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PROBLEMS OF PEASANT AGRICULTURE IN THE BRITISH WEST INDIES

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THE history of the British West Indies differs from those of most other British tropical colonies, and it is impossible to appreciate the present problems of peasant agriculture in these islands without reference to their historical background.

The total area of the British West Indies is 7,700 square miles and the present population 2½ millions. Reference to a large-scale map shows that the islands are scattered over a wide expanse of sea. The use of the collective term, the British West Indies, tends to obscure the fact that the islands are divided into ten separate governments. Jamaica, which has the largest area and population, is nearly 1,000 miles from its nearest British West Indian neighbour. St. Kitts, Nevis, Antigua, and Montserrat constitute the Federation of the Leeward Islands, but each has its own legislature. Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Grenada make up the Windward Islands and have a Governor in common but no federal legislature. Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago complete the list of governments. The subdivision of the group into many separate governments has important consequences, the one of immediate importance being a lack of uniformity in policy concerning peasant agriculture. Each has pursued a policy of its own, and until recently there was no machinery for securing a regular interchange of experience and knowledge. I propose, therefore, to abbreviate my paper by restricting my remarks mainly, though not entirely, to the Leeward and Windward Islands.

The Leeward Islands were settled by the British early in the seventeenth century;[1] the Windward Islands, by contrast, were acquired by conquest from the French late in the eighteenth century. The British West Indies have been regarded so long as the stronghold of the plantocracy as to obscure the fact that the pioneer settlements consisted of smallholdings on which Englishmen and their families cultivated indigo, tobacco, and cotton with their own hands. 'Modern' sugar works were soon introduced into Barbados (1642) and the Leeward Islands. The smallholders were unable to meet the heavy expense of constructing sugar works and purchasing the horses or

[1] St. Christopher (St. Kitts) was first settled in 1623.

cattle to work the mills.[1] Moreover, Europeans were found incapable of the strenuous manual tasks in field and factory, and negro slaves from West Africa were rapidly substituted. The smallholders were bought out, and the land passed into the hands of a relatively few magnates who quickly amassed great fortunes. Thus from a very early stage 'King Sugar' and the plantocracies dominated the economic development of the islands.

The British West Indies differ from most other parts of the British tropics in that there is no large indigenous population. The aboriginal inhabitants, the Caribs, were few in number but fierce and warlike. Many of them were exterminated or deported, and most of the survivors were merged by miscegenation into the general population. The slaves were torn from their tribal associations in West Africa, herded together like cattle, and set to work in gangs. Their customs and languages have virtually disappeared. Hence the planters did not have to contend with local systems of land tenure, subsistence agriculture, and social and religious customs. The pioneer planters adopted the system of agriculture then current in England, and this proved so profitable that the revolutionary principles of rotational farming and alternate husbandry had no repercussion in the British West Indies.

The British West Indian islands were acquired during the time when Britain was trying to build up a strong self-sufficing Empire, and they fitted exceptionally well into that conception. They supplied sugar, which was previously obtainable only from foreign countries; they made little demand on the manpower of the mother country; they made the West African slave trade highly profitable and employed large numbers of British ships and sailors. The 'sugar islands' became the pampered pets of the old colonial system and were valued far more highly than the British North American colonies.

The modern history of peasant agriculture dates from 1838, for prior to that date the great majority of the population consisted of slaves who were mere chattels which could be bought and sold. The slaves lacked the civil status necessary for the acquisition of land. Nevertheless most of the slaves cultivated land on their own account and for the following reason. The slave-owner required a much larger number of slaves to reap and manufacture his crop than he did for the cultivation of cane during the remainder of the year. He was responsible for feeding his slaves, and found it necessary to import

[1] The original sugar-mills had two vertical wooden rollers which were rotated by horses or, later, cattle attached to sweeps. Cattle-mills gave way to windmills and windmills to steam-mills.

part of the rations from North America and England. Most planters possessed some land which was unsuitable for sugar cultivation and this was allotted in small gardens to the slaves in order that they might grow some of their own food. After emancipation in 1838 the ex-slave-owner was no longer responsible for feeding his labouring population; nor, on the other hand, could labourers be compelled to work for any particular planter. The plantation owners therefore offered these gardens to worthy labourers with the object of securing an elastic and amenable supply of labour. This link between wage-earning and the occupation of land persists to this very day, but the system does not provide a satisfactory basis for peasant agriculture, nor, of course, was it ever intended to do so. The labourer has no security of tenure and can be dispossessed at the whim of his employer.

