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An Archaeology of Social Space: Analyzing Coffee Plantations in Jamaica's Blue Mountains

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An Archaeology of Social Space: Analyzing Coffee Plantations in Jamaica's Blue Mountains, James A. Delle, 1998. Plenum, New York. xxi + 243 pp., tables, figures, bibliography, index. \$39.95 (cloth).

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Any archaeologist studying New World plantations appreciates that space is a material artifact in some sense, and few archaeologists have been able to ignore the class based oppression shaped by plantation spaces. Nevertheless, few African-American or plantation archaeologists have taken the somewhat enigmatic notion of space as their material focus, and even fewer have probed how plantation spaces can be related to everyday experience as well as capitalism's broader systemic relations. James Delle's *An Archaeology of Social Space: Analyzing Coffee Plantations in Jamaica's Blue Mountains* ambitiously tackles all these subjects and examines them in heretofore poorly studied Caribbean coffee plantations. Delle champions a historical archaeology that conceives its focus as the archaeology of capitalism, which is certainly among the most ambitious yet ambiguously defined subjects archaeology could tackle. Delle focuses his perspective on capitalism by documenting how periodic crises in worldwide capitalism reverberated throughout British colonial sectors like Jamaica and found material form in the reorganization and restructuring of myriad Jamaican plantation spaces. Delle complexly weaves political economic theory, scholarship on space, cartographic analysis, and primary documents into an interesting study of how one modest corner of the world negotiated the complex interactions between a world political economy and various groups with quite different interests.

Delle's research data comes from Jamaica's eastern highlands, which was a significant coffee producer in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Delle proposes to interpret the peoples in the region by understanding their relationships to broader socioeconomic currents and competing interests within the British colonial system and the island itself. This would seem a straightforward premise that would be well received in African-American archaeology, but Delle advocates a political economic theory that has not been warmly embraced by historical archaeologists. Readers hoping to find a record of excavated material goods from a handful of Jamaican quarters will find that Delle instead lays the foundation for such site specific studies and focuses his analysis on simply understanding what actually defines the complex entity of coffee plantation production. Rather than dwell on discrete assemblages of everyday material discards or quarters with an ambiguous relationship to broader socioeconomic structure, this book has a much broader and more ambitious scope; *i.e.*, Delle attempts to understand the fundamental conditions like racist ideology, world economics, and geography that held together this profoundly unequal society and made it possible at all. It seems unreasonable to launch into the

archaeology of something as novel as Jamaican coffee production and simply transfer our understandings of sugar or tobacco production elsewhere in the New World, so Delle aspires to provide a theoretical and historical structure within which we might begin to understand life in Jamaica. Yet at another level, the study is a general overview of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century capitalism, even though his data is overwhelmingly focused on the Yallahs River drainage in Jamaica's eastern highlands and has its clearest relevance in plantation archaeology.

For Delle, the fundamental feature of Jamaican plantation society is class conflict, especially the elite's efforts to maintain their social privileges and economic sway in the face of worldwide socioeconomic upheavals. Inevitably this means that a significant focus of the study must be on the small but influential class of men who turned to coffee production during the sugar's industry collapse in the late eighteenth century. Nevertheless, Delle's study also contains a rich collection of primary documents that underscore that planters' ideological vision of plantation space was utterly contested. Consequently, Delle renders Jamaican plantation space as a union of elite's ideological vision of how space should function, the social meaning these spaces assumed in everyday life across class and racial barriers, and the objective material culture of plantations.

Delle attacks these complex issues by providing a detailed exposition of his vision of capitalism, and probably the most novel dimension of this intellectual framework is his highlighting of the idea of "crisis." The book builds on a generally accepted Marxian recognition that class relations and space are directly related; to archaeologically understand why a space takes certain forms at particular moments we need to understand that capitalism periodically experiences crises in the circulation of capital, moments of change that are reflected in the material reorganization of space. One such crisis, Delle argues, came in the late eighteenth century, when Jamaica's once flourishing sugar industry began to experience rapidly decreasing profits. Smaller planters turned to coffee production when sugar prices began to fall because of, among other factors, competition from other sugar producing colonies, disruption of commodity trade during a series of late eighteenth-century wars, and shifts in trade and labor organization. During this period, a series of coffee plantations were established in the Yallahs River drainage, and coffee continued to be produced in the region even after the 1830s abolition of enslaved labor, which led to the rapid disappearance of such estates by mid-century.

Delle frames his analysis of specific plantations by spending a chapter examining what he calls "cognitive space"; *i.e.*, the space that the elite planters idealized and hoped to forge discipline among enslaved laborers. He then turns to an analysis of concrete plantations spaces based on cartography and plantation ruin surveys. This comparison of the imagined space of Jamaican plantations and the actual spaces of

enslaved, overseers, planters, and labor spaces on the plantations will likely offer some of the most interesting methodological insights for archaeologists who routinely wrestle with the discrepancies between dominant plans and more complex lived realities. Delle examines how discipline was experienced in these spaces by various members of plantation society, considering some of the mechanisms of domination and surveillance (*e.g.*, material culture such as stocks, or rules governing movement on and between plantations) as well as resistance (*e.g.*, feigned illness). The book does not contain a detailed study of any single plantation's excavated assemblage; instead, it lays the groundwork on which archaeologists might subsequently conduct intensive excavations and refine the myriad ways in which factions of plantation society contested inequalities in material spaces. Delle closes the study by examining the post-Emancipation transformation of coffee production, when most plantations disappeared or were subdivided into much smaller plots worked by peasant wage laborers.

Delle's study is complex, theoretically sophisticated, and provocative, and it provides a point of comparison and contrast for plantation archaeology in other regions. Yet it is just this sort of ambitious, sweeping, and clearly positioned framework that will provide a foundation for further case specific studies.