CHAPTER ONE

A Theoretical Overview

The recent academic study of women has brought about a profound critique of theory and methods in social science. Substantive areas have been revolutionized by consideration of women’s work and influence on culture and social life. And women’s studies has led to recognition that traditional, gender-bound analytical perspectives both hinder and inspire critical thought. Feminist influences on academic writing and research are distinct but not wholly separable from Marxian and other analytical strategies emphasizing the feelings and actions of underlying populations.

A parallel explosion of research and commentary on New World slavery has focused little on women. Extensive work on the demography of slave societies in the U.S. South and the Caribbean touches some dimensions of females’ experience, but in an indirect and shallow way. A major rethinking of New World slavery to account for women’s experience has only just begun. This book is meant as a contribution to that reconceptualization, an attempt to probe and recast major theoretical questions about slavery in light of research findings on Caribbean slave women’s position. It is also an effort to understand the work, family organization, and social status of Caribbean bondwomen.

Several notable recent works on women in the West Indies have laid the groundwork for new analytical strategies and constructs, with fresh data on slave women and pertinent theoretical insights. Mathurin (1974) follows Jamaican slave women through several significant eras, introducing new material on women’s roles in production, reproduction, and other areas of social life. Nanny and other Maroon and insurgent women slaves have come alive through the research of Kopytoff (1976) and Tuelon (1973). Barbara Bush’s (1981) contrast of free and slave women’s social status in the British West Indies reminds us that skin color, gender, and social position together conditioned slave women’s experience. Reddock (1985) raises the contradiction between production and reproduction, moving away from the simple categorization of slave women’s low fertility as an act of resistance or insurgence. Gautier (1985) touches all of these issues in her exposition and analysis of bondwomen’s lives in the French West Indies and, through discussion of women in Africa, traces indigenous sources of gender stratification among New World slaves.¹
In a broader sense the last twenty years of slave studies have laid the groundwork for a complete and critical study of slave women. Three debates have preoccupied scholars, each dominating the literature for nearly a decade [see Davis (1974) for a discussion of these and related questions]. The theme uniting these controversies is whether social structural entities, for example, the state, the law, and the symbolic and economic orders, define slaves' experiences or whether slaves' institutions and relationships, often informal and considered illegitimate by economic and political authorities, capture the essence of slavery. These and related debates are significantly altered, if not resolved, by examination of women's place. And in moving beyond these disputes in light of women's position, we lay the foundation of a broader analytic for studying slavery.

Let us turn, then, to three major areas of controversy in Caribbean slave studies: (1) the comparative treatment of slaves, (2) the continuing profitability of New World slavery, and (3) the phenomenological status of slaves.

**Comparative Treatment of Male and Female Slaves**

Historical accounts of New World slavery present a broad variation in the treatment of slaves, but horrific physical abuses of human beings were found throughout the Caribbean. There is general scholarly agreement that Spanish slave codes were more liberal than the British and French codes and that in the seventeenth century Spanish and Portuguese slave colonies exhibited relatively patriarchal master-slave relationships, that is, ones mediated by noneconomic ties. In 1946 Tannenbaum formalized the proposition advanced earlier by Freyre and nineteenth-century observers that imperial cultures and religious beliefs influenced slave treatment.

There were, briefly speaking, three slave systems in the Western Hemisphere. The British, American, Dutch and Danish were at one extreme, and the Spanish and Portuguese at the other. In between these two fell the French. The first of these groups is characterized by the fact that they had no effective slave tradition, no slave law, and that their religious institutions were little concerned about the Negro. At the other extreme there were both a slave law and a belief that the spiritual personality of the slave transcended his slave status. In between them the French suffered from the lack of a slave tradition and slave law, but did have the same principles as the Spaniards and Portuguese. If one were forced to arrange these systems of slavery in order of severity, the Dutch would stand as the hardest, the Portuguese as the mildest, and the French, in between, having elements of both. (Tannenbaum 1946, p. 65)
A plethora of studies reinforcing Tannenbaum’s hypothesis followed (see, for example, Klein 1967; Elkins 1976).

