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II. ASPECTS OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE WEST INDIES

Notes on Peasant Development in the West Indies Since 1838^a

By

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"Modern West Indian history begins without a peasantry, and (this) is of particular interest because in tracing it, we trace the birth and development of an entirely new class which has profoundly affected the foundations of West Indian society".¹

INTRODUCTION

The West Indian peasant, because of the circumstances of his origin, cannot be fitted neatly into conventional definitions of the peasant. He has no long established "ties of tradition and sentiment" to the land which he controls. He cannot be seen as the "rural dimension of old civilization".² The West Indian community is a relatively young one and, moreover, no peasantry survived the establishment of the plantation and slave labour-based sugar industry during the seventeenth century. Whatever elements of a peasantry existed then — the yeoman farmers — quickly disappeared. The small settlers sought new opportunities in North America as the plantation swallowed their holdings; and the Negroes who escaped the estates and established settlements in the bush and the mountains were always in danger of extermination by those who controlled the plantation.³

The only tenuous link, then, that can be established between the present-day peasantry and the pre-1838 period is in the activity of the slaves as producers of most of their own food, and even of surpluses, on land granted them by their owners.⁴ In this role the slaves were partly peasant cultivators or, as Mintz calls them, proto-peasants.⁵ But of course they neither controlled the land nor their own time and labour.

Our peasantry then starts at emancipation in 1838. It comprises the ex-slaves who after 1838 started small farms "on the peripheries of plantation

^aIn this paper the "West Indies" refers to the former British West Indies. The paper has been slightly revised since presentation at the Conference.

¹W. A. Lewis, *The Evolution of the Peasantry in the British West Indies*, Colonial Office Pamphlet 656, 1936. p. 1.

²R. Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture*, Chicago 1956, pp. 27-29.

³See V. T. Harlow, *Barbados, 1624-1685*, Oxford 1926; H. Merivale, *Lectures on Colonies and Colonization*, London 1841, pp. 75-6; S. Mintz, "The Question of Caribbean Peasantries: A Comment", *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 32-4.

⁴See S. Mintz and D. G. Hall, "The Origins of the Jamaican Internal Marketing System", in *Papers in Caribbean Anthropology*, New Haven, 1960.

⁵Mintz, "The Question of Caribbean Peasantries . . ." *op. cit.*, p. 34.

areas",⁶ wherever they could find land — on abandoned plantations and in the mountainous interiors of the various territories. "They represented a reaction to the plantation economy, a negative reflex to enslavement, mass production, monocrop dependence, and metropolitan control. Though these peasants often continued to work part-time on plantations for wages, to eke out their cash needs, their orientation was in fact antagonistic to the plantation rationale".⁷

To summarize, then, the West Indian peasantry exhibits certain special characteristics. It is recent in origin; its growth — in numbers and in acreage controlled — was consistent during the first fifty or sixty years of its existence; it exists alongside and in conflict with the plantation; and it did not depend exclusively on cultivation of the soil for its income and subsistence. The early peasants, and many of the later ones as well, often combined the cultivation of their land with activities like fishing, or shopkeeping and casual estate work. So, for the purposes of our discussion, we shall use the term peasant to refer to all those variously called peasant farmers, small farmers, small cultivators. They are the individuals who, as Lewis points out, devote "the major part" of their time to cultivating land on their own account "with the help of little or no outside labour".⁸ The size of holding which this requires varies with fertility of the soil and with the type of farm enterprise; but a minimum of two acres is probably what was (and is) required. Finally, these peasants are the founders and residents of the new village communities which sprouted near the estates and occasionally in the mountains immediately after emancipation.⁹

Available statistics do not allow us to estimate the size of the peasantry or the average size of its holdings with any precision. It is therefore probable that many of those we shall call peasants were those in possession of a "house-spot" and a garden. These individuals are perhaps more accurately described as smallholders, but their desertion of the sugar estates and their participation in the development of the new village communities place them near, if not inside, the peasant sector.