The Act of Emancipation conferred civil rights on the bulk of the population and, in particular, removed the barrier which had hitherto prevented them from purchasing land. But all the land in the older colonies, the Leewards, had long ago been alienated to the planters, and even in the less highly developed Windwards practically the whole of the land suitable for agriculture had passed into private possession. Hence provision for peasant agriculturists largely depended on the dispossession of private owners. Now the policy of the local governments, the plantocracies, and the Imperial Government was to maintain the staple industry, sugar. The planters required a large and elastic supply of labour, and impediments were therefore placed in the way of the acquisition of smallholdings by the labourers.

But the sugar industry was subjected to a number of political blows during the nineteenth century, one of the most far-reaching being the Equalization Act of 1846. Up to that time colonial sugar had enjoyed a preference in Great Britain, a prohibitive tariff being levied on foreign sugar. Provision was made in 1846 for the reduction and eventual extinction of the preference accorded to British sugar producers. Many planters succumbed to the consequent fall in the price of sugar, and some sold off their estates in smallholdings. These planters were compelled to dispose of their properties by force of economic circumstances, their plantations being inferior in soil, climate, or accessibility to those which survived. Consequently those who managed to acquire these smallholdings started off with a grave handicap.

Some sugar planters, notably in Montserrat and Nevis, survived by adopting the share-cropping system. They divided their fields

into small plots which were cultivated by the labourers in the staple crop, at first sugar and later cotton. The share-croppers were tenants at will and enjoyed no security of tenure. The plots were non-residential, and the crops were shared equally between the landowner and the cropper. The landowners resumed the cultivation of their estates with wage-paid labourers immediately the price of sugar or cotton rose to a profitable level. Thus share-cropping was adopted merely as a desperate financial expedient to enable the landowner to retain his property and to secure an income during depression. It is clearly not a satisfactory basis for peasant agriculture since the landowner desires to resume the role of planter at the earliest possible opportunity. Share-cropping is merely a system of paying wages in kind instead of in cash.

Two of the Windward Islands, Dominica and St. Lucia, were taken over from the French in an undeveloped state. They had been set aside as reserves for the warlike Caribs. They are very hilly, thickly forested, and have a very high rainfall. Dominica, for example, has some parts which boast an annual precipitation of over 300 inches of rain a year. Most of the land is consequently unsuitable for arable cultivation. There is uncertainty in these two islands as to the ownership of land. Part of the land was allocated during the French occupation, some during the British occupation, and some since; but there is no land tax and no registration of titles, so that even bona fide occupiers possess no valid title. This confusion has permitted labourers to go into the interior of the islands where they practise a system of shifting cultivation, much to the detriment of the soil.

Cash tenants are also represented in the West Indies. A few ex-planters have rented out their estates entirely in smallholdings. The tenant is usually required to grow the staple crop of the island, and as the landlord normally markets the crop on behalf of his tenants he possesses a ready means of securing his rent from the proceeds. The tenant has no security of tenure and rarely possesses a written lease, but it has become customary for the landlord to pay compensation for growing crops. The one promising feature of this system of tenure is that the landlords obviously prefer to be landlords rather than planters.

In brief, there are many peasant agriculturists in the British West Indies holding land on very unsatisfactory systems of land tenure.

The bulk of the peasant proprietors are concentrated in the island of Grenada, where their rise was due primarily to the failure of the sugar industry during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The

topography of Grenada is unsuited to the centralization of sugar manufacture, with the result that the small sugar factories succumbed one after another. At that time, however, the infant cacao industry was enjoying great prosperity arising from the pursuit of free trade in Great Britain and the rise in the material welfare of the people resulting from industrialization. The sugar planters were unable to finance the change from sugar to cacao with wage-paid labour, for they had no financial reserves. A cacao seedling takes five years to come into bearing and from fifteen to twenty-five years to reach full productivity. The planters therefore employed some of their ex-labourers as contractors, each to plant and to bring into bearing an acre or two of cacao.

