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Social and Political Aspects of Rural Development In The West Indies^a

By

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The Commonwealth Caribbean consists of a number of separate administrative areas which nonetheless have certain characteristics in common. They are all essentially one-town societies with one large commercial and administrative capital dominating the society. In the larger territories of Trinidad and Jamaica there are a few other large towns (San Fernando in Trinidad and Montego Bay and Spanish Town in Jamaica) but their political and social influences are minimal and in no way comparable with the main cities of Port-of-Spain and Kingston.

Nonetheless an examination of the problems of rural development in the West Indies cannot be made by singling out special rural communities for development. Although numerically the rural population predominates, their possibilities and problems of development can only be meaningfully appraised, if the cultural, social and economic dependence of these rural communities first, on their own commercial towns and secondly, on the outside world, are sufficiently taken into account.

The Historical Legacy

The Commonwealth Caribbean offers a special opportunity for the study of rural development because of certain distinguishing features of West Indian society as a whole. The West Indies have been exposed to Western rule and Western influence for a period of over 300 years. During this period the indigenous cultures were all destroyed; and the resulting economic and social development have left societies which in part bear the characteristics of "settler-colonies"; in part bear the imprint of "colonies of conquest" which possess separate cultures; and in part show distinguishing characteristics resulting from their own peculiar situation.

The integration of the West Indies into the economy of Europe took place early. The triangular trade between the region, North America and the United Kingdom led to an export-oriented economy which produced little for direct consumption and depended for manufactures and even for basic food-stuffs upon imports. The Caribbean became one of the classic plantation areas, in the sense that not only did plantations exist but they constituted the predominant form of agricultural production and this left its marks upon the society as a whole. In this sense "plantation societies" is an appropriate description for the region.

^aThe terms West Indies and Commonwealth Caribbean are used interchangeably to describe the former British West Indies.

This integration of the region into the European economy was carried so far that it led to the Royal Commission of 1883 describing the West Indies as "the tropical farms of the British Nation", which in fact they were. The characteristic feature of the plantation system was the development of large-scale agricultural production on the fringes of a commercial civilization and this led to a concentration of power, and an abuse of power, that constitute the characteristic social problem of the plantation.

The plantation-dominated agricultural society with a labour force dependent primarily upon recruitment from abroad was dealt a severe blow with the abolition of the slave trade and slavery. The new phase of social relations which were entered upon by the West Indies was marked by two characteristics: first, the attempt of the plantation owners to obtain new sources of supply of labour from outside the area, and secondly, the movement of the freed slaves away from the plantation into peasant-type production. The result of the efforts of the plantation owners was a steady stream of indentured labour mainly from India into the West Indies, particularly into Trinidad and British Guiana, producing a rich cultural diversity into the rural atmosphere of these countries. The effect of the second characteristic, the movement away from the plantation, was to create the classic conflict between peasant and plantation production which is in many respects at the root of the contemporary problem of rural development.

The possibilities and scope of rural development lie in the fact that the rural population has been exposed to Western influence for a considerable period; and the rudiments of a general education are so widespread that communication of new ideas is greatly facilitated. On the other hand the integration into the Western world has produced a typically peasant mentality in which "community" and "tribal" and group loyalties are minimized because of the predominantly economic orientation. This sets the background for much of the work of community uplift and development of the area. Another important contemporary feature inherited from the past is the existence of a rural proletariat in the person of the plantation worker and the effect this has had upon the psychology of rural people in general.

West Indian society at present is characterized by smallness in scale; by the fact that it is operating on the periphery of Western culture, without any internal cultural dynamic of its own, and that like other underdeveloped areas it possesses a marked desire for rising standards of living. The smallness of scale of the society has been further accentuated by the political fragmentation that has taken place within the last few years.

Another characteristic feature of the area as a whole is an expanding population against limited resources. Population growth has reached a stage where industrialization has become imperative, even as a means of solving the problem of agricultural over-population. In the past the development of the relatively underdeveloped sections of Trinidad and Guyana, and the export of surplus population to foreign sources have eased the burden of over-population. But now migration possibilities are becoming increasingly restricted.