THE GROWTH OF THE PEASANTRY

Three stages of growth can be identified. First, there is the *period of establishment* marked by the rapid acquisition of land holdings and by a continuous increase in the number of peasants. This stage lasted from 1838 to about 1850 or 1860. Second, there is the *period of consolidation* during which there was continuing expansion of the number of peasants and, more important, a

⁶S. Mintz, Foreword to *Sugar and Society in the Caribbean*, by R. Guerra y Sanchez, New Haven, 1964, p. xx.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. xx-xxi.

⁸Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 3. See, in particular, F. L. Engledow's Report on Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry and Veterinary Matters (Supplement to *West India Royal Commission Report 1945*) Cmd. 6608, 1945, pp. 41-45.

⁹See H. Paget and R. Farley, "The Growth of Villages in Jamaica and British Guiana", *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 38-61.

marked shift by the peasants to export crop production. This stage lasted to about 1900. Third, there is the *period of saturation* during which the peasantry did not expand and might even have been contracting. This is the period from 1900 to the present, when the peasantry reached the limits of possible expansion inside the plantation-dominated society and economy.

The Period of Establishment

A combination of factors explains the ex-slaves' desire to leave the estates at emancipation and to establish themselves as independent cultivators. Emancipation had widened the range of their expectations, and these, in many cases, could not be satisfied in plantation labour and residence. Moreover, the planters, over-anxious to safeguard their entire labour supply, attempted by various means to keep all the ex-slaves on the estates in relationships which closely approximated their earlier servile condition. In particular, they devised a system of tenancy which compelled the ex-slave to labour "steadily and continuously" on the estates in return for secure residence of the house and ground which the slave had occupied.¹⁰ Consequently, insecurity of tenure, as well as relatively low wages for plantation labour, sometimes high rent, and long contracts, reinforced many ex-slaves' determination to seek new and better opportunities away from the estates. Some indulged in a measure of occupational differentiation; and there was a marked increase after emancipation in the number of artisans, porters, fishermen, seamstresses, etc. But most of those in flight from the estate attempted to acquire land. The reason for this was obvious. Cultivation of the soil was the one skill the ex-slaves possessed; moreover, in many of the territories enough land seemed to be available to furnish the would-be cultivator with at least the elements of subsistence.

Opportunities for land acquisition did not exist to the same extent in all the territories. In Barbados, St. Kitts and Antigua — three of the older colonies — small size, a large population and a long-established sugar industry left few, if any, opportunities for land acquisition. Consequently, it was difficult for a peasantry to emerge in these islands; those ex-slaves who wanted to "better" themselves away from the estates had to think of emigration. On the other hand, Jamaica and the Windward Islands, Trinidad and British Guiana offered opportunities for land acquisition. In Jamaica and the Windwards the sugar industry had left undeveloped much of the mountainous interior; in Trinidad and British Guiana (now Guyana) a small population and a young sugar industry created many opportunities for land acquisition.¹¹ It must be noted, however, that in both of these latter territories, relatively high wages and, in British Guiana, the high cost of drainage might have moderated the

¹⁰See W. G. Sewell, *The Ordeal of Free Labour in the British West Indies*, New York, 1861; W. K. Marshall, "Social and Economic Problems in the Windward Islands, 1838-1865" in Andie and Mathews (eds.) *The Caribbean in Transition*, Rio Piedras, 1965, pp. 247-252.

¹¹In 1838 Barbados had as many slaves as British Guiana, and Antigua had more than Trinidad. The figures for Barbados and British Guiana were 82,807 and 84,915; for Antigua and Trinidad they were 29,537 and 22,359.

desire for land acquisition. The point remains, however, that Jamaica, the Windwards, Trinidad and British Guiana provided the best opportunities for land acquisition by ex-slaves.