Critical reaction to Tannenbaum’s thesis was extensive (Sio 1965; Goveia 1960; Davis 1966). Genovese (1965) broke new theoretical ground in acknowledging regional and temporal variation in slave treatment and argued that imperial economic goals were more powerful determinants than culture or religion. And, he argued, the comparative development of industrial capitalism within the contours of a changing global economy influenced master-slave relationships and thus the treatment of slaves. Hence the experiences of slaves could shift dramatically with the fortunes and structural position of the metropolitan bourgeoisie and the state, as they did in the British West Indies during the seventeenth century (Dunn 1972). Or local industrial, agricultural, and commercial entrepreneurs could challenge imperial authority, as in Cuba, transforming a relatively “benign” form of slavery into a highly centralized and brutal system, demanding unprecedented levels of slave productivity (Knight 1970; Moreno Fraginals 1977, 1978).

Newer understandings of the foundation of variation in the treatment of slaves in comparative capitalist development are fuller and more complex than Tannenbaum’s earlier analysis. Indeed, many scholars are now contemptuous of discussing “treatment”: Slavery is profoundly inhuman and to detail its cruelty, superfluous and insensitive. It is agreed, however, that variations in daily experience occurred—in time, from one slave society to another, and across plantations on a single island. The theme of treatment has also broadened to include comparative labor productivity, diet, and living conditions, which are more readily quantifiable and more sensitive to variation within and among units of analysis than physical treatment of slaves.

Several traditional areas of scrutiny reveal differences in the treatment of males and females and warn us against the wholesale rejection of Tannenbaum’s thesis until the position of females has been more fully and deliberately studied. Certainly women experienced many of the psychological and physical abuses endured by men. Few punishments of males were not inflicted on females. But the general atmosphere of cruelty and the physical abuse of slaves by masters had slightly different expressions and implications for men and women.

There were, of course, variations in laws pertaining to the punishment of men, women, and children. The Spanish codes accorded more rights to slave women than did the British, French, Dutch, or Danish. But enforcement was neither universal nor consistent; throughout the Caribbean both male and female slaves were treated sadistically. As elsewhere where women have been violently abused, pregnant women were especially vulnerable to brutality (Davis 1966, p. 233). James (1963, p. 13) graphically describes an example of such terror: “When the hands and arms were tied to four posts on the ground,
the slave was said to undergo 'the four post.' The pregnant woman was not spared her 'four-post.' A hole was dug in the earth to accommodate the unborn child.' This disturbing passage suggests other dynamics too often ignored in discussion of the treatment of slaves. The white male master's relationship with black women slaves was intrinsically more complex than that with male slaves, influenced by gender conflicts, sexual tensions, and his ownership of her unborn children (Jordan 1968; Clinton 1982; Bush 1981; Hine 1979).

Two issues emerge, both suggesting an ambivalence among female slaves toward superordinate whites. First, sexual relationships between white male masters and female slaves were frequent in the Caribbean, particularly where white women were scarce (Morner 1973; Davis 1966; Mathurin 1974; Bush 1981). These liaisons were an important source of mobility for slave women and sometimes resulted in freedom for themselves and for the children born of such unions. Combined with the rigidity of the master-slave tie, sexual unions may have meant more mistreatment, especially sexual abuse, of women than has generally been acknowledged. Davis (1966, p. 228) cites the case of Brazil, where greater demands on slaves for productivity brought harsher treatment and more sadism in sexual relations between masters and slave women. In a similar way the master's attitude toward slaves' unborn children was necessarily contradictory and varied in time and place. Children were evidence of the sexual freedom that Europeans exaggerated, admired, and feared in slave communities, and—whether fathered by white or slave males—must have stirred sexual tensions and guilt. Pregnancy also marked a conflict between the planter's goals of labor productivity and reproduction of the labor force, suggesting another possible source of sadism and violence.

It is often remarked in documents of the day that women were harsher masters than men, especially toward female slaves. If this is true, the complicated relationship between free and slave women, both subordinates of white men, becomes significant (Clinton 1982; White 1985; Mathurin 1974); if false, the scapegoating of women masters by men in discussing abuse is itself rich in sociological implications (Gautier 1985, p. 35).

Finally, there are aspects of the treatment of slaves that only variations in metropolitan ethos seem to explain. For example, women were fewer in the Spanish West Indies than elsewhere and significantly lower priced. Supply factors do not wholly account for this discrepancy (Klein 1978). Neither does demand, for males' and females' levels of labor productivity were close. Early commentators believed that Spanish moral and religious beliefs discouraged the presence of women on estates, as proximity was believed to foster promiscuity (Humboldt 1960, p. 188). This contention is consistent with the argument that Spanish religious leaders respected the integrity of slaves' souls (Tannenbaum 1946). In the absence of other explanations, this ideologically based perspective must be considered to account for the predominance of male
slaves in the Spanish Caribbean, although it is likely that slaves’ treatment otherwise varied little with the national origin of slaveowners.