Already the formidable nature of the problem is such that everywhere the problem of development is paramount in the political field. In the field of rural development the problem is bedevilled by the following:

(a) The orientation towards plantation and export crops and the lack of familiarity with, or knowledge about, all aspects of local production, storing and marketing of foodstuffs.

The easiest solution in agricultural development appears at first sight to be the extension of the existing system of production; but even in the islands where the field of local food production appears now as important, insufficient attention has been paid to local food tastes and to conditions affecting local food production. In this connection it must be remembered that virtually all the research in the area has been conducted with the so-called "plantation" or "export" crops. So that the basic knowledge requisite for reorganization of the economic life of the rural population does not exist.

This problem is of great significance for the whole society. While a rudimentary literacy is widespread, the bulk of the population may be said to be functionally illiterate. A population of this sort may be expected to act rationally in spheres of local knowledge where familiarity produces the relevant information requisite for adequate decision-making. But where a semi-literate population is called upon to engage in politics based on an economy dependent upon world trade, we are faced with a source of acute political and social instability. Rural development suffers from the fact that even the peasant is imbued with an external orientation so that, while in Jamaica there is some considerable food production, peasant production tends to concentrate everywhere on production of export crops. Even in Jamaica 50 per cent of the sugar cane produced is done by cane farmers rather than by plantations.

(b) The political integration of the West Indies into the Western world has also had its effect. Concepts and notions of the welfare state have been introduced and are part of the everyday politics of the area. In this connection a significant orientation to West Indian society was given by the Royal Commission of 1938 which was appointed after widespread popular disturbances. The report of this Commission was politically conservative and envisaged a long-continued imperial responsibility for the stricken area with little or no advance to self-government and political independence.

It is in this political context that the Royal Commission recommended a series of social services for the area derived primarily from the experience of Great Britain. It was assumed that the cost of these services would be largely met by the Imperial Treasury. The bulk of the West Indian population, themselves exposed to cultural influences from the West, easily accepted the notion that the demands for a welfare state were legitimate and feasible. However, the whole political evolution of the West Indies has been in the direction of increased responsibility and the problem is one of demands for a welfare state on an economy that cannot afford it.

One consequence of the introduction of the notion of a welfare state has been the progressive taking over by the state of whatever voluntary services previously existed. Perhaps the most striking example of this phenomenon as it affects rural development, is the evolution of the Jamaica Social Welfare Commission. Founded as a voluntary group based primarily on the principles of self-help, Jamaica Welfare Limited has become transformed into the Jamaica Social Welfare Commission, another governmental agency for social work.

Moreover, because of the smallness in scale of the society and the relative ease of communication the levels of aspiration and demands of the rural population are fairly close to those of the urban population; and the introduction of adult franchise and democratic rule has led to the easy extension of urban-style aspirations to the countryside.

(c) Rural development takes place in the West Indies within the context of a highly centralized administration. This, too, is an inheritance from the colonial regime. There is in Guyana, Jamaica and Barbados some slight semblance of rural self-government and there has always been some municipal government for the larger towns. But this self-government is extremely limited and in the long-run dependent upon central governmental support. If we look at education, (highly decentralized in the United Kingdom with its local education authorities) we find that there is in fact no local responsibility for this in the West Indies. Even where voluntary religious denominations participate in education this is done on a centralized and not on a local basis.

The Discords of Development

The experience in the West Indies indicates that social changes in the rural areas can only be properly envisaged as part and parcel of the problems of a developing country. It seems clear that in any such community differentials, and even gross differentials, are bound to exist. There are the differences, characteristic of other countries, but more sharply drawn between social classes, between the professional groups and the manual workers, between skilled and unskilled workers, as well as the gross distinction between rural and urban areas. These differentials are all in their way related to the problem of rural development.

Indeed, as development proceeds within these small island communities the differentials become more and more obvious and a source of rural discontent. The tendency to move off the land and into urban areas becomes more marked. So that the phenomenon of urbanization without industrialization becomes widespread. It is also obvious that continued migration from the West Indies to overseas territories is not only a migration of urban workers, but affects people in the rural areas as well.