These opportunities were eagerly grasped, but they were not won without opposition. The ex-slaves' land hunger was enormous and evident. Observers said that the "great and universal object" of the ex-slaves was the acquisition of land "however limited in extent".¹² One St. Vincent planter said as early as 1842 that the labourers were always "on the look out" for land on which they could settle and allow their wives "to sit down" and "take charge of the children".¹³ Throughout the period immediately after emancipation there is overwhelming evidence of desire to acquire portions of the surplus land — estate land not in cultivation and Crown Land.¹⁴ But this desire brought the ex-slaves into direct conflict with the plantation. Planters feared the effect on the labour market and on the sugar industry of widespread independent land settlement. Consequently, they placed obstacles in the way of its development. The planter-dominated legislatures refused to initiate surveys of Crown Land as a preliminary to smallhold settlement, and they adopted strict legislation against squatting on Crown Land. The planters either refused to sell surplus and marginal estate land, or they charged high, even exorbitant, prices for small portions of it. Moreover, the legislatures instituted costly licences for the sale of small quantities of manufactured sugar and coffee and for the production of charcoal and firewood. They also levied land taxes which discriminated against the owners of small-holdings.

Small-scale land acquisition became possible, however, because of the determination of the would-be peasants and because of the failure of the planters to maintain a united opposition. Some planters were anxious to win advantage in the labour market, and these sold land to the ex-slaves in the hope that such action would secure them a portion of the ex-slaves' labour. In addition, many planters were chronically in debt and, therefore, welcomed the cash returns they could get from the disposal of small portions of their marginal land. This particular advantage was often exploited during and after the depression of 1847. But most important was the action of the ex-slaves. They practised thrift and industry, and, as a result, laboriously accumulated the purchase money for land. Some put their savings from wages and provision cultivation in the Friendly and Benefit Societies; some, as in British Guiana (now Guyana), started informal co-operatives and joint stock companies. Others, as in Jamaica, got the assistance of Baptist ministers in their attempts to bargain with landowners. Generally, they paid high prices for the land. Prices ranging from £5 to £20 per acre were common, and

¹²This was typical comment by stipendiary magistrates in the Windward Islands and in Jamaica.

¹³H. M. Grant's evidence before the 1842 Select Committee on West India Colonies.

¹⁴See Paget and Farley, *op. cit.*; also R. Farley, "The Rise of the Peasantry in British Guiana", *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 4, pp. 87-103; D. G. Hall, *Free Jamaica 1838-1865*, New Haven, 1959.

prices of £100, £150 and even £200 per acre were often reported.¹⁵ The land itself was of variable quality; more often than not it was marginal land which was barely accessible, not surveyed and even uncleared. The lots, too, ranged in size from about half an acre to five and sometimes ten and fifteen acres.¹⁶

So successful were the efforts of the ex-slaves that within four years of emancipation officials were reporting an "almost daily" increase in the number of freeholders and an obvious extension of cultivation in territories like Jamaica, British Guiana, the Windwards and Trinidad. Eisner shows that Jamaica possessed 2,114 persons owning holdings under forty acres in extent in 1838. By 1841, however, that number had reached 7,919, and by 1845 there were 19,397 persons with holdings under ten acres in extent. She estimates that by 1842 nearly 200 free villages with a total extent of 100,000 acres had been established, and about £70,000 had been paid by the settlers for land.¹⁷ Farley has described a similar pattern of development in British Guiana. By 1842 there were in Demerara and Berbice over 4,000 freehold properties with an extent of about 22,000 acres which had been purchased at a cost of about £70,000.¹⁸

This rapid development continued throughout the rest of this first period. The profits of provision cultivation provided more labourers with the means to desert the estates for the new villages and for independent small-scale cultivation. And the perennial difficulties of the planters afforded labourers with many more opportunities to acquire land at lower costs. By 1852 in British Guiana there were more than 11,000 new freehold properties with an estimated value of £1 million.¹⁹ By 1860 in Jamaica the number of holdings under fifty acres in extent had reached 50,000.²⁰ By 1861 the Windward Islands of St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Grenada and Tobago possessed more than 10,000 freeholders, while the number of residents of villages built since emancipation totalled about 20,000 in Grenada and St. Vincent.²¹