Living conditions and food consumption also differed for men and women. Estate managers and planters allocated resources to men and women equally, whereas children were to receive less. However, we do not know if ration plans for food, building supplies, huts, furniture, and other material goods were mediated by overseers or if slaves themselves redistributed goods, with more allotted to men and other privileged social groups. The question is especially pertinent to areas where food was not rationed but grown on provision grounds.

In the West Indies slaves generally had small garden plots, or “polincks.” Usually less than an acre, the gardens were apportioned to slaves for cultivation of legumes, grains, vegetables, and herbs. Livestock were occasionally tended as well. Unfortunately, records are sparse on how lands were divided and distributed. It appears that each adult slave received a provision plot, making possible land consolidation by families. Patterson (1976, p. 56) argues that women saw an advantage in living without mates with whom to compete for domestic authority and the social and economic rewards of successful farming and marketing. Slave women could group the provision grounds of their children, suggesting that in Jamaica, at least, children, too, controlled small parcels of land for food cultivation. Craton (1982, p. 50) qualifies Patterson’s interpretation:

From the very few records and descriptions of the grounds that have survived, it seems clear that the plots were allocated to heads of household and that these were predominantly male. The working of the grounds (and the smaller garden plots around the houses) was normally a family, almost proto-peasant, activity. Men, women, and children worked together as a household unit. . . . But in the division of labor the men decided what should be grown and did most of the planting and reaping, the children carried and weeded, and the women tended the house plot and domestic animals, cooking the provisions and carrying the surplus to market on Sunday.

Mintz (1974) agrees, contending that nowhere in West Indian slave history is the claim of women’s authority or control of the growing or marketing of provisions validated.

Other commentary suggests a middle ground between Patterson’s assertion of women’s economic power and Craton and Mintz’s depiction of gender hierarchy traditionally associated with agricultural production. Women did sometimes control provision grounds, but more often men were in charge. Women’s dominance in marketing is broadly asserted and upheld by historical evidence. A repetition of the West African pattern is suggested, with men
performing heavy agriculture and women trading produce. Jones (1982, p. 254) argues that the division of labor among New World slaves provided more gender equality than is common in agrarian societies and that "the more freedom [U.S.] slaves had in determining their own activities the more clearly emerged a distinct division of labor between the sexes."4

The relatively few nuclear families among Caribbean slaves suggests a greater production role for female slaves in the West Indies than in the U.S. South. This often translated into household authority and subordination of adult sons to the economic needs of their mothers and her other offspring.5 But with extensive evidence of male status in economic and social arenas, from their monopoly of skilled jobs to occasional intergenerational repetition of males' names, female heads of households may have suffered economic hardship along with relative autonomy, much as they do in industrial societies today.

The authority to disperse provision land and food among slaves was especially significant, for slaves everywhere in the Caribbean were often malnourished and generally underfed. With notable status within the slave community, males probably claimed more food from provision grounds or rations. It appears that young males were given more food than females, the elderly, the ill, and the disabled. Male labor productivity was generally assumed to be greater than females' and that of other apparently feeble groups, and, with males' superior place in the stratification system of slaves, differential access to rations was in all likelihood considered appropriate and legitimate by other bondmen and women. There is evidence, however, that female slaves and other categories of presumably weak workers were at some times as productive as male agricultural workers (Higman 1976a). Moreover, women slaves generally did arduous physical work throughout pregnancy. Were working women less able to meet nutritional requirements than men? And to what degree did male slaves themselves contribute to this inequality?

Males and females also enjoyed differential access to shelter in many settings. Masters sometimes built houses and allocated them to slaves, equally to households with and without male heads. Elsewhere slaves built their own huts. The historical record discloses cases of single women prevailing on others in the community to construct dwellings for them (Bennett 1958, pp. 32–33).

We can infer more certainly that living conditions—poor sanitation in slave villages, lack of adequate ventilation and warmth, and inadequate access to proteins and other nutrients—affected males and females differently. For example, females outlived male slaves, even in settings in which the females' work loads were extraordinarily heavy and increasing (Craton 1971, 1977). The consequences of brutal living conditions for women's fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth and for early infant survival were enormous, as emerging research reveals. It has long been assumed that women's promiscuity
depressed their fertility and led to reproductive diseases (Sheridan 1985, p. 226; Bennett 1958, p. 53). This is a regrettable bias, reflecting both a lack of certainty about slave women's sexual patterns and a lack of interest in what are surely more profound influences on reproduction—nutrition, sanitation, and physical comfort (Dunn 1977; Debien 1974).

