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# LAND REFORM IN A SPARSELY POPULATED COUNTRY WITH AN INDIGENEOUS POPULATION

## The Case of Guyana

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### Introduction

The distinguishing characteristic of a land reform programme is the transfer of ownership of land from one set of persons to another. This transfer may result in the fragmentation of land holdings or in their consolidation. Land reform has been initiated in different circumstances, but the more common situations have been those in which one or more of the following obtain: (1) a high population density; (2) little unutilized cultivable land; and (3) large and low productivity plantations/*haciendas* with low land utilization ratios. Under those circumstances, equity, social stability and resource allocative efficiency argue compellingly for changes in the size, and/or the form, and/or the ownership of existing forms.

Against this background, the popular conception of Guyana as a vast, sparsely populated country, with a relatively efficient plantation sector, and in any case, large expanses of unused arable land seems to suggest that considerations of land reform are irrelevant. This paper challenges that view, and intends to demonstrate that, on a closer examination of agricultural and, more broadly, economic planning, as well as the spatial character of the economy, land reform is a real and relevant issue. Reinforcing this conclusion are certain socio-political considerations.

The discussion will focus on two main areas, namely, the coastal plantation societies, and the interland Amerindian communities. The first has received partial analysis over the last two years, beginning with C.Y. Thomas' "Sugar Economics in a Colonial Situation."<sup>1</sup> The second has received no attention from Caribbean economists, and indeed only sketchy treatment by social anthropologists. Since the sugar debate has produced no response from policy makers we think it worthwhile to raise again some fundamental questions about land ownership and land use on the coastland. The discussion will be extended to deal with rice, the major coastal peasant crop. Our choice of the second topic, i.e. Amerindian land reform, is motivated largely by the desire to force comment on the essentially political and social questions of the rights of indigenous peoples in general, and on the place of the Amerindians in Guyanese society and economy in particular.

### Some Features of the Current Agricultural Situation

The issue of efficient resource allocation arises basically out of one observed fact: the failure of the Guyanese society over decades of existence to feed themselves and sustain a reasonable standard of living in the face of acknowledged agricultural potential. This fact itself reflects certain important characteristics of agriculture in Guyana.

Firstly, agriculture is essentially coastal in nature, with some 94 per cent of all farms distributed along the coastland and riverain areas of Demerara, Berbice and Essequibo. Secondly, the crop pattern reflects a concentration on three crops. The first two, sugar and rice, are the major contributors to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and export revenues - sugar accounting for 12 per cent of the GDP, and 28 per cent exports in 1970; and rice accounting for 4 per cent of the GDP, and 8 per cent of exports in the same year. Ground provisions constitute the main crop grown essentially for the domestic market. The acreage under crops given by a recent estimate of the percentage distribution of crop land in 1970, indicates that sugar utilises 21.8 per cent, rice 59.5 per cent and other crops less than 20 per cent of farm land in Guyana.<sup>2</sup> Corresponding to and resulting from the geographically skewed nature of agriculture is a similarly

<sup>1</sup> C.Y. Thomas. *Sugar Economies in a Colonial Situation*, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> Guyana Ministry of Agriculture's estimates. Reported in B.A.T. Phillips "The Place of Marketing Cooperatives in the Development of Agriculture in Guyana" *Proceedings of the Sixth West Indian Agricultural Economics Conference*. U.W.I., Trinidad, 1971, p.47.

skewed distribution of population - more than 89 per cent of the total population live on the coastlands. Further, the agricultural labour force is predominantly engaged in the sugar and rice industries.<sup>1</sup>

This is the economy-wide picture, there are of course differences over particular districts both in the terms of population distribution and of crop dispersion. For instance, Berbice, Essequibo and East Coast Demerara specialise in rice production, while there is a relative concentration of the farming of ground provisions in the region of the Demerara river, East Bank, West Bank and West Coast Demerara.

Two other important features in the context of this paper are firstly, less than one-half of the total land space of Guyana is cultivable, and secondly, there is an uneven geographical distribution of arable lands.