The contractors were entitled to grow 'ground provisions' (food crops) on the land and to sell them, and they were given preference for any wage employment that the planter had to offer. At the end of the contract—usually five years—the contractor was paid an agreed amount for each cacao tree in good health, and with that small amount of capital he was enabled to pay a deposit towards the purchase of a small plot of land on a derelict sugar estate or in the hills. Consequently there exists in Grenada a large body of small peasant proprietors.

By 1896 the British West Indies, still wedded to sugar, were on the verge of economic collapse. The Bourbon cane, then the only variety of consequence, rapidly succumbed to disease, and the competition of bounty-aided beet sugar from Europe reduced the price of sugar in the United Kingdom by 50 per cent. between 1882 and 1896. The West India Royal Commission, which was sent out in 1896–7, recommended the settlement of the labouring population on the land as peasant proprietors as being the best and, indeed, it appeared, the only solution of providing for the livelihood of the labourers. The Government of St. Vincent immediately implemented the recommendations of the Royal Commission, but other governments were slow to emulate that example. The Royal Commission had no hesitation in recommending the compulsory acquisition of land, and the Government of St. Vincent assumed this power, but purchases were confined to estates which had 'practically ceased to be cultivated'. Other governments used properties which had come into their possession for other purposes, or purchased more or less derelict properties in the open market. Practically all the land made available for peasants had either failed under plantation systems or had never been devoted to the production of cash crops. Peasants throughout the West Indies are generally handicapped from the very

outset by soil of low fertility and steep slopes which render the soil especially liable to erosion.

The Royal Commission recommended freehold tenure, the only form in which the peasants had any confidence. The impecunious island governments considered it obligatory to recover their expenditure on the purchase, survey, and layout of the land from the peasants, and they therefore required applicants to pay a substantial deposit, and the remainder of the purchase price was to be paid by a varying number of annual instalments. This insistence on a deposit defeated the aims and recommendations of the Royal Commission, because at that time no agricultural labourer, then earning from *6d.* to 7½*d.* per day for only three or perhaps four days a week, could possibly accumulate the £4 to £13 which was the sum required as a deposit. Consequently the smallholdings passed into the hands of artisans and other persons of substance, most of whom already owned or cultivated land on their own account. A large number of the peasants, particularly in St. Vincent, Nevis, and Jamaica, acquired the money for the purchase of their holdings by their earnings abroad. The man whose life's ambition was to acquire and settle on a piece of land in his own country had first of all to exile himself in order to earn money with which to pay the deposit.

The holdings were small, most of them from 3 to 5 acres; and generally too small, after subtracting useless land, to afford whole-time profitable employment for the peasant and his family. The size of the holding was adjusted not to the needs of the family, as the Royal Commission had intended, but to the length of the peasant's pocket. Despite the limitation in size, the great majority of these peasants found it necessary to incur debt in order to pay the deposit, and they embarked on the development of their holdings financially ill-equipped to weather the long lag between expenditure of effort and receipt of reward, which is characteristic of so many systems of agriculture. One redeeming feature is the absence of indebtedness for social and ceremonial purposes. Debt incurred for social extravagance is common, as we heard yesterday, among Indians both in India, in the West Indies, in Fiji, and indeed wherever Indians may settle; it is common also among West Africans in West Africa, but there is practically no debt for such extravagant purposes among West Indians, the main reason being, I imagine, that they are unable to borrow. Most of these peasants found it essential to continue in other occupations in order to meet the cost of purchasing and developing their holdings, so that agriculture remained a part-time means of livelihood and not a mode of living.

The great majority of the allottees continue to live in villages, partly because of the social amenities which the village provides, particularly water, but also shops, school, church, playing-ground, &c., and partly because they could not afford to erect a new house on their holding. This separation of the home from the land has very important consequences. The animals are kept, mainly for purposes of safety, near the village home, and the manure which they could manufacture is not available for applying to the land. This separation makes it very difficult for the peasant to adopt a system of mixed farming, the complementary use of crops and livestock. Generally the holding has been built up in fragments, a bit here and a bit there; just the opposite of what has happened in India, where the holding has been broken down into fragments by customs associated with the law of inheritance. But the economic consequences are the same. Ninety per cent. of the parcels of land that we examined have no residence upon them, and this provides conditions which are ideal for the predial thief. Food crops in particular suffer, because they can be consumed by the thief; they do not have to go through any form of processing or to any market; and they are very difficult to identify.

