

[Richardson on Roberts, 'Slavery and the Enlightenment in the British Atlantic, 1750-1807'](#)

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Justin Roberts. *Slavery and the Enlightenment in the British Atlantic, 1750-1807*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. pgs. \$91.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-107-02585-1.

Reviewed by David Richardson (University of Hull) **Published on** H-Albion (April, 2014)
Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth

Justin Roberts has written a challenging and thought-provoking book. In it, he underlines the centrality of work and the conditions pertaining thereto to the lives of enslaved Africans in Barbados, Jamaica, and Virginia in the late eighteenth century. This period saw the onset of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, an event often linked to change in agriculture and to the emergence, among other things, of the factory system. Rising productivity in the latter was identified with the division of labor; long working hours; close supervision of factory operatives; and, most significantly for Roberts, a belief in the importance of labor discipline and the morally redemptive values of work as part of “benevolent” management ideas associated with the Enlightenment. Roberts’s goal is to assess the extent to which slave owners in British America appropriated such ideas as they sought to maximize output and productivity from their own labor forces. Readers of his book will detect the application to plantation slavery arguments associated with Edward Thompson about discipline and labor conditions in early industrial Britain. Students of slavery will also recognize parallels with the work of others, among them the late Mary Turner, who emphasized that enslaved Africans were essentially workers and who encouraged other historians to see such slaves as living at one extreme of a spectrum of Atlantic-wide labor regimes that included both free and coerced workers. In Roberts’s view, slavery in British America needs to be seen as a species of labor history, with similarities to and differences from other forms of labor in the English-speaking Atlantic world. His focus in this book is more on the similarities between factory and plantation labor than on their differences.

Management of workers’ time was key to labor discipline, whether the workers were free or enslaved. The factory bell became symbolic of British industrial capitalism. With plantation slavery, the slave owners’ logbook of slaves’ work time assumed a similar role, in Roberts’s view. His study revolves around analysis of the reported number of hours per day worked by slaves, the distribution of time between tasks as it related to different groups or gangs of slaves, the apportionment of such tasks by age and gender categories, the toll exacted on slaves by them, and the rates of absence through flight or sickness of slaves. The evidential base for his analysis is provided by annual work logs of four estates--Mount Vernon (northern Virginia), Newton and Seawell (southeast Barbados), and Prospect (northeast Jamaica)--for which detailed logs have survived for several years between 1787 and 1798. Partial logs, together with other papers for other estates, notably, in Barbados and eastern Jamaica, allow Roberts to extend the scope of his analysis back to the 1770s and forward to the early 1800s. The study’s core estates varied in size, slave numbers, the birthplace of the enslaved populations, and crop outputs. Together with the limited number of estates under study, this may be thought to raise questions about the representativeness of slaves’ experiences that Roberts is able to reveal. Though future studies of other plantation records may help to shed light on that issue,

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Roberts's comparative framework and detailed statistical analysis nevertheless offer acute and valuable insights into the different patterns and burdens of work encountered by enslaved Africans across the English-speaking Americas in the later eighteenth century. Whereas others have studied slaves' plantation life in one specific locality, Roberts offers a multipolar study of their lives that sheds light on important differences not only between the Chesapeake and Caribbean worlds of slavery but also within the Caribbean world of slavery. In this respect, Roberts has written an important book, providing for the later eighteenth century the more nuanced and comparative study of sugar production, plantation life, and slave demography in the Caribbean that one has come to associate with the research of Barry Higman, among others, for the period after British slave trade abolition in 1807.

Among Roberts's more important findings are the high costs to slaves of sugar cane holing and fertilizing relative to other tasks, the positive contribution of crop diversification and mix to slave labor productivity, and differences in the seasonal incidence of slave sickness among the plantations under review. These and other findings will provide further grist to ongoing arguments among historians about the relationship between work regimes and slave demography in the Americas. They may even provoke new thinking about slavery and the human costs of British industrialization. For, insofar as enslaved Africans in British America made a net contribution to Britain's industrial growth, as Eric Williams and others have argued, then perhaps the life experiences of those forced to labor to produce sugar, coffee, tobacco, and other goods for British consumers need to be included on the balance sheet of assessment of the living standards of British workers during the Industrial Revolution. This seems a logical extension of Roberts's insistence that such slaves were one part of an Atlantic-wide British laboring population that by the eighteenth century worked under varying degrees of coercion or freedom. It is also consistent with treatments of British abolitionism that highlight the empathy shown by some sections of the British working class with the plight of enslaved Africans in British America. Whether or not factoring in the well-being of the eight hundred thousand or so enslaved Africans living by 1800-34 under British rule would radically alter calculations of "British" workers living standards ca. 1750-1850 remains unclear, but it is one of many issues that Roberts's book demands that we should reflect upon.

The considerable merits of Roberts's book notwithstanding, he leaves open some important issues, the addressing of which may expose some limitations of his approach to the Atlantic as an arena of British-centered sociocultural change. Two issues might be noted here. First, though Roberts relies heavily on documentation generated by planters and their agents, he says little about the processes by which so-called British enlightened ideas relating to labor discipline were transplanted to the Americas. Maybe absenteeism by British Caribbean planters in Britain, where they might have been exposed to such ideas, as well as the correspondence of those planters with their attorneys and overseers in the West Indies had some part to play. Maybe, too, one needs to consider in this context the education of planters (absentee or otherwise), their library stocks, and the resulting literature that they read. Doubtless, other mechanisms of knowledge transfer were also involved, but in largely overlooking such mechanisms and focusing instead on what sort of ideas migrated rather than how they migrated, Roberts offers an, as yet, incomplete story of Enlightenment knowledge transfusion in the British Atlantic world. Second, while Roberts provides important new insights into the world of work of slaves, he provides little evidence, directly or indirectly, on how far Enlightenment ideas determined slaves' overall productivity performance. Following Adam Smith's strictures on the relative inefficiency of slave labor, and bearing in mind the difficulties of identifying precise sources

of productivity change historically, Roberts's reticence on this issue is perhaps understandable. There are, nevertheless, published estimates that show differentials in productivity performance among slaves in different parts of the Americas, but with colonies in the western Caribbean, including Jamaica, Saint-Domingue, and Cuba, leading the way in improvements in performance after 1750. Roberts overlooks such findings. They are, however, consistent with arguments by Robin Blackburn that emphasize the comparative advantage of Saint-Domingue in Caribbean sugar production before the 1791 slave uprising. They also suggest that efforts to discipline African captives and to raise output per capita among enslaved populations were not confined solely to British America. On the contrary, they were seemingly commonplace throughout an Atlantic world in which European nations competed against each other for economic advantage in colonial production.

Any suggestion that Roberts should widen his vision in seeking to explore how Enlightenment ideas in Europe influenced attitudes to, and the economic performance of, slave labor in the Americas should not detract from the considerable achievements of his book. In urging the need to view slave labor as part of a spectrum of labor conditions in the Atlantic world and to investigate comparatively the influence of European ideas on the life of slaves in different parts of the Americas, Roberts has opened up a line of research that will occupy him (and hopefully others) for some time to come. Historians will look forward with much anticipation to receiving the fruits of that research agenda.

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