The report of the joint United Nations - British Guiana Special Fund Project on Soil Surveys reveals that of the total 13.8 million acres of land only 6.3 million acres are arable. Of this, 2.0 million acres are located on the coastal region, and 0.4 million in the North-west district. The remaining 4.0 million acres are scattered in the interior regions of the country.<sup>2</sup> Most of this 4.0 million acres is largely unpenetrated virgin forest.

The difficulties of pushing back such frontiers are emphasised by the highly skewed communication system which derives from the coastal nature of the Guyanese society and economy. Of the 532 miles of public roads 354 of these are in the coastal and riverain areas. The railways are coastal; so is the steamboat shipping service. The rivers are only navigable a small part of the way, in discontinuous stretches by some crafts, and only for parts of the year. In addition air transport is very expensive. Transport facilities though extending to a few distant border and interior areas, by-pass the arable middle of the country. This, plus the concentration of all economic activity and population (89-90 per cent) in the coastal and riverain areas, make the coastal area critical to any short or medium term programme of agricultural development.

Because the coastland of Guyana is below sea level, there is a delimit of the range of presently usable land due to problems of drainage and irrigation. Of the one million acres under crops and pasture "less than 450,000 acres fall under controlled drainage and irrigation. Possibly another 150,000 acres of land are cultivated without any organised drainage and irrigation facilities. . ."<sup>3</sup>

The absence of adequate water control facilities, may be due to the high cost of establishing a functional system for any large area. Some indication of these establishment costs is given in Table 1. "There is a growing dependence on public drainage, irrigation and flood control projects for any large scale agricultural development on the coastal region."<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, where capital is scarce, it becomes necessary to examine closely the allocation of existing drained, irrigated, and cultivable land.

### Land Reform in the Coastal Plantation Society

In 1968, Havelock Brewster initiated the debate about efficient land use in the sugar economy of Jamaica by posing the fundamental question of the optimal allocation of land and capital in the economy

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1 Cited by S.S. Naraine in: "The Impact of Drainage, Irrigation, and Flood Control on Agriculture in Guyana," *Proceedings of the Sixth West Indian Agricultural Economics Conference*, U.W.I., Trinidad, 1971.

2 Reported in J.G. Steele "Soil Areas Suitable for Development in Northern Guyana," *British Guiana Development Programme (1966-1972)*, Appendix II, pp.XII-39 to XII-44, Georgetown, Guyana.

3 The 1966-72 Development Programme estimates an expenditure of \$37.2m. on improvements of existing roads and the construction of new roads.

4 S.S. Naraine.*Op.cit.* p.11.

as a whole. As Brewster insisted the issue essentially "... is a matter of the net returns to the country for all the resources put into the industry compared with the returns from alternative investments."<sup>1</sup> C.Y. Thomas in the same debate reiterated the question of the optimal "shape, form, size, and location" of the sugar industry.<sup>2</sup>

Two years later, Thomas analysed the issues in the Guyana case. He wrote: "The question we should be asking ourselves as Guyanese is, whether this is the best way to use over one hundred thousand acres of our best land, drained and irrigated at huge cost, to employ nearly seventeen thousand workers. . . ; to employ capital assets of our \$85 million . . .?"<sup>3</sup>

We suggest that this is the dominant issue for agricultural development in Guyana, and this paper attempts to provide answers in so far as land reforms affect the "shape, form and size" of the industry. In addition the analysis is extended in part to the rice industry.

### Static Reasons for Land Reform

Traditionally, static models of land reform rest heavily on the marginal productivity gains from increasing the size of peasant farms, as well as from output gains from a fuller utilisation of land.

The underlying logic of the latter is straightforward. Bringing hitherto idle land into cultivation adds directly to output and increases the output/land ratio. The usual presumption is that small peasant farmers do not hold substantial idle land, except for land in fallow, but that large farm holders do. A transfer of ownership from large to peasant farmers via fragmentation of large estates consequently augments gross output. The critical issue therefore is whether there is significant under utilisation of land at both small and big farm level.

