

civic equality thinkable in eighteenth-century France, but it has also created, accommodated, and reinforced forms of inequality and oppression ever since.

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SURANYI, ANNA. *Indentured Servitude. Unfree Labour and Citizenship in the British Colonies*. [States, People, and the History of Social Change, Vol. 4.] McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal [etc.] 2021. xiv, 278 pp. Ill. Cad. \$130.00. (Paper: Cad. \$37.95.)

In 1654, an Irish boy named Ricckett Mecane was kidnapped and shipped to Maryland, then sold as an indentured servant to Thomas Gerrard. In 1661, Mecane claimed to be twenty-one and thus to have completed his term of service; Gerrard sought to extend his bondage for eight and a half more years. Mecane sued for his freedom, but was ordered to serve two more years, after which he appeared in court again – this time as a free man serving on a jury. In *Indentured Servitude: Unfree Labour and Citizenship in the British Colonies*, Anna Suranyi attends carefully to Mecane's story, revisiting it throughout the book to explain how his suit exposes various “contradictory realities” of indenture (p. 3). As one of about 320,000 servant men, women, and children who sailed from British ports to the colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Mecane provides a case study of servants' lived experience of the continuum of unfreedom that characterized the legal and labor culture of the early modern British Atlantic (pp. 16–17). Some traveled willingly, while others were coerced or taken by force. Some traveled under contract, others were indentured on arrival; some were transported criminals or rebels. But none, “[e]ven Irish servants like Ricckett Mecane”, were slaves (p. 86). Pointing to the contemporary relevance of Mecane's case, Suranyi addresses and dismisses the “pseudohistory of ‘Irish slavery’” that elides crucial distinctions between white indenture and the enslavement of Africans (pp. 65–70).

Such legal, political, and cultural distinctions between indenture and slavery have been essential to scholarly debates about the histories of race, slavery, capitalism, employment, and empire. Suranyi spotlights one key difference in particular: the fact that, unlike enslaved people of African descent, Mecane and other indentured servants could petition courts to sue their masters. Their ability to do so, and to receive some measure of justice in court, she argues, registers the state's acknowledgment that indentured servants were “rights-bearing members of colonial society” (p. 95). That so many servants did formally grieve their masters' abuses and violations of contract signifies their own “expanding sense of being participatory members of their society, with inalienable rights” (p. 15). By fostering a premise of legitimate rights shared by the state and some of its most vulnerable subjects, indenture was “a crucial factor in shaping ideals of citizenship on both sides of the Atlantic” (p. xii).

The book's examination of citizenship marks its primary contribution to existing scholarship.

Servants' access to courts is a key premise of that argument, and it also produced Suranyi's primary source base: legal proceedings from seventeenth-century Maryland, Virginia, Barbados, and Jamaica, the likeliest destinations of most British indentured servants (p. 99). Suranyi notes some of the legal and cultural differences among these colonies, but the approach is more comprehensive than comparative. She is thoughtful about the representativeness of these cases and the challenges of discerning servants' consent or voluntary submission to contract (p. 86). As Suranyi acknowledges, the necessary reliance on court cases skews the evidence of master-servant relations toward "abusive and polarized relations" (p. 91), but her ability to tease out nuance and ambiguity in them provides a framework for imagining a broad range of unrecorded experiences. Indenture contracts, government documents and laws, and literary sources like poems and autobiographies help to fill in that bigger picture and show how enmeshed the institution was with the broader culture. Like Mecane's case, the autobiography of Quaker minister Elizabeth Ashbridge weaves through the book, offering a rare first-person narrative account of an indentured woman's experience. Ashbridge is a canny author who uses irony and sentimental conventions to dramatize her experience of coercion, resistance, and willing submission. Yet, the plight of the servants preserved in the court documents is often no less compelling, because of Suranyi's good eye for telling details and her resourcefulness at extracting various themes and observations from them. The precarity of all the servants' lives comes through vividly, as does the effect of government policy on people who challenged the state's authority over their bodies and minds, violated its laws, failed to labor productively, or otherwise threatened to drain its purse.

