were, arguably, already proletarianised. In this sense, emancipation simply released a tied proletariat, to become what Marx called a *vogelfrei* [unattached] proletariat. Even without international competition and the machinations of capital, the lack of a deep historical relationship to the land probably precluded a successful development of peasant proprietorship.

At any event, emancipated blacks can be seen as historically “primed” to move from involuntary to self-induced migration. Petras identifies three phases of labour in the period she surveys: (a) 1850–81, when Jamaicans were recruited to build the Panama railway; (b) 1882–1914 when they left to dig the Panama *canal*; and (c) 1921–29 when Jamaicans worked in Cuba or Costa Rica in US companies or as domestics.

Petras documents the quite different phases in the Panama constructions, the changes in the composition of capital, the frequent interruptions and misfortunes in the projected “thruway” across the isthmus. The railway company at first recruited displaced artisans, craftsmen and skilled workers from Kingston, but these were soon joined by workers from agricultural households, trying to maintain their plots by leaving women at home and supplementing household income from work in Panama. It was a hazardous calculation – one in five of the 1,200 black workers died from the appalling conditions on the site. By 1860, the railway was a commercial success, and the company shipped some indigent workers back to Jamaica. Others, however, settled into a precarious existence in Colón and Panama City.

The trickle from Jamaica to Panama turned into a flood in the second migration phase. The canal was altogether a more precarious enterprise than the railway, with French national pride (the much-publicized *de Lesseps* of Suez canal fame headed

the enterprise) substituting for rational calculation. Because of a complex pattern of recruitment and return, the total number of Jamaicans who worked in Panama is difficult to estimate, but at the peak of construction by the French company, in October 1884, Jamaicans probably accounted for 15,000.

This time the death toll was horrific: yellow fever, malaria, typhoid, smallpox, pneumonia, dysentery, beri-beri, food poisoning, snake-bite and sunstroke disabled or killed about 80 per cent of the labourers and half of the French personnel. The natural conditions were, of course, highly adverse, but the toll of death, injury and sickness was much increased by the insistent demands of the shareholders for a fruitful return on their capital. Financial scandal reaching to the French cabinet finally sank the de Lesseps company in 1885, though a desultory French interest continued to 1904.

At this point US hegemony over the region displaced the over-extended French. The US engineers believed they could displace inefficient men with new marine technology, while low productivity amongst West Indians could be offset by the new “scientific management”. One aspect of “scientific management” was to bring poor European labourers from Spain and Italy to compete with the Jamaicans – whom the US planners thought were altogether too cocky and ill-disciplined. Though this tactic at first worked, European workers soon drifted off to more lucrative employment and the US Canal Commission found there was little alternative to the West Indians, recruitment of whom peaked in 1911–14. (In 1913, there were 42,262 employees on the pay-roll of the Commission.) With the completion of the canal, the much-needed workers turned into an embarrassment. Many were repatriated, others were recruited by United Fruit Company for the banana plantations in Costa Rica or by US sugar interests in Cuba.

While the story told by Petras mainly shows the dominance of white capital over black labour, she includes a short section towards the end of the book on the labour organisation, called “the Brotherhood”, amongst the Jamaican workers in Panama. I found this section tantalisingly brief and would have both liked more detail and more of a sense of how the 1919 strikes in Panama linked to the protests of black workers elsewhere in the world in the same year. The influence of Garveyism, for example, is barely mentioned: though the British Colonial Office records provide useful sources.

Despite this small shortcoming, this book provides a convincing narrative and, beyond that, the outlines of a theoretical framework related to the activation and deactivation of global, regional and national labour reserves. The book therefore has an additional value for those whose interests go beyond the purely historical.

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