The Period of Consolidation

The rapid increase in the number of peasants continued during the second phase of development. In Jamaica, the only territory for which we have almost complete figures for the period, the number of small land holdings (i.e. holdings under fifty acres) increased spectacularly between 1860 and 1900 and up to 1930. Eisner's figures show that these holdings more than doubled in number between 1860 and 1902. The total figure for the later date was 133,169. Also important was the increase in the number of substantial peasants or small farmers. The number of holdings with a size between five and

¹⁵See Hall; and Farley, *op. cit.*

¹⁶See Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁷G. Eisner, *Jamaica 1830-1930*, Manchester 1961, pp. 210-211.

¹⁸Farley, "The Rise of the Peasantry in British Guiana", *op. cit.*, pp. 100-101.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 101-102. According to Farley, the recovery of the sugar industry in British Guiana led to a slump in peasant development after the 1850s.

²⁰Eisner, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

²¹Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

forty-nine acres increased from 13,189 in 1880 to 24,226 in 1902 and to 31,038 in 1930.²² Moreover, as a share of the total population, the ratio of peasants rose from 11 per cent in 1860 to 17.5 per cent in 1890 and to 18 per cent in 1930.²³ Similar developments occurred in Grenada where the number of small-holders increased from about 3,600 in 1860 to more than 8,000 in 1911. By the latter date there were more than 2,000 proprietors of lots varying between two and a half and ten acres in size.²⁴

But the most important feature of this phase of development was the emergence of what Eisner calls a "new peasantry". The presence of this new group is partly indicated by the increase in the number of farms exceeding five acres in extent; but it is mainly indicated by a "dramatic" change in the peasant's pattern of production. Eisner's national income estimates for Jamaica for the years 1850 and 1890 reveal a shift from mainly provision production to a mixed provision and export crop production by the peasants. The value of export crops (sugar, coffee, rum, pimento, ginger) in 1850 is estimated by Eisner at £1,089,300, of which "small settlers" contributed £113,500 or just over 10 per cent. In 1890 the value of cash crops (to which had been added logwood, bananas, oranges, coconuts, cocoa and lime juice) was estimated at £2,028,300; and the small settlers' share had risen to £798,800 or to about 39 per cent.²⁵ At the same time, the peasants had increased the value of ground provisions from £854,000 in 1850 to about £2,601,200 in 1890.²⁶ This meant that whereas in 1850, 83 per cent of the peasant output consisted of ground provisions and only 11 per cent of exports, in 1890 the share of ground provisions had dropped to 74 per cent and that of exports had risen to 23 per cent. It meant also a remarkable increase in the peasants' share of total agricultural output. In 1850 the peasants' share was about half but by 1890 it had risen to about three-quarters.²⁷

This change in the pattern of peasant production was also apparent in the Windward Islands. There, increased peasant activity after the 1850's in the production of arrowroot, cotton, spices, cocoa, citrus, bananas, logwood and sugar resulted in increased exports of most of those commodities. Indeed, arrowroot and cotton in St. Vincent and cocoa and spices in Grenada were regarded as peasant crops from the 1850's onwards, while sugar in Tobago was produced exclusively by peasants and sharecroppers by 1898 and was already in the process of disappearance as a major cash crop in that island as well as in Grenada.

The Period of Saturation

In general, the shortage of land for continued peasant expansion imposed a limit, however, on this type of development. The characteristic of the most

²²Eisner, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 221.

²⁴The *Grenada Handbook* 1946, p. 70.

²⁵Eisner, *op. cit.*, pp. 53, 80.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 221, 234. It fell to about 68 per cent in 1930.

recent stage of peasant development is the failure of the peasantry to expand at its earlier pace. Moreover, there is increasing evidence that the peasantry in some territories has been declining in numbers during the last twenty years. Table 1 provides some of the evidence for Jamaica.

