

From St Helena to Bencoolen: The British East India Company's Practices of Slavery and Slave Trading in the Eighteenth Century

This paper explores the British East India Company's official engagements with slave trading and the deployment of slave labor across its far-flung but nevertheless intimately connected territories, extending from St. Helena in the South Atlantic to Bencoolen on the west coast of Sumatra. This paper argues that the question of imported slave labor was central to both the practices of various Company authorities and affiliates, as well as discursive political economic contestation within and about the Company across the long eighteenth century. Contestation over slave labor took the form of intra-colonial rivalries and competition amongst the territories of the East India Company. For instance, the outbreak of rebellion in St. Domingue, an extremely profitable French sugar colony, in the 1790s produced a contentious debate over whether free labor in Bengal or slave labor in Bencoolen could produce higher quality sugar more cheaply than the other. Yet even though such a debate framed Bengal and Bencoolen as harboring different, if not entirely divorced, patterns of slavery and slave trading, and the territories of the East India Company more broadly presented a confusing patchwork of divergent policies and discursive regimes surrounding slavery; a territory's apparent commitment to ostensibly free labor did not eliminate the fact that slave trading as well as broader commodity and population exchange directed by administrative linkages bound these spaces together into regional and imperial economies. The fact of convergences and divergences in the Company's deployment of slave labor across its multiple territories illuminates the ways in which conceptions of the local and regional were integrated into an increasingly centralizing imperial model of administration. Debates over slave labor, thus, demonstrates both how the constitution and conduct of empire in the "East Indies" were being rearticulated in the late eighteenth century, as well as the porosity of the Atlantic and Indian ocean worlds, and the global British empire.