A final quantifiable index of the differing treatment of male and female slaves is productivity. It appears that women were as productive as men in some periods of Caribbean slavery, for example, immediately preceding emancipation in Jamaica when, in the absence of young men, women, children, and older slaves often sustained prior levels of productivity. In general, the marginally lower prices paid for female slaves suggest lower productivity than was achieved by males. But the prices of male and female slaves varied little across Caribbean slave societies and time periods. It seems, then, that slaves of both genders labored more intensively over time in conjunction with the escalating demands of plantation agriculture and that female slaves were always considered useful workers and fully exploited.

The often heated and intense discussion of slave treatment has, then, bypassed important gender issues. Specifically, the differential treatment of male and female slaves in terms of physical abuse and cruelty, food consumption and shelter, and labor productivity has not been systematically studied. Yet differences emerge that alter the course of debate.

First, although general slave treatment coincides with changing fortunes of sugar monoculture and European patterns of consumption, women's treatment may not. The experiences of women are as much a function of the complex structure of status inequality influenced by colonial ideologies as of global or national conflicts and competitions. Women's position is further removed from global disputes than men's because of their subordinate position within a community of slaves and by gender itself, mediated in the master-slave relationship by racial differences.

Slavery and Industrial Capitalism

The second major area of theoretical debate within Caribbean slave studies concerns the continuing productivity of slave-based agriculture. A long tradition of research and commentary held that plantation slavery was finally inefficient, destroying soil fertility and the producer's competitive edge in international commodity markets. This process was especially marked, it is argued, in the Caribbean, where the Industrial Revolution mandated intensive production techniques. In 1944 Eric Williams (1966) claimed that Caribbean islands boomed and fell in productivity and profitability. But contemporary observers question this relationship, contending that planters were not shortsighted but often adopted productive techniques to preserve the
ecosystem in order to sustain profits and productivity. The latter view has received considerable attention in recent years and now commands the field (Anstey 1975; Drescher 1977, 1987; Engerman 1973; Eltis 1987; Solow and Engerman 1987).

The differential impact of external and internal dynamics on the rise and demise of Caribbean slavery has preoccupied Marxist scholars as well. They have generally supported Williams’s theory, regarding seventeenth- and eighteenth-century imperialism as a means of primitive capital accumulation. The possibility that master-slave relations do not mirror the labor-capital ties that define capitalism has, however, generated a great debate. The key question posed is whether labor relations or market relations are the essence of capitalism.

The most extreme statement of the market position is well known through the work of Wallerstein (1974, 1980) and others, who date the start of modern capitalism with fifteenth-century international expansion (for a review of this and related literature, see Chilcote 1984 and Wallerstein 1976). The world systems and “dependency” emphases constitute more than a semantic break from the classic Marxian definition of capitalism by production relations. They imply a dynamic that emphasizes profit making, or surplus accumulation, over other noneconomic aspects of human relations. Hence Genovese’s characterization of the slave-based economy in the U.S. South as seigneurial is rejected. Following the market definition of capitalism, noncapitalist dimensions of New World slavery, including seigneurial aspects of master-slave bonds, were disrupted by mercantilism and finally transformed into capitalism (Genovese 1965, 1976).

Hindess and Hirst (1975) have taken the structuralist epistemology of much dependency theory to buttress a more orthodox Marxist definition of slavery. They argue that slavery, like capitalism, is a mode of production that may articulate with (dominate or be dominated by) another mode of production. But slavery’s basic dynamics, founded on class relations, retain an integrity, modified perhaps by other dominating modes but finally preserved.

An odd conceptual alliance appears, then, between, on the one hand, Drescher, Engerman, and others who see slavery as a modern system of group relations compatible with industrial capitalism and, on the other hand, orthodox Marxists, who agree, by virtue of an epistemology that links holistic economic systems or, in Marxist parlance, modes of production. These views split, of course, on the question of internal contradictions. Marxists contend that systems hold and foster the seeds of their own failure. Neoclassical economics allows for infinite growth and development in an economic system, dependent finally on the creativity and energy of its leaders.

At the same time, dependency theory has reinforced Williams’s view of slavery. A continuum has formed from the Williams/dependency perspective
to the Marxist/neoclassical economics approach. Proponents of the Williams/dependency position define New World slavery as capitalist by virtue of its integration with fourteenth- through nineteenth-century international market relations. They also stress a cycle of productive expansion and decline influenced by worldwide trade. The Marxist/neoclassical view simultaneously emphasizes class relations and the long-term economic viability of the slave regimen. Its proponents recognize the strength and intensity of international economic exchange but consider its influence limited.