TABLE 1. PEASANT HOLDINGS IN JAMAICA, 1902-1961

	Under 5 acres	1-5 acres	5-25 acres	25-100 acres
1902	108,943		24,226a	
1930	153,406		31,038a	
1954	138,761	95,851	53,237	5,572
1961	113,239		40,769	3,803

*Returns for holdings of 5 to 50 acres.

Sources: G. Elsner, *op. cit.*; Department of Statistics, *Survey of Agriculture 1961-2*; Federal Statistical Office, *Agricultural Statistics*, Series 2 No. 1, 1960.

The striking feature of these figures is the evidence they provide of the dramatic decline in the numbers of *smaller* holdings in the period 1930 to 1961. So sharp was this decrease that the total number of these holdings in 1961 barely exceeded the number recorded for 1902. There is also clear evidence that the number of *larger* holdings increased throughout the entire period. These almost doubled in number between 1902 and 1961 despite a sharp decrease in the period 1954 to 1961.

This pattern was not uniform throughout the West Indies. Table 2 supplies some evidence of the size of the peasantry in the other islands and of its growth during the period 1946 to 1961. In all the Windward Islands there has been a continuing and substantial increase in the number of smaller holdings especially. In Barbados and in all the Leewards there has been a decrease in the number of smaller holdings, and only a small increase in the number of larger holdings in Antigua and Montserrat. In Trinidad there has been a slight increase in the number of smaller holdings, but a marked increase in the number of larger holdings.

TABLE 2. PEASANT HOLDINGS IN SELECTED WEST INDIAN ISLANDS, 1946 AND 1956-61a

	1-5 acres		5-50 acres	
	1946	1956-1961	1946	1956-61
Trinidad and Tobago	18,120	19,200	11,563	14,400
Barbados	4,208	2,400b	454c	292c
Dominica	2,760	3,781	1,934	1,748
Grenada	4,991	6,773	1,361	1,615
St. Lucia	857d	4,887	1,976	2,361
St. Vincent	3,271	4,636	1,230	1,229
Antigua	2,926	2,800b	344c	476c
Montserrat	1,317	1,302	142	194
St. Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla	2,237	n. a.	351	n. a.

a) The dates of the second set of data for the several islands are: Trinidad and Tobago 1957, Barbados 1961, Dominica 1956-9, Grenada 1956-9, Antigua 1956-9, Montserrat 1957, St. Lucia 1958, St. Vincent 1958.

b) Estimates based on the returns of total number of holdings under 5 acres for the date 1956-61.

c) Holdings of 5-100 acres.

d) This low figure reflects incompleteness of the Census (See *West Indian Census 1946*, Part A, para. 43 p. 51).

Sources: *West Indian Census 1946, Parts A and B: Agricultural Statistics*, Series 2 No. 1; *A Digest of West Indian Agricultural Statistics*, Department of Agriculture Economics and Farm Management, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, 1965.

This suggests that the peasants' shift to cash crop production has operated in conjunction with other factors to exhaust the opportunities for peasant landholding in the larger territories of Jamaica and Trinidad as well as in the longer settled islands of Barbados and the Leewards. These opportunities had always been limited in the latter islands where the plantation was well established and has remained dominant.²⁸ A relatively small peasantry did come into evidence in these islands, but the increasing pressure of numbers on the land as well as non-availability of land for expansion of peasant cash-crop production seems to have resulted in both the amalgamation of some of the smaller holdings into larger ones and a drift of peasants away from the land. Since there are few alternative means of employment available inside these islands, most of the ex-peasants must have emigrated.