In this connection it is necessary to observe the effect of the Farm Labour Scheme through which, in several of the West Indian islands, temporary farm labour is exported to the United States. As far as possible this group is drawn

from agriculturalists and agricultural workers. These farm-labourers, after their temporary sojourn in the United States, are an additional source of the introduction of new ideas and new standards and hence of new discontents.

Moreover, these farm-labourers themselves, having access through high wages to a source of capital development, have shown a marked tendency to move away from low-paid agricultural work into petty trade and speculation, or they seek to make the West Indian islands themselves the place where they temporarily sojourn. These discontents are not in themselves "unhealthy" or likely to lead to discord. The difficulty in the situation lies in the fact that the community as a whole and the rural communities themselves are unable to satisfy the new demands that have arisen.

Indeed, there is a failure to face up to the problems of development that the communities have set themselves. This is in part due to nationalism being derived from a middle-class desire to show a good face to the world; in part due to the fact that the revolution of expectations has been accompanied by highly visible developments. Moreover, the political competition within a developing democracy has led to the presentation by the government, the main sources of ideas in an underdeveloped country, of a string of successes to the electorate. The overall effect is to create throughout the community the image of a successful West Indies, of a progressive series of communities actually engaged in solving their problems. That the West Indies are not the most backward of the nations of the world helps to reinforce this.

In the direct field of agriculture and community development these services are also centrally organized, with the main career lines of promotion located in the towns. The effect of this high degree of centralization is to kill and hamper local initiative and to perpetuate the feeling of dependence upon a government that is conceived of as possessing considerably more resources than it does in fact command.

Another result is the tendency of high salaries normal for the administration in the town to become uniform throughout the country. The fact that the colonial government, even before the establishment of a welfare state policy, was responsible to the Imperial Parliament and represented to some extent a "reforming agency" led to the establishment of a "fair wages" policy in governmental work and a "fair wages" clause in governmental contracts. Consequently, the wages and salaries in the public sphere tend to be high. The existence in some islands of high-wage sectors in the private sphere, particularly in the mining of oil and bauxite, has reinforced this tendency of administration to cost substantially more than the community can afford for a programme of development.

Naturally in all services provided by the government the urban areas are more favoured and this reinforces the tendency of all professional services to be centred in the town. Any expansion of proposed services, whether medical, legal, educational or in the community and welfare field, comes up against this fact that salaries have to be related not to the needs, circum-

stances and opportunities of the local area but to a standardized system.

Consequently we have in the rural areas certain contradictory and puzzling phenomena. Thus there are reports of shortage of labour, at the same time as massive unemployment exists. For the spread of higher standards of living leads to a high "reserve" price of labour. Moreover, the close personal supervision and extra benefits (meals, etc.) which the small-farmer frequently offers as an inducement to his workers become less attractive as developments in mining, manufacturing and governmental work introduce a general atmosphere of impersonality into all fields of economic relations.

The Nature of Community

One difficulty in the sphere of rural development has been the failure of any indigenous pattern to emerge. Initially the model to be imitated was village work in India and conceptions of village welfare introduced were to a large extent irrelevant to West Indian conditions. In the island of Jamaica, which has the most developed forms of rural social work, "village welfare" activities and "village workers" are appointed, although the very concept of the village is largely foreign to the society; and is an imported word little used except among the educated classes.

In the West Indies, where economic life has been so lacking in any form of autonomy, the idea of the self-contained village or community is largely meaningless. As a perceptive writer on the rural communities of Jamaica has pointed out there is no one single all-embracing local community, but a series of communities varying in range and scope which are significant for various forms of activity. Again, we must stress that excessive centralization has led to the establishment of only the larger local entities, so that organization on the level of the rural district or village does not exist, even in its most rudimentary form.

Much of the discussion of community development has proceeded on the basis of a simple model of the integrated community. While everywhere this poses difficulties these appear to be especially marked in the West Indies. Nonetheless, the efforts at community development did lead to some initial successes. The spheres of road building, school construction, public works generally, have been traditionally allotted to the central government. Hence all efforts at community development in these fields have taken the form of presentation of demands to the central government. In the sphere of community centres and playing fields or the establishment of house-craft centres or "new" activities, there has been some response to appeals to community effort; especially self-help has been encouraged by matching grants from government.