Peasants to-day grow only a very small proportion of their food requirements. Most of them concentrate on a single cash crop, mainly, I think, for the following reasons: first, they are familiar as labourers with the cultivation of this staple crop; secondly, it offers them an unlimited market at some price (perishable local food crops, such as sweet potato, may become unsaleable during a glut); and, thirdly, they must have cash to pay their instalments and to buy food and clothing. But this concentration on a single cash crop has many undesirable features, especially when it happens to be a crop such as cotton, which must be kept cleanly weeded and which is grown on hilly slopes subject to heavy tropical rainfall. There is less objection to sugar-cane, which is a grass and has many admirable agricultural qualities. Sugar-cane has been cultivated successfully in the West Indies and without any rotation for at least 300 years, and yet yields are now higher than ever before. Nearly every single cash crop exhibits wide seasonal variation in labour demands, and this reduces the profitable occupation of the peasant's manpower and thereby reduces his earnings.

There is not a single peasant among the 700–800 families we examined who uses a plough; not because the peasant is insensible to the value of this labour-saving device, but because the soil is too steep, too stony, or too stiff to be worked by an animal-drawn plough. Not a single one of those peasant families grew any crop for his

livestock, because it is possible to keep them alive on waste-land and roadsides, and he is under the necessity of flogging his arable land in order to secure the cash to meet his obligations. Most of these peasants eke out a miserable existence.

Little manure, either organic or inorganic, is used, and soil erosion is reducing year by year the area of land which is fit for agricultural purposes. The populations of most islands are already dense, and in Barbados it exceeds 1,000 per square mile, all dependent, directly or indirectly, on a single industry, sugar. If present trends continue, the populations will double within the next forty years. On the other hand, most of those countries which formerly welcomed West Indian immigrants have now bolted their doors. The population problem in the West Indies overwhelms all others in importance and appears insoluble. It is imperative that further degradation of soil should be prevented, and steps must be taken to increase output, both per acre and per man-year. Crop yields on peasant holdings are extremely low, and usually average little more than half those obtained on plantations, due largely, of course, to the inferior soil or climate.

There is no doubt that the productivity of these peasant farms can be increased. The peasants, as a rule, are hard-working and skilled in the various agricultural operations, but they are defective in their powers of organization and management. The Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture has recently set itself the task of remedying these defects. We have accumulated a great deal of knowledge from individual experiments concerned with varieties, cultural methods, fertilizers, &c., and by means of economic surveys. Our present problem is to integrate this information into practicable and profitable peasant farms. We have started four experimental farms out of the eleven types of arable farm we have planned. Each farm is to be worked by a resident peasant family. This family will be paid wages for all the work which its members perform, and they will receive, in addition, an incentive bonus in the form of a percentage of the crop. We regard it as essential that the members of the family should be paid wages because they will be required to follow our instructions, and will not be permitted to work in the manner which they consider most profitable. Some of our errors of organization and management have already revealed themselves, and others, doubtless, will soon come to light. When we have rectified these errors and have evolved practicable and profitable types of farms, we shall then proceed to establish demonstration farms, which we hope the peasants will emulate. These demonstration farms will differ from the experimental farms in only one respect: a demonstration farm must never

be the scene of any experiment. Everything practised there must have been proved by experiment and trial before it is demonstrated.

There is one particular aspect of these investigations into peasant agriculture to which I should particularly like to draw your attention, since I have made it the guiding principle of my work. I refer to team-work. We, as agricultural economists, can contribute much to agricultural progress; so can the agronomists, geneticists, soil scientists, entomologists, mycologists, and other specialists. But there is a tendency in many institutions for each specialist to work in a watertight compartment. The main advantages of the division of labour are sacrificed by such lack of integration. I regard our work on cacao as a classic example of the benefits of team-work. I gladly acknowledge that my own work on cacao would have come to an early and inconclusive end had it not been for the co-operation and inspiration of the soil scientist and geneticist. We hope that a similar approach to the problems of peasant agriculture will enable us to solve the major technical problems.