The implications for the study of women slaves in this multidimensional debate are significant, if heretofore unexplored. In the Williams/dependency analysis slave traders and owners found that women were undesirable because of their presumed deficiencies as laborers. Other reasons have been proffered for the dominance of men among African slaves by early observers, all focusing on the low supply of women rather than the high demand for men (Humboldt 1960; DuTertre 1958). But these explanations have received relatively little attention. They do not reinforce the influential principle introduced by Williams—that physical strength was at a premium on New World slave plantations and males' superiority in this regard was accepted and sought by slaveholders. Yet, with the end of the slave trade, young men were no longer available, and women and children often outnumbered men in the field, performing ably.

If, with the changing composition of the field labor force, Caribbean slave productivity remained constant, perhaps women were excluded for other reasons. Indeed, the price of female slaves was rarely more than 5 percent less than that paid for males. This important point suggests that slave owners saw less difference in the productivity of males and females than modern observers infer. Recent analysis of mid-nineteenth-century productivity in Jamaica demonstrates that women at least sometimes maintained the levels of productivity achieved by the formerly male-dominated work force. Supply and other factors must then be scrutinized to explain slave owners' apparent preference for male slaves, and the entire thrust of the Williams/dependency perspective must be questioned.

If weaknesses in the Williams/dependency view are highlighted in our analysis of Caribbean slave women's position, the other major perspective on New World slave economies also presents conceptual problems. Proponents of the Marxist/neoclassical economics position fail to acknowledge powerful tendencies toward dissolution in Caribbean slave societies rooted less in market constraints and pressures than in the social relations of slavery, including gender. At the end of the slave trade, when women slaves could not be purchased, their roles in field labor, food production, and reproduction were increasingly difficult to fulfill. These and other contradictions in New World slavery intensified and finally wrought a new mode of production, a no
less complex mixture, this time of capitalist plantation labor and peasant-based production and trade of commodities. No amount of capitalist ingenuity and aggressiveness could forestall the crises of slavery, neocapitalist economists' claims notwithstanding. But failure to attend to women's position in this complex drama makes it impossible to identify the forces that brought collapse and renders significant efforts to define and describe the slave mode of production cumbersome and overly abstract.

What contribution can the study of Caribbean slave women make to a synthesis of these two dramatically different perspectives on New World slave economies? World systems theorists have lately emphasized the household as a point of convergence (Smith et al., 1984). It has been argued that, although capitalism may dominate and finally change noncapitalist social relations, these relations must retain their internal dynamics to encourage capitalist production (Wolf 1982; Mintz 1978; Dupuy 1983). And it is within the household that precapitalist social relations and their ties to larger, dominating production systems are found. For example, the slave mode of production in the West Indies often provided for its own subsistence by slave-controlled growing of provisions or cultivation of food as another estate crop (Mintz 1974, 1978; Tomich 1976; Dupuy 1983) and in some locations through other income-generating activities, such as "hiring-out" of slaves to individuals and firms beyond the plantation. Such subsistence activities became more difficult to initiate and maintain with growing demands on slave labor. A rapid, linear destruction of the slave mode did not ensue, as the self-sufficiency of the slave population had to be nurtured for capitalism to operate smoothly and to grow. But the production of provisions, especially on slave-controlled lands, and other autonomous economic activities unrelated to the production of cash crops were constantly besieged.

I am suggesting, then, that it was not the inefficiency of slave production that brought slavery's end but the near impossibility of sustaining the slave population and increasing productivity. Whether this was a necessary economic tension or primarily the product of political and other external events is beyond the scope of this work. But women's changing situation can help to explain more precisely why slave societies gave way to internal and international pressures and rivalries. In general terms it appears that women had a long-standing and major role in food production and household maintenance. As their labor was required increasingly in commodity agriculture, slavery was perceived as inefficient and attacked by sectors of European and Caribbean states (Williams 1966). If women's productivity was not seriously at issue, why did the slave mode of production falter? International competition and soil infertility have been argued by Williams and dependency theorists. Rejecting this view, as Marxist/neoclassical advocates have done, we must look elsewhere for explanation.
I contend that an aging population of slaves, composed disproportionately of women, was asked to bear too many burdens in domestic, subsistence, and commodity production. Had rejuvenation of the population been possible, these tasks and more might have been accomplished. Caribbean slave women were never highly fertile for many reasons, including overwork and generally poor living and work conditions. At the end of the slave trade, slave masters ameliorated conditions, just as they demanded more labor from women of childbearing age. Productivity was maintained and mortality declined, but the birth rate failed to improve except where production had long since peaked and productivity demands ebbed. Voluntary and involuntary fertility combine here, we can safely infer, to show the limits of slaves' endurance and energy.