These efforts suffer from two limitations. First, the general tendency of the governments to assume responsibility for welfare work hampers local initiative, and community development has come to be regarded as within the legitimate sphere of central governmental activity. It seems unrealistic to demand voluntary community effort directed by well-paid "community work-

ers". Secondly, these operations are on a small scale and any attempt to extend this activity into directly productive fields meets with the resistance of organized labour.

In the field of community development there is, too, a hankering after the "good old days". There was, in the past, a greater degree of rural isolation and on this account certain forms of mutual aid in house-building, clearing land and harvesting were quite common. The increasing spread of communications and the fuller economic integration of the rural communities have completely wiped out these forms of mutual assistance as an important source of labour. Nonetheless the moral fervour which supports community self-help sees this as a deterioration and not as an inevitable consequence of economic development.

An examination of community development in the West Indies shows that the sociologically significant community is the island or territory and that any conception of rural development has to be placed within this context of a larger development. This is not to deny the significance or importance of rural or village development *per se* but merely to accent the need for an appreciation of the necessity of placing the partial development within the context of the whole.

The Conception of the Problem

The problem of rural development has been characteristically conceived in two contradictory ways. On the one hand there has been the strong desire to increase productivity in agriculture and therefore a great deal of attention has been directed towards land reform which will in fact result in increased productivity. On the other hand, there has been strong social pressure towards dividing up the land.

With regard to the first set of factors these attempts to induce economic development have inevitably come up against certain social factors. One of the most important of the attempts at reform has been the achievement of secure title to land, the attempt to consolidate fragmented holdings, the attempt to overcome the limitation of small-scale individual ownership; the direct provision of credit, educational and extension facilities for the farmworker; the attempt to induce industry to settle in rural areas and rural towns whenever possible.

Land Holding and the Farm Family

The extensive fragmentation of peasant holdings is of course a direct result of population growth operating on limited resources. Because of the pressure on the land, the prejudice against rural occupations has never been really operating; or rather, it affects the level of aspiration more than it does the level of expectation. Fragmentation is everywhere uneconomic. The only factor that makes the fragmentation possible is the low general standard of living and the low level of technology in agriculture. This low level of farm agriculture sets severe limits to what can be accomplished by the farm family

with hand tools so that the direction of development is necessarily towards a more intensive cultivation of the land.

The nature of the lower-class West Indian family, with its relatively loose organization, and its failure to achieve any legal recognition has led to the existence of a great deal of confusion in the tenure of land. The central government has also not been seriously interested in land taxation as a source of revenue. So much of the economy was geared to external trade that it was simple to rely on customs duties and (latterly) on income tax. Consequently, the whole system of land administration has been in chaos. The plantation and large land-owners have had access to secure titles to land, but in all the islands much of the farm population has grown up with inadequate title to land. Thus in the island of Tobago title to land passes by a simple receipt despite legal regulation to the contrary. In such circumstances divisions of land are made without adequate survey and recourse to proper legal procedure so that after a few generations an initially clear situation must become tangled and complex.

This system of customary practices surrounding the ownership and use of land are not only complicated by the issue of legitimacy arising from family structure; but by the persistence of a form of "joint ownership" of land by the family. This customary system of holding land has been described as "family land" and traced to an African inheritance. This latter interpretation appears to have little foundation. Similar systems of joint ownership tend to exist wherever there is agricultural land. But such tenures do not prohibit development because intra-familial arrangements are made either for the ultimate division of the land or for adequate compensation for those whose rights in the land have been displaced. The African aspect appears to arise merely from the anthropological surprise at seeing certain kinship ties among the agricultural lower classes; there are no specific historical antecedents identified for any of these practices.

In most areas where agricultural development has been seriously undertaken, attempts have been made to cut through the morass and hence simplify the acquisition of title. This allows greater facilities for credit. But it undoubtedly leads to the violation of customary, if not legal, rights and to a further disruption of the "communal" or "group" solidarity upon which some community developers have relied.