But there are other and, in some respects, more difficult problems to be solved before we can claim to have laid a firm foundation for a prosperous peasant agriculture. We consider it essential, for example, that the peasant family should live on its farm, and that the farm should be undivided and not fragmented. We claim the following advantages for residential, undivided farms. First, they will eliminate the considerable amounts of time and energy now wasted in journeying between the home and the various parcels of land. Secondly, they will reduce the need for riding- or pack-animals such as the donkey, which are now required to transport the peasants, their food, tools, and their produce between home and land. Thirdly, livestock could be kept on the farm, and their manure could be manufactured and applied to the soil; this would remove the main impediments to mixed farming, which many authorities regard as the most satisfactory solution of the problems of peasant agriculture in the British West Indies. Fourthly, since the tools and implements will not have to be carried to and from the land, the peasant will be able to use a wider and more efficient variety than the universal cutlass and hoe. Fifthly, the wife, instead of having to neglect her home and children to work on distant parcels of land, or to neglect the land in order to look after her family, will be in a position to take part in the farm chores without neglecting her other duties. Sixthly, the family living on its farm will be able to give attention to crops, particularly in the kitchen

garden, at critical periods of their growth, when, for example, watering may make the difference between a crop and no crop. Seventhly, a compact settlement of residential peasants will be able to take effective measures to stamp out the curse of predial larceny. Finally, close settlement of peasant families will facilitate community efforts for the organization of marketing, both buying and selling; co-operative credit; public services, such as water, roads, &c.; playing-fields, shops, churches, and all the other amenities which, we feel, must be taken from the village to the land settlement.

The peasant family must also be assured of security of tenure. Hitherto the peasant has considered unrestricted freehold as the only secure form of tenure, but the absolute security which is afforded by freehold tenure has degenerated into licence, and, in particular, it has failed to prevent the serious degradation of soil by erosion. Moreover, it has already made possible the fragmentation of holdings, with all its attendant evils. We consider that freehold must give way to leasehold, primarily because the typical peasant unit of 3–5 acres does not constitute a suitable topographical unit for anti-erosion structures. We claim that the landlord, whether state or private, must be made responsible for the maintenance of all anti-erosion structures which affect more than one holding. We propose to offer security of tenure by a long lease, say, 21 years (the precise number of years is unimportant), which would be renewable after the first 11 years for a further period of 21 years, and so on, provided, of course, the peasant observes the rules of good husbandry and remains in beneficial occupation of the farm. He would be entitled to nominate one member of his immediate family to succeed him, and he would be entitled to compensation for any unexhausted improvements when he leaves the farm. But he would not be entitled to sub-let or to encumber his lease or to transfer it. His lease should be surrendered only to the landlord; this proviso is designed to prevent that speculation in leases which has become a major problem of land tenure among Indians in Fiji.

This revolution in peasant agriculture in the West Indies will necessitate the provision of capital on a scale vastly greater than heretofore. Governments have either been unable or unwilling to face up to this commitment, with results which we considered disastrous to the peasants and to the community. We are emphatically of the opinion that expenditure on housing should be kept low, and that we should be generous, even extravagant, in providing capital for the equipment of the farm. If we provide him with the means of attaining a higher standard of living, then better housing will become

an expression of achievement, and not a millstone of debt around the neck of the peasant.

In reply to questions, Professor Shephard said:

Mr. Dawe has asked what types of diversified agriculture could be practised on these small peasant farms? We have drawn up plans for eleven different types of peasant holdings, each designed to answer a number of important questions. Every one will have a house, a kitchen garden, one or more cash crops, some livestock, and fodder grass, but varying emphasis will be placed on the main sources of income. The holdings will range in size from a small market garden to a dairy farm. Some will be worked entirely by manual labour, others with the aid of draught animals, and still others with mechanical implements. One of the holdings will be irrigated. Later, if we can secure the necessary funds, we hope to experiment with holdings on which orchard crops will furnish the main source of cash income. I shall be pleased to supply details to any interested person.