Demographic history has recently focused on such problems in Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere. Because the household is a seemingly inappropriate category of analysis for bonded people, we may easily miss the primary locus for decision making, contradiction, and crisis within Caribbean slave societies. The two dominating perspectives on the economic dynamics of slavery have focused on these major questions: Was New World slavery a capitalist, noncapitalist, or transitional system of production? Did external or internal forces bring decline and decay? Neither focus intrinsically deters us from consideration of women as an oppressed group among slaves; indeed in combination they enhance it. Yet women's position has been wholly ignored in theoretical debate. Tragically, the enormous and painful role played by women and other presumed weak groups in maintaining a still vital economic system has been underestimated; the costs of perpetuating this exploitation are obscured; and as a consequence major conceptual questions about slavery's functions and demise remain unresolved.

The household is a significant category for slavery in the New World as elsewhere, for it is there that many gender inequalities were expressed. Males and females had differential access to household economies, in particular, provision grounds. At the same time, Caribbean slave women experienced a high level of control in the growing and marketing of provisions. This economic sector fueled plantation production and eventually was destroyed by it. Women's economic power ebbed with productivity demands in the commodity sector, finally becoming less significant as male-dominated wage labor became the foundation for family economies in the postemancipation era.

Where collectivized growing of provisions by slaves under the supervision of estate managers was the norm, as in Barbados, both male and female slaves had little access to social status and authority. Still, gender equality was reduced by male control of skilled labor, the principal means of generating status and economic resources. Other areas, such as Cuba, that imported food represent a later stage in the movement of slave-based cash crop production
throughout the New World. Labor had become a source of gender inequality, with male strength and its legacy from an earlier period of agricultural production as its foundation.

**The Phenomenological Status of Slaves**

The social position of slaves has long perplexed and fascinated Western social scientists. Traditionally slaves have been conceptualized as property. Such definitions have generally had three dimensions: The slave is the property of another human being; his or her will is subject to another's authority; his or her labor and services are obtained through coercion (Davis 1966). Slave laws have generally treated slaves as animals, machinery, and other objects. Elkins (1976) introduced another dimension in the categorization of slaves as property: their dehumanization.

Davis and others have questioned this view, holding that slaves were never treated wholly as property. Masters recognized the humanity of slaves in several ways. Tannenbaum (1946) had earlier compared the treatment of slaves across European colonial governments. He argued that, although New World slaveholders treated slaves as property in law and practice, they sometimes saw slaves as *human* property. In the Spanish West Indies, for example, slavery was an external condition, beyond the souls of masters and slaves. “The distinction between slavery and freedom is a production of accident and misfortune, and the free man might have been a slave’’ (Tannenbaum 1946, p. 46). In the British, French, Dutch, and Danish West Indies slaveholders perceived bondmen and women as fully comparable to other forms of property.

There has long been discontent with the notion of slaves as chattel. Patterson (1982) calls for a sociological definition of slaves, one resting less on relationships codified by law and more on the symbolic expression of social relations. He describes slavery by three characteristics: (1) masters’ use of force against slaves, (2) the dishonoring of slaves, and (3) slaves’ natal alienation. The last point pertains most directly to social position. “The slave [was] denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a genealogical isolate’’ (Patterson 1982, p. 5). Put more strongly, the slave was “socially dead.” Slaves formed social bonds, of course, but they were not recognized as legitimate by the state or social elite. Family and friendship ties had meaning only within the slave community; in the symbolic order slaves were “bondless.”

Perspectives of the slave as property or as natally alienated hold or imply that males and females were viewed in structurally similar terms. As
property, males and females alike were bought and sold, with profitability always overwhelming considerations of sexuality, friendship, and affection. Within the slave community slave men lost authority over women and children, itself sometimes conceptualized as a property relationship. "Natal alienation" similarly obliterates the meaning of informal relationships between master and slave and within the slave community. But, as Davis (1966, p. 59) notes, "bondwomen have always been the victims of sexual exploitation, which was perhaps the clearest recognition of their humanity.' Slaveholders often sired and later freed the children of slave women, suggesting reciprocal relations accompanied perhaps by affection and respect.