Agricultural Communities that Do not Like Agriculture

The cultural inheritance of these communities together with the contemporary situation has helped to produce a bias against agriculture. In the early nineteenth century the reaction against the plantation led to a widespread extension of peasant cultivation. But the peasant cultivator never developed an independent cultural life of his own. His psychology has to a large extent been influenced by the rural proletariat, and as so much of small-farming has gone into the export crops the rivalry with the plantation has helped to reinforce this outlook.

The failure of the community to adapt itself to its primarily agricultural environment is in no way better envisaged than by an examination of the school system. Originally intended to give merely the rudiments of literacy and a minimum of rural education to the former slaves and their offspring, the educational system has for the last century and a half wrestled with the problem of adaptation only to end in the sphere of rural education in ignominious defeat. In the first place "agricultural" education was viewed primarily as a means of ridding the working-classes of their prejudice against agricultural work. Since manual work on the plantation called for a minimum of skills, such a programme was understandably viewed with suspicion. In the second place, the colonial administration taught the population to be clerks by itself setting such a high value upon clerical and administrative skills. In the third place the educational system was inevitably a copy of that existing in the more developed industrial system of Great Britain.

Widespread universal education was largely a product of the industrial revolution and the introduction of an English system either proved irrelevant or helped to turn the population away from agriculture. In the fourth place the teachers themselves have largely been drawn from the less privileged classes. While the small middle-class groups were able to send their children to grammar, secondary and professional schools the bulk of the population had to be content with an elementary education. The teaching profession by its organization represented the main source by which the person with an elementary education alone could rise to middle-class status. Consequently, the teachers as a whole have been successively conservative and have until recently resisted many rational adaptations to the environment. As a group they tend to represent the conservative middle-class of yesterday. While this is not as true of the younger teachers, it is largely true of all influential persons in the teaching world and the field of educational administration.

Further, the excessive centralization of which we have spoken led to the ultimate ambition of the teachers to be resident in town. Teaching in the country came to be regarded as a form of exile away from the amenities of urbanization and from educational opportunities for the oncoming generation. Any attempts at adaptation in education have been rendered futile by basic lack of orientation in teachers and parents alike. Education has been viewed primarily as a source of mobility, as a means of escaping, if possible, out of agriculture into the professions and skilled urban occupations. Agricultural education has moreover not been integrated into general education but has been segregated out as a specialized and limited activity on the part of the school.

What has happened to agricultural education as a whole can be illustrated for the secondary field. Science was introduced into the secondary schools, in the first place as agricultural science and the first science scholarships were agricultural scholarships. But nowhere in the area is secondary education now concerned with agriculture although science itself has become well established. Instead, special agricultural schools separate and apart from the

main stream of secondary schools and in no way comparable in status have been started. Education for the clerical posts still remains dominant. More recently efforts have been made to implement agricultural education through other agencies, most important being the 4H Club Movement. But here again the segregation out of agricultural activity is what stands out, while all the problems of mobility and urban orientation exist in the new service.

Social Factors and the Economic Holding

The achievement of some form of adequate title to the land does not, however, solve the problem of fragmentation of holdings. Indeed, by increasing the scope of the market in land it may have precisely the opposite effect. So far there have been no radical attempts to deal with the problem of fragmentation. One of the results of a plantation-dominated economy directed largely from demand and outlet towards an external market, is that managerial decisions of an economic nature become separated from technical problems. So that extension workers are well equipped with technical data, but are little familiar with the economics of farm management. While there is an awareness in the higher circles of the need for consolidation, no serious attention has been paid to the problem. Certain experiments with larger properties operating on a group or collective basis have been made but no effort has been made to generalize this experience, which has not in any case been particularly successful. This absence of economic or managerial thinking on the part of administration has been responsible for the failure of many schemes of land reform and projects of agricultural development.

This failure is seen at its clearest in the dismal history of land settlement schemes. While there are strong pressures to move off the land there is also the strong land hunger which leads to the schemes for the division of the land. Usually land-settlement schemes have been small in size because politically they must reach the largest number, because of the lack of capital available, the low technology involved as well as the absence of "managerial" thinking.