Dr. Ackerman asked: Will there be government controls of leasehold tenure? The answer is: 'Yes.' The development of land settlement in the West Indies depends almost entirely on government initiative. In the past government has sold land outright in small and uneconomic holdings to the peasants, and in thus attempting to solve a problem for this generation has created problems which will be insoluble for future generations. We recommend that the tenant on a government land settlement should have freedom of action in respect of details but must conform to a satisfactory system of agriculture. We have not attempted to experiment with the proportionate profit farms such as they have in Porto Rico, but there is one collective farm which has been started as an experiment in Jamaica, and I hope that an account of it will be published in *Tropical Agriculture*. Our major problem is to secure money for experiments. We ourselves had to put up £100 to start the first experimental peasant holding.

Professor Thomas's question was about the use of demonstration farms. I had better quote the question in his own words: 'As I understood them you first of all had experimental farms, then when the experiment has proved a success, that is reproduced on demonstration farms. Do I understand that the demonstration farms are also owned by the state or by the college, because if so it seems to be quite different from the development in this country, where now we seem to be leaving the conception of demonstration farms altogether but carrying out demonstrations on farms of the best farmers?'

I am glad this question has been asked, because it enables me to point out that the problem of extension work in the British West Indies differs materially from that in the United Kingdom. Most of our peasants have imitated the only system they know—the plantation system of monoculture—without the financial resources of capital and credit essential to that system. Moreover, monoculture, with its seasonal variation in labour requirements, implies defective use of the peasant's main resource, namely, family labour. We therefore are faced with the problem of evolving systems of farming and types of farm suited to the resources of the peasant. We have to ascertain which crops should be grown, what livestock should be maintained, how the land should be divided between cash, food, and fodder crops, what areas of land typical peasant families can profitably manage, what capital is required, and a host of other questions. In brief, we have to begin *ab initio*, and the order will be: First, individual experiments with crop varieties and livestock; second, the integration of the knowledge thus acquired into experimental holdings; and, finally, when we have satisfied ourselves that the experimental holdings are practicable and profitable, the establishment of demonstration holdings. You, by contrast, already have well-established and, at the present time, highly profitable types of farms, and your main purpose is to demonstrate modifications and improvements within these systems. We agree with you that the successful farmer is the best extension worker.

Professor W. G. Murray asked what was happening in the plantation economy; was it gaining or losing in comparison with the peasant economy?

The general trends are towards the two extremes, namely, large capitalistic companies and peasant farmers. The old plantation system is breaking down in some islands. When a plantation is handed down for many generations from father to son it eventually passes to a son who has no aptitude for farming. Moreover, families in the West Indies have usually been large, and ownership passes to an ever-increasing number of individuals, most of whom make it a custom to draw heavily on the plantation for their living, and sooner or later the plantation becomes heavily overburdened with debt. The manufacture of sugar, still our principal crop, is best effected in very large and costly factories, and there has been a tendency towards the aggregation of family plantations into large limited liability companies holding up to 25,000 acres of land. On the other hand, governments, politicians, and public opinion have encouraged the establishment of peasant holdings.

In reply to *Mr. Holmes*, I have no figures on the comparative efficiency of the sugar-cane as compared with the beet, but I can supply you with a mass of figures for sugar-cane and cane sugar. It takes about 40 tasks or man-days to produce 1 ton of cane sugar in the British West Indies. In Hawaii, where the industry is completely mechanized and most of the cane is irrigated, the labour requirements are even less.

Pre-war it cost about £12 f.o.b. to produce a ton of sugar in the British West Indies. Sugar-cane could be bought there for as little as 11*s*. per ton delivered to the scale. The cost of producing sugar-cane in Barbados during the 1944–5 season averaged £1. 1*s*. 4*d*. per ton and the cost of manufacturing sugar £3. 17*s*. per ton. The factories recover 1 ton of sugar from about 8·3 tons of cane. The cost of production therefore totalled about £12. 14*s*. per ton of sugar. Allowances for depreciation should be made at the rates of 3*s*. 6*d*. for the plantations and 17*s*. 6*d*. for the factories, per ton of sugar, bringing the total to £13. 15*s*. per ton. The average price paid for sugar-cane was £1. 7*s*. 1½*d*. There have been substantial increases since 1944–5 in rates of wages and in the prices of cane and sugar. The sucrose content of sugar-beet is generally higher than that of sugar-cane, but the price to be paid for sugar-beet in 1948—about £5 a ton, I understand—seems fantastically high. There is, in fact, no comparison between the economics of beet and cane sugar.