

“The devil was in the Englishman that he makes everything work”: Implementing the Concept of “Work” to Reevaluate Sugar Production and Consumption in the Early Modern British Atlantic World

Neil Oatsvall and Vaughn Scribner
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Abstract

This article utilizes a scientific definition of “work”—understood as a process of energy transfers—to shift enslaved laborers and the environments they toiled within (and against) to the heart of the historical conversation. Though white Caribbean plantation owners and British colonial consumers often figure prominently in historical analysis of Caribbean sugar plantations and rum production, this article’s perspective necessarily relegates them to the fringe of the historical conversation. Even though those historical actors attempted to direct all the various forms of work on their plantations toward a profitable goal, they accomplished the least total work in the scientific sense. Ultimately, appreciating the preponderance of work necessary to create sugar and its byproducts impels our evolving comprehension of how humans interacted with the environment in the early modern Atlantic world and also demonstrates clear linkages between our destructive, consumer-driven present and past. Just as in the present day, agroecosystems were organized around the goal of creating products for blissfully unaware consumers in order to extract as much profit as possible from the work of humans and the environment, often with devastating outcomes for both human and non-human workers.