No data on land utilisation levels for small farms of 50 acres or less exist at the moment. However, information for a country-wide sample of rice farmers drawn from the 1968 Census of Agriculture is available, and because rice farming is the activity undertaken by 30 per cent of all small farms, and is the predominantly peasant crop, these data permit fairly valid inferences for the peasant farm sector as a whole. The data reveal very extensive and intensive use of available land both in terms of total cultivation of farm land, as well as in terms of multiple-cropping practices. In addition, the overwhelming proportion of rice farmers in four of the five administrative districts where rice is grown,<sup>4</sup> taking advantage of rainfall plant two crops per year.

On the other hand the degree of utilisation of land in farms larger than 50 acres is less than for small farms although the utilisation rate is still relatively high. Table 1 was constructed from a sample of 108 out of the estimated 400-500 farms over 50 acres enumerated by the 1968 Census of Agriculture. It reveals that not more than 48 per cent of the large farms utilised 90 per cent or more of their available land area, and that 67 per cent of them utilise more than 50 per cent of their land. A subdivision of these farms in several smaller size categories did not reveal any tendency for utilisation ratios to decline as farm size increases. Finally, plantation sugar utilised about 59 per cent of its total land holdings in 1969.

Thus the argument for land reform on the basis of unused land resources possesses considerable validity. It must be qualified however, that the probability of having portions of ground that cannot be cultivated in any given patch of land, increases with the size of the farm.

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1 H.R. Brewster. "Jamaica's Life or Death: The Sugar Industry." in N. Girvan & O. Jefferson (eds.) *Readings in the Political Economy of the Caribbean*, 1971a.

2 C.Y. Thomas. "Diversification and the Burden of Sugar to Jamaica." in Girvan & Jefferson, *Op.cit.* 1971, p.60.

3 C.Y. Thomas. *Op.cit.* 1970, p.5.

4 Details are Essequibo Coast 82%, Essequibo Islands 98%, West Coast Demerara 92%, East Coast Demerara 98%, West Berbice 20%, and East Berbice 67%.

The evidence on the farm productivity - farm size relationship is somewhat ambiguous. The essential premise of arguments based on the size of farms is that the size distribution of farms is positively skewed. The next essential step is to assert economies/diseconomies of size as a reason for increasing the size of small farms and decreasing the size of large farms within well defined ranges.

The premise of positive skewness has some measure of validity in the Guyanese context. Preliminary results of the 1968 Census of Agriculture indicate that with the exclusion of the Rupununi,<sup>1</sup> 98.7 per cent of farms are under 50 acres in area. Moreover, the distribution within the two broad size groupings is heavily concentrated at the lower ends of the scale. The main features of the distributions are summarised in Table 2 which is constructed from the two samples drawn from the census enumeration. It is particularly noteworthy that slightly more than one-half of the farms in the "not more than 50 acres" group are smaller than 5 acres; and that slightly more than one-half of those in the "larger than 50 acres" group are no less than 100 acres.

The search for economies/diseconomies of scale did not yield such clear results. Firstly, there is the general problem of distinguishing between "scale" and "size" effects noted by Bachman and Christensen.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, there are the difficulties of productivity comparisons of farms over different crops and different marketing conditions discussed by Beckford.<sup>3</sup> These include the weaknesses of physical yield comparisons when the crops are dissimilar and multi-cropping is practised. They also include distorted bases of comparison when imperfections exist in factor and/or commodity markets, e.g. in a situation where one crop has its price supported by some institutional arrangements like those governing most of the sugar industry. Thirdly, there is the difficulty of ensuring that the farms being compared have not been constrained in their efforts to vary other inputs concomitantly with land. And finally, there is the bias resulting from quality differences in land. Bearing in mind these problems of inter-farm comparison, and in any case constrained by the lack of data for other crops, land productivity estimates were computed for two crops: (a) sugar, and (b) rice.

The sugar data though aggregative is separable into two subsets: 'plantation' which altogether accounts for 91.3 per cent of total land under cane, and 'peasants' which altogether accounts for the remaining 8.7 per cent. Yield were estimated for each of the years 1956-1969. They indicate in general greater efficiency in plantation cane farming. Only in three cases did peasant productivity exceed that of the plantations, and on a further three occasions productivity on peasant holdings and plantations came close to being equal.