In Trinidad and Jamaica a combination of other factors are involved. The expansion and consolidation of the plantation ever since emancipation has been one limiting factor. In addition, various types of non-agricultural economic activities during the last forty years have competed with agriculture both for land and labour. For example, industries like bauxite and tourism in Jamaica, and oil in Trinidad have not only attracted the peasant away from cultivation on his own account but have also imposed limitations on the growth of the peasantry by occupying land which was either peasant agricultural land or land which might have become available for peasant expansion. At the same time, the opening up and exploitation of migration opportunities, particularly after 1945, might well have made the peasantry more conscious of its neglected and depressed condition and more determined to improve it. It is suggested that these simultaneous pressures, added to the familiar ones of increasing population, shortage of fertile land for expansion, and demands for improved living standards, explain the "crisis" of the peasantry in territories like Jamaica and Trinidad.

The situation has been somewhat different in the Windward Islands. In these islands the peasantry has continued its expansion. The reason for this is partly historical. Mainly because of late settlement, a sparse population and mountainous terrain, these islands have never possessed a plantation system which exercised full dominance over the economy and the landscape. As a result, the plantation system was (and is) less well equipped than in other islands to withstand long depression in the sugar industry (or in other staple production). This created perennial opportunities for peasant acquisition of land. Moreover, there has been no alternative economic development in these islands to compete with agriculture or to attract the peasant away from the land. The peasantry has thus been able to sustain a competition with the plantation for land and labour in conditions more favourable to it than in any other territory. This has ensured its continuous growth. These islands,

²⁸This is confirmed by statistics on the amount of farms with a size of more than 100 acres. In Barbados (1961) these farms occupied 81.7 per cent of the total area; in Antigua (1961) 59.1 per cent; in St. Kitts (1946) 78.8 per cent; in Montserrat (1957) 68.4 per cent. (See *A Digest of West Indian Agricultural Statistics*, p. 14).

then, are more nearly peasant communities than any of the other islands in the West Indies.²⁹

THE ROLE OF THE PEASANTRY

Peasant activity modified the character of the original pure plantation economy and society. The peasants were the innovators in the economic life of the community. Besides producing a great quantity and variety of subsistence food and livestock they introduced new crops and/or re-introduced old ones. This diversified the basically monocultural pattern. Bananas, coffee, citrus, coconuts, cocoa and logwood in Jamaica; cocoa, arrowroot, spices, bananas and logwood in the Windward Islands: these were the main export crops introduced or re-introduced by the peasantry after the 1850's. All of these were subsequently adopted by the planters and became important elements in the export trade by the 1870's. All of these crops did not succeed; peasant coffee in Jamaica, for example, was seldom of good quality. In addition, the success of the peasants in combating attacks of disease on crops like cocoa and bananas was always severely limited by their shortage of resources of capital and knowledge. However, this many-sided activity of the peasants represented not only "a great new area of peasant advance"³⁰ but also served as a vehicle for expanding the production possibilities of the region. The plantation-staple economy was being mixed with elements of a peasant-subsistence economy; and it seemed probable that a peasant economy could replace the plantation economy without any serious economic loss to the community. Peasants were producing cash crops as well as food. It was the availability of much peasant-produced food which might have cancelled out the advantages of large-scale production for export markets by introducing important elements of self-sufficiency into the economy.³¹

The alternative foreshadowed by the presence and activity of the peasants had great social significance as well. The peasants initiated the conversion of these plantation territories into modern societies. In a variety of ways they attempted to build local self-generating communities. They founded villages and markets; they built churches and schools; they clamoured for extension of educational facilities, for improvements in communication and markets; they started the local co-operative movement.

²⁹This is confirmed to some extent by statistics on the percentage distribution on the area occupied by farms of different sizes:

	Under 5 Acres	5-100 Acres	100 + Acres
Dominica	12.7	32.0	55.3
Grenada	22.9	29.9	47.2
St. Lucia	14.9	37.5	47.6
St. Vincent	22.5	28.0	49.5
Jamaica	11.8	32.2	56.0
Trinidad and Tobago	12.5	40.1	47.4

Source: *A Digest of West Indian Agricultural Statistics*, p. 14.