Economically not viable they have frequently been placed close to towns and have become housing plots for urban workers, or they have been located at spots where adequate local marketing facilities do not exist. At the same time vague feelings that land-settlement should form a "community" and possess a community spirit has led in some cases to a requirement of residence not in keeping with the circumstances of the case. Here again the model of the integrated village community has hampered development.

These problems of an economic holding in agriculture and the social demands made by the population are not new or unique. Nor have any of the solutions proposed been any way unique. Provision of credit, co-operatives, marketing, etc., — these "solutions" are fairly obvious. Attempts at implementation have, however, met with little success.

Rural Education and Extension

The problem of development has been left largely in the hands of extension workers. But rural sociology and agricultural economics have hardly emerged as serious disciplines or professional pursuits. Certainly the extension workers are exposed to a minimum of such training if any at all; and usually at stages of their training when attitudes have already hardened and matured. Extension work is involved in urban rather than rural society and is more of a middle-class career than a farming opportunity. Agricultural training has been largely the training of extension workers and few persons trained in agriculture actually enter into the business of farming.

More serious than the cultural practices is the failure to get adequate personal motivation. Farm development schemes have failed largely because of this. Plans are developed from above without mid-way collaboration from below. Schemes are introduced with the assumption that the "rational goals" of the planners are identical with the goals of the individual farmer or farming community. There is a failure in communication because farmers see extension workers, social workers and government officers as a whole as having individual goals of their own; and are not convinced that the messages actually communicated are motivated entirely by goodwill and understanding.

In such a context the many mistakes inevitably made in any such programme of reform easily destroy confidence in the leadership. Social class differences in West Indian society are so sharp that such suspicion is almost inevitable. It is this suspicion symbolized by cultural differences that makes communication of new ideas difficult, even though these cultural differences themselves operate independently in the situation. Linguistic differences (particularly where, as in St. Lucia and Dominica, a French-patois speaking population confronts an English administration) exist and accentuate the problem. But by and large the gap between the classes in the West Indies is social rather than cultural, although actually they tend to coincide. Moreover the problem of rural development is inadequately conceived if we try to place it in the framework of cultural pluralism. The "folk culture" of the rural West Indies is to a large extent merely the urban culture of yesterday and reflects a diffused exposure to the effects of the outside world. The spread of the cinema, records, radio (and some television) has served to impress much more of a common imprint on the rural and urban areas than is at first apparent.

Rural Development in its Larger Context

Rural development in the West Indies has largely been conceived as a spreading out of the superior urban standards into the rural areas. There is little resistance to the provision of such amenities. Indeed the problem is one of failure to satisfy the demand or to render that demand economic.

The cultural factors inhibiting rural development lie largely in the failure to provide sufficient education related to the every-day life of the people; and the failure to adapt standards to the way of life of the people. In the

sphere of medicine for instance, there are in some areas a strong reliance on "folk medicine" and on "obeah" and in some respects there is a rivalry between the backyard and medical practice. Yet nurses, pharmacists and doctors are overwhelmed with patients; and the backyard flourishes only partially as a result of a cultural preference for some such sort of activity and largely in default of other activities.

The disruption of indigenous and native cultures has reached the stage where no "integrated culture" offers any resistance to the introduction of innovations. Except for the field of "obeah" and its impact on medical practice there are few folk beliefs that are "non-rational", that is, based on a psychological need to the situation rather than on lack of specific information. In the sphere of extension work, failure to use fertilizer — a belief that fertilization "burn the land" — is to a large extent rationally held. Much of the failure of extension work springs from the failure of the worker to understand the economic problems of the small-farmer, or to appreciate the limited range of his experience. The appreciation of the problem and the extension of the experience can lead to rapidly induced change.

The overall picture is true of most of the Caribbean area as well as of the West Indies. Naturally within the West Indies individual variations sometimes of large magnitude do in fact exist. By and large, however, the picture of rural development is one in which there is little innate cultural resistance to innovation and to the introduction of new ideas. But the range of attitudes surrounding governmental activity, the inadequacy of personal motivation and the sharp cleavages in the overall social structure inhibit most of the attempts at progress. In this context, the main lack is an adequate source of direction. Attempts at inducing social change have been fitful, partial and unrelated to the total context of West Indian society. Any properly conceived attempt at development must take these factors into account.