Much recent literature on slavery has treated the informal social ties of slaves, emphasizing their strength and endurance. In the U.S. South the frequency of nuclear families has been proven (Blassingame 1972; Genovese 1976; Fogel and Engerman 1974). Gutman (1977) has demonstrated that kinship ties endured and remained important to slaves over several generations. In the West Indies a high incidence of the formation of nuclear families has been found in some areas, eras, and units of production (Craton 1978, 1979; Higman 1976b, 1978). Of significance is the shift in focus away from the state level and its manifestation of the slaves' position in law, and the social structure, with its symbolic and cultural expressions of the slaves' status, to the slaves' community. In other words, "history from below" is advocated, with slaves' creation of culture more significant than that of more powerful social and political forces.

The deep epistemological debate over how to study oppressed people is confounding. Both sides claim a close affinity with underlying classes and groups. The study of state and social structure seems to ignore the values, behavior, intentions, and actions of slaves. On the other hand, slaves' culture and struggles were always impeded and framed by symbolic and legal orders. Variations on this debate have, of course, preoccupied scholars in all the social sciences, including women's studies. Its resolution may not be possible, and efforts are certainly beyond our scope here. A suitable goal is to establish some limits of both approaches for the study of Caribbean slave women's position.

Theories based on elite and state conceptions of the position of slaves manifest a fundamental and serious weakness in their failure to qualify the assertion that male and female slaves were equal before the law and in the symbolic order of the society. Slave status per se differentiated the free from the enslaved; no slave, male or female, ever attained greater status than any free human being. But this equality did not translate into equity among slaves precisely because slave masters treated male and female slaves differently. Slave men, by virtue of their greater access to resources (skilled positions, hiring out, provision gardens), had status and authority over slave women and children. And women's greater access to manumissions, domestic work, sexual unions with masters, and the potential for bearing free children gave
them an advantage over slave men. Clearly a dialectic of gender and sexual relations must be superimposed on status for status to be an effective construct for understanding the position of slaves.  

Are women and men, even among slaves, equally subject to natal alienation? On the face of it, yes; women, men, and children could be bought and sold away from kin. But feminist studies have reminded us that the mother-child bond is unique and places women in a structural position that generally involves more social ties than men enjoy, especially when men are not in institutionalized familial roles. Again, focus on the categorical nature of the position of slaves has deterred us from discerning contrasts in informal social ties among males and females.

Scholars who have stressed slaves' creation of culture have also erred conceptually by failing to consider women. Ironically, the ways in which this position has been expressed have directly opposite consequences. Craton (1979), Jones (1982, p. 258), Bush (1986), and others have contended that families formed among slaves not only as a gesture of autonomy but also as an act of political protest. Masters discouraged family formation in a variety of ways. To have a family was to flaunt an independent spirit. To a degree this interpretation is contrary to findings on the U.S. South and the Caribbean. At some times slave masters encouraged marriage and reproduction. On the other hand, many observers have contended that slave women, especially in the Caribbean, failed to have children as an act of alienation and political protest (Patterson 1969; Brathwaite 1971; Bush 1986; Gautier 1985). It has been argued as well that marriage and lasting conjugal unions were anathema to slaves, particularly as youths (Patterson 1969, p. 164). Yet Caribbean slave masters themselves discouraged marriage and childbearing.

My first line of criticism of the proposition that marriage or fertility—or its absence—was a form of political protest is simply that its advocates can’t have it both ways. Second, proponents of this approach seem to be claiming that slaves accepted their owners’ ideologies in failing to marry and have children. More important, however, we cannot possibly know how slaves felt about the impact on masters of their decisions to create children or kin. Historical parallels are not very informative on these questions, and they are sadly absent in the literature, especially literature on the United States. Genovese (1976) and Gutman (1977) have used music, folklore, and evidence of kin networks to demonstrate the dearness of kin to slaves, but this hardly establishes the intentions of slaves to create kin, particularly in response to political motivations.

I refer once more to recent materialist work on households in articulating systems of production. We can establish material incentives for childbearing, family formation, and family maintenance, although, of course, materialist motives themselves are not demonstrable through historical evidence. Following this approach, we can infer that children were economically valuable in
Theoretical Overview

15

the U.S. South and in some Caribbean settings at some times. These material motives are also important in distinguishing male and female status levels, resource bases, and relations with masters.

