

Black People, Enslaved Populations: Registration and Rights in the British Caribbean, 1787-1838

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In 1815, the abolitionist William Wilberforce introduced into the House of Commons a bill to prevent the importation of slaves into Britain's West Indian colonies. Emancipationists believed that, notwithstanding the 1807 Slave Trade Abolition Act, planters continued to purchase enslaved persons from other European colonies in the Greater Caribbean. Wilberforce's legislative initiative, known as the Slave Registry Bill, called for a census of blacks, administered by the British Parliament, containing statistics on all slave births, deaths, and sales. The Registry Bill thus attempted to use enumeration as a technique of colonial governance, but was vehemently opposed by the Caribbean planters as an infringement on their legislative autonomy. The Registry Bill, however, also galvanized enslaved persons' efforts to challenge the plantation system, as black people in the Caribbean interpreted the proposed legislative measure as a prelude to full emancipation. Indeed, one of the most significant uprisings in the Caribbean—the 1816 Bussa Rebellion in Barbados—was inspired by rumors (or “the mistaken idea,” as a contemporary report put it) that the Bill was in fact their manumission.

My paper concentrates on a range of literary and extra-literary sources—James Grainger's georgic poem *The Sugar-Cane* (1764), Maria Edgeworth's short story “The Grateful Negro” (1802), and judicial testimonies of enslaved rebels—to examine how disenfranchised Africans conducted politics in the revolutionary Atlantic. Taking the controversy over the Registry Bill as a pivotal moment between the founding of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade (1787) and emancipation (1838), I investigate how enslaved people aspired for what Steven Hahn in his seminal study of race and political democracy has termed “socially meaningful power.” Chattel slavery is the antithesis of democratic citizenship. An overwhelming number of African Caribbeans in the long eighteenth century were slaves, not subjects, with virtually no legal or economic rights. Yet, notwithstanding this putative legal nullity, relations between masters and slaves in practice were distinguished by considerable interdependency. Black people developed their ideas of rights and entitlements well before the revolutionary era in the realm of provisioning and petty production. They deemed the time allotted to them (in custom and law) to cultivate their provision grounds as rightfully theirs and hence inviolable. These customary rights gained a new urgency and legitimacy in the revolutionary period, as the enslaved began to demand additional time to work for themselves. The term “people” in current work on political democracy is largely synonymous with the inhabitants of the nation-state. As members of the diaspora, exiled from their native lands, enslaved Caribbeans were stateless people who lived in the extraterritorial space of the colony, outside of established structures of governance. Yet they waged struggles, individually and collectively, for meaningful control over their lives and labor, not to mention for their subjecthood. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of Africans were first-generation migrants who labored on sugar fields. Both the changing demographic profile of populations (that is, the proportion of Whites to Blacks, on the one hand, and of African-born slaves to creoles, on the other) in each colony and agrarian labor profoundly shaped Black people's political aspirations. Attention to labor and racial demography illuminates ideas that have become central to recent work on political democracy: rights, freedom, and sovereignty.