³⁰Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 36-38.

Informal co-operatives made their appearance immediately after emancipation; groups of ex-slaves pooled their resources to buy land, to lay down drainage systems, to build churches and schools. Participation in more formal organizations came later. This could be seen in peasant activity in the Friendly and Benefit Societies, in the Jamaica Agricultural Society and particularly in the People's Co-operative Loan Bank of Jamaica.³² These banks, first established in 1905, represent a considerable initiative in the area of self-help. They were located in peasant communities and were intended "to encourage thrift and to provide the small farmer with loans on reasonable terms and at the lowest possible rates of interest".³³ The importance of these banks in rendering vital financial assistance to the peasants, particularly in times of natural disaster, can be judged from the fact that by 1949, 119 branches of the bank with 72,700 members had been established, and the bank had made advances and loans of nearly £2 million.³⁴

The peasantry, then, because of the extent of its social investment and self-conscious community building was a persisting factor both for stability and change inside the West Indian community. As "a nucleus of importance" which could constitute "the stability of the country"³⁵ the peasants' presence and activity combined to soften the rigid divisions of race and class which were a feature of the plantation society.³⁶ At the same time, their increasing numbers and their economic importance made a cogent case for the adoption of broader-based institutions. In this respect peasant development was emancipation in action.

GOVERNMENT POLICY TOWARDS THE PEASANTRY

The potential of peasant development was never fully realized because government had tended, most of the time, to ignore the existence of the class. The peasants, as Eisner says, "were left to themselves to experiment with different crops and techniques".³⁷ This helps to explain why wasteful practices like "firestick agriculture" still persist with their terrible consequences of soil exhaustion and soil erosion.³⁸ It also helps to explain the general backwardness in agricultural knowledge, the inadequate credit and marketing facilities and the shortage of fertile land for peasant expansion.

This neglect can be explained by the dominance of the estate-based sugar industry over influential opinion both at home and in the metropolis. Plant-

³²See Eisner, *op. cit.*, pp. 228-230.

³³R. Colon-Torres, "Agricultural Credit in the Caribbean", *Caribbean Economic Review*, Vol. IV, Nos. 1 and 2, p. 95.

³⁴See "Rural Welfare Organizations" and "Credit Facilities for Small Farmers", in "Land Tenure in the Caribbean", *Caribbean Economic Review*, Vol. II, No. 2, pp. 90-92, 107-11. The actual figure was £1,793,658.13.7, of which £856,541.3.8 was still outstanding.

³⁵This was the opinion that was expressed in 1850 by Drysdale, a stipendiary magistrate in St. Lucia.

³⁶Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

³⁷Eisner, *op. cit.* p. 225.

³⁸See Mintz and Hall, "The Origins of the Jamaican Internal Marketing System" *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7; Eisner, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

ers feared that peasant expansion would ruin the sugar industry by creating labour shortages. They convinced official opinion in England that both the prosperity and civilization of the West Indies were dependent on the survival of the estate-based industry. Metropolitan official opinion, though sometimes sceptical about the economic argument, seemed to accept (for no very good reason) the cultural argument. Both sides, therefore, co-operated for a long time in maintaining the traditional industry and in protecting the ex-slaves against "a relapse into barbarism and the savage state".³⁹ Both these ends could be served by ensuring that the ex-slaves continued to work for wages on the estates "not uncertainly or capriciously, but steadily and continuously".⁴⁰ Consequently, neither the Colonial Office nor the local legislatures exerted themselves, at first, to assist peasant development. Peasant development thrived in spite of this official indifference and, occasionally, open hostility.