DEBATES ON SLAVERY, MARXISM, AND WOMEN'S STUDIES

Three extensive and complicated areas of debate and discussion within Caribbean slave studies form the theoretical basis of this book and suggest research questions. First, women's treatment differed from men's in both physical terms and in reference to the quantitatively determined areas now under heavy scrutiny—food, shelter, clothing, housing, provision grounds, and the like. But were these differences systematic, either in Tannenbaum's terms of religious and cultural variation or in the stages of capitalist development suggested by his critics?

Second, the economic basis of Caribbean slavery has been at issue. Was it a self-propelled mode of production or a form of international merchant capitalism? I set forth a synthesis of these approaches, focusing on the Caribbean slave household as a locus of subsistence production, where females enjoyed some status, authority, and economic power. When household production was limited, males were more powerful, as indicated by their access to skilled jobs and postemancipation proletarianization.

Finally, the social and cultural status of slaves has been debated by those who favor a structural explanation based on symbolic and legal orders and by those advocating the study of the culture of working peoples. Structural explanations, based on slaves as property or as natally alienated, tend to equalize males and females when such an analysis is not warranted by the data. Those who recognize the integrity of slave culture interpret slaves' emotions and political intentions, also without basis. A materialist strategy that acknowledges slaves' economic motives for status in a society with strong structural barriers to mobility and social change is advocated.

My responses to these areas of debate are drawn from a broad Marxian perspective and favor specific analytics and categories. New World slavery is, for me, best understood as a series of social formations, combining non-capitalist modes of production, including slavery, with mercantile capitalism. Locating the interconnections of modes of production in households advances the analysis of slavery, patriarchy, and gender. Some phenomena are best described as rooted in ideologies, the material bases of which are unclear but finally determinant. The Marxian study of Caribbean slave women benefits from reference to other sources and perspectives that have focused on gender directly.

Women's studies has blossomed in recent years and has presented a surprisingly uniform body of literature on the cross-cultural position of
women. There is strong agreement among comparativists that the development of advanced agriculture generally diminishes women’s status (Boserup 1970; Sanday 1981; Goody 1976; Blumberg 1978). Cultivation of crops for sale generally puts a premium on male strength and undermines the crucial economic roles women perform in hunter-gatherer, horticultural, and simple agrarian societies.

New World slavery marked major advances in agriculture, expressed in the plantation form of production. Males were dominant in skilled tasks and valued for their productivity in field agriculture, despite their only marginal superiority over female workers. Planters’ and slaves’ overestimation of relative male strength may simply reflect West African and European peasant traditions, where males predominated in part because females’ physical capacities were channeled to childbearing. Women slaves in the Caribbean bore few children and were involved in heavy labor in both plantation-based production and subsistence cultivation. Yet this emphasis on production over reproduction translated into status and authority only in the growing of provisions, and then only where carried out on individually controlled grounds and where a male head of household did not preempt females’ access to land.

New World slavery in its Caribbean form supports the finding that advanced forms of agriculture had a profound influence on women’s economic and social position and with the steady incorporation of industrial elements, plantation organization and technology further altered women’s status. Slave women’s energy was almost fully applied to agricultural production, and their labor productivity nearly equaled men’s. Women’s social position too approached men’s. Yet gender stratification remained relevant, expressing another tragic irony of Caribbean slavery: that with women working as hard as men, in the same jobs and generally as competently, gender was an important basis of social hierarchy.

The parallels of Caribbean plantation slavery to modern industrial society are conspicuous. As modern wage workers have entered industrial and service employment, the birth rate has dropped and women have been drawn into previously male provinces of work. At the same time, women’s economic power and social status have generally diminished, although gains in social autonomy and women’s recent movement into higher-level occupational slots have been compensating trends (Chafetz 1984; Blumberg 1978). Caribbean slave women’s enlarged role in field labor subjected them to routinized and continuous work, particularly as industrial components modified plantation organization. Independence from male slave authority figures followed. But without the corresponding economic gains that contemporary women have slowly achieved, slave women’s autonomy meant little more than isolation and estrangement from kin and other social ties.
Slaves became, then, commodities in much the way Marx understood wage laborers. Increasingly bondless Caribbean slaves were atomized and alienated. New World slavery was indeed a moment in the long-running proletarianization of Caribbean agricultural workers (Mintz 1978). It conferred on bonded workers a status much like the proletarian and foreshadowed capitalism's eclipse of other relations of production after emancipation. Slave women's part in the elaboration of changing modes of production was especially cruel. Victims of an agrarian system with industrial patterns of production, women worked as men but lacked even bondmen's status and authority.