These various forms of government intervention and public debates about them are the subject of the book's third and strongest chapter, "The Political Economy of Indenture". Suranyi charts the laws and policies that emerged to discipline people viewed as unmanageable and unproductive members of society – the poor, rebels, criminals, orphans – and to harness their labor to feed the engine of empire. She narrates the overlap between private entrepreneurial efforts to profit from the servant trade and state-sponsored ones. The proximity of indenture to crime and punishment is a throughline. Convicts could be sentenced to transportation as a respite from capital punishment. Lines between the legal trade in servants and the illegal trade were blurry. Efforts to crack down on "spiriting" were uneven; Parliament attempted to restrict illicit kidnapping and to ensure that servants were willing to serve, but most of these attempts failed and illegal trade persisted, leading to "simultaneous condemnation of spiriting and disinclination to remedy it" (p. 58). Yet, the debates themselves, Suranyi concludes, "envisioned a polity in which beggar boys as well as rebels who had conspired to bring down the government possessed inalienable natural and legal rights, and re-emphasized a model of government that governed with the consent and in the interests of the people" (p. 65).

In Chapter Four, Suranyi considers the central role of contract, presenting it as evidence of a "genuine effort on the part of the government as well as of the parties involved in these transactions to ensure legitimate and fair interactions" (p. 75).

She acknowledges that contracts were “not always a sufficient safeguard” against abusive masters and that possessing one did not mean a servant would prevail in court (p. 92). Yet, she ultimately insists that, “by employing provisions and language that bound both parties, the law was implicitly engaging in a leveling manoeuvre that recognized servants as rights-bearing subjects, even as paradoxically they were being locked into an unequal status” (p. 75). By providing those on the bottom rung of society with access to the world of contractual relations, or even by forcing them into it against their will, indentured servitude might well have acclimated them to a feeling of having rights and opportunities. But as an ambiguous condition whose outer boundaries were drawn at slavery and capital punishment, it also defined freedom down, both in the labor market and in the civic and political sphere. In so doing, it acclimated servants to submit voluntarily to various forms of coercion and shaped a concept of equality compatible with hierarchy.

By focusing on rights and citizenship, Suranyi presents indentured servants as important actors in the history of ideas. The book offers a textured account of how indenture developed to address the domestic concerns and imperial ambitions of the early modern British state; its effect on the servants themselves and those who profited from their labor; and its broad cultural significance as a discourse that shaped and transmitted ideas about rights, freedom, equality, race, gender, age, nation, and social mobility.

However, the book’s promise to show how indenture shaped citizenship is not fully realized. One reason for that is the book’s organization, which seems geared toward providing an accessible overview of various aspects of indenture. Many of the chapters are broadly thematic; titles include “Justifications of Servitude”, “Living in Servitude”, “Resistance to Servitude”, “Women in Indentured Servitude”, “Indentured Children”. Chapters conclude with paragraphs that summarize the preceding discussion and distill main points that connect to citizenship. These paragraphs are useful, especially for readers who might read only a chapter or two, but they also point to the book’s reliance on the texture of the cases and the voices they preserve for interest. On their own, the claims about citizenship can seem flat and unsurprising, and become repetitive over the course of the book. One way to animate those claims and flesh out the connections between the granular evidence and the larger assertions would be to put them in extended conversation with histories and theories of rights and citizenship; the author does so, but this conversation is confined primarily to two paragraphs in the introduction (pp. 14–15). Although Suranyi demonstrates her fluid grasp of current scholarship on indenture, she rarely clarifies explicitly how she is building upon, refining, or contesting those works and understandings. The absence of sustained scholarly debate and framing might make the book more appealing to general readers, but at some cost to its interest to those more familiar with the subject.

Suranyi’s centering of the servants themselves is admirable, but she could press the implications of her analysis further. She repeatedly qualifies her more sanguine conclusions, underscoring that indentured servitude was “inherently exploitative and abusive” (p. 65). By insisting on the salutary features of the system, she does not paper over its violence. She marks and laments how its fault lines and contradictions translated into exclusions from citizenship. But if we see it the way she asks us to, in

all its complexity, as an institution that enshrined and legitimated inequalities of all kinds along with “cultural norms expecting opportunity and social mobility” (p. 200), and if we grant her premise that it shaped modern citizenship, then how do we understand citizenship differently? How do its ambiguities shape property rights or birthright, which are so associated with citizenship? How did masters’ experience of contract shape citizenship and the forms of legitimate state authority? *Indentured Servitude* raises these and many other challenging questions well worth pursuing.

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