Government attitude was modified only when discontent and restlessness among peasants and labourers combined with prolonged depression in the sugar industry during the 1890's and again in the 1930's to create a situation of crisis. The wisdom of the traditional policy was then questioned by those who had initiated it. The establishment of the Jamaica Agricultural Society and the appointment of a travelling agricultural instructor in the 1890s hinted at new policy; the Report of the Royal West India Commission in 1897 seemed to point in a new direction. The Commission recognized that the peasantry was "a source of both economic and political strength." Accordingly, it recommended land settlement and diversification of agriculture: "no other reform affording so good a prospect for the permanent welfare in the future of the West Indies as the settlement of the labouring population on the land as small peasant proprietors". The ironic point is that these sentiments had to be repeated by the Sugar Commission of 1929 and by the Moyne Commission in 1939.⁴¹ Fundamental reform had been stillborn.

The "agricultural revolution", proclaimed as official policy in Jamaica since 1902 and hinted at in these Reports, has still not occurred. New government policy has consisted principally of the provision of agricultural credit facilities and the institution of land settlement schemes. The first is a new departure, beginning in the 1940's,⁴² and for that reason it is open to question whether it is not too little and has not come too late to ease the crisis among the peasantry. Land settlement schemes have a longer history. They were started in Jamaica in 1896, and have been used in most of the territories ever since. The schemes have not been pursued as consistent and coherent

³⁹Merivale, *op. cit.*, pp. 312-313; Earl Grey, *The Colonial Policy of Lord John Russell's Administration*, London, 1853, pp. 54ff.

⁴⁰This was the advice, contained in the Queen's Letter, which the Colonial Office offered to Jamaican petitioners for relief in 1865.

⁴¹W. A. Lewis, "Issues in Land Settlement Policy", *Caribbean Economic Review*, Vol. 3, Nos. 1 and 2, pp. 58-59.

⁴²R. Colon-Torres, *op. cit.*, pp. 85 ff. See also "Credit Facilities for Small Farmers" in "Land Tenure in the Caribbean", *Caribbean Economic Review*, Vol. II, No. 2, pp. 101-116.

policy; rather they have been used as expedients whenever general crisis seems to be threatening the existence of the community, as in the 1920's and again in the 1930's and 1940's. Consequently, little attention has been paid to the choice for settlers for the land or to the problem of the small farmer's deficiencies in knowledge, capital and organization. Moreover, much of the land distributed was not particularly fertile; half of the settlements in Jamaica between 1929 and 1949 possessed soil of the "red dirt" variety which is notorious for its incapacity to retain water and plant nutrients.⁴³ Government has concerned itself only with distributing the small holdings but if land settlement is to involve reform rather than a palliative, government must commit far more resources to this type of project.⁴⁴ The amount of land distributed in many of the territories suggests that only the surface of the problem has been scratched. The peasants require access to a large quantity of "fertile" land (i.e. estate land) in order to improve their living standards and also to increase their numbers. Land settlement, which in Trinidad between 1933 and 1948, for example, involved the disposal of 4,120 acres to 2,940 settlers will neither halt the drift from the land nor encourage permanent settlement.⁴⁵

A more determined assault on the problem is necessary if the position of the peasants is to be strengthened and if the potential of the peasantry is to be realized. This would seem to involve a re-consideration of the role of the plantation in this community and, ultimately, a basic re-arrangement of priorities in agrarian policy.

⁴³P. Redwood, *Statistical Survey of Government Land Settlement in Jamaica, B.W.I., 1929-1949*, pp. 18-21. Only 4 per cent of the settlements possessed soil of the best (alluvia) variety.

⁴⁴Lewis, "Issues in Land Settlement Policy", *op. cit.*, pp. 77 ff. See also LeRoy Taylor's "A Review of Land Policy in Jamaica", Mimeograph, 1965, I.S.E.R., University of the West Indies, pp. 7 ff.

⁴⁵Figures provided by Lewis for the period 1916 to 1949 show that 5,300 acres were settled in the Leeward Islands; 14,400 acres in the Windward Islands; and 106,100 acres in Jamaica. In British Guiana 8,500 acres were settled, between 1944 and 1949.