From this it might be inferred that there is no valid productivity argument for increasing the land holdings of peasant cane producers and decreasing those of the plantations. Nonetheless, we should exercise caution in view of the superior quality of plantation land, fertilisers, drainage and irrigation facilities, and other inputs.

For the rice industry, we computed correlation coefficients between output/land ratios and acreage planted for five samples of farms of size less than 50 acres drawn from each of five separate districts. All of the coefficients were small and negative, indicating that productivity was inversely related to acreage planted. We interpreted these results as partial evidence of small diseconomies of farm size. The details are given in Table 3.

While there has been between the five districts reasonably homogeneity in land quality, we must note that the farmers in each district displayed widely different absorption ratios for labour, machine power, and

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1 A civil uprising by some cattle ranchers in the Rupununi prevented a census in this area.

2 K.L. Bachman & R.P. Christensen. "The Economics of Farm Size." Ch. 7 in H.M. Southworth & B.F. Johnston (eds.) *Agricultural Development and Economic Growth*. Cornell Univ. Press, New York, 1967, pp. 236-240.

3 G.L. Beckford. *Persistent Poverty*. Oxford Univ. Press, 1972, p.108.

animal power inputs, and this may have had some effect on comparative land productivities. Furthermore, even though there is some evidence of diseconomies within the size range 0-50 acres, economies may exist between broad size categories i.e. there may be an upward displacement of the output/land curve as one moves from a lower to a higher size category.

In the social economy context of cane farming in particular, we have to consider at least three other static factors. Firstly, international sugar marketing agreements e.g. Commonwealth preferences impose social costs in the form of *quid pro quo* concessions given to foreign export nations, as well as the direct administrative costs of the bargaining/lobbying machinery. Secondly, because the plantations are foreign-owned, there is a repatriation of profits and dividends.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, the benefits of the expanded capital assets of the plantations - an expansion financed, over the last decade, almost entirely out of retained earnings, depreciation allowances, and the issue of bonus shares - have accrued solely to U.K. nationals both in terms of increased stock holdings and in terms of rising share prices.<sup>2</sup> Deducting all of these costs and leakages from the net private returns to plantation sugar would reduce considerably (perhaps to negative amounts) the net social contribution of the plantation sugar industry. If this happens, the static comparative advantage of plantation cane farming might decline not only with respect to peasant cane farming, but to a wider range of products.

Even if the comparative static reasons for land reform in the coastal plantation society are not clear-cut, the dynamic reasons centering on the sugar plantations are abundantly clear.

#### *Dynamic Considerations*

The need for agricultural product diversification is one of the few widely accepted propositions in Caribbean agriculture. Its wide acceptability stems from the unambiguous failure of the region to provide much of its food consumption requirements, as demonstrated by the high ratio of food imports to total consumption; it also derives from the nutritional deficiencies of the basic Caribbean diet.

On the last point, Brewster<sup>3</sup> provides for Jamaica some statistical material which reveals in a particularly dramatic fashion the poverty of the basic situation concealed by much lauded per capita national income measures of "development". The information given in Table 4 is most revealing.

Jamaica may differ from the rest of the Caribbean only in degree. Perhaps it should also be pointed out that, because of the highly skewed income distribution pattern in Jamaica, *for most people the per capita consumption figures overstate their monthly intakes.*

Agricultural diversification becomes important both in terms of domestic food needs and in terms of export agriculture. On the domestic market the concentration in demand on importables such as cereals, meat, dairy products and fish not domestically produced, channel the benefits of increasing national income away from the domestic agricultural sector leading to stagnation and unemployment of labour and other resources in the sector and consequently in the rest of the economy. Since the economy is open it also means temporarily rising propensities to import. The latter results in deteriorating terms of trade and decline in the income and employment generative capacities of the export agricultural sector.

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1 C.Y. Thomas. *Op.cit.* 1970, pp.18-22 presents details which reveal among other things, (i) a doubling of share prices; (ii) a 50% increase of share capital via bonus shares between 1960 and 1966; and (iii) capital expenditures totalling \$41.1m. and depreciation reserves totalling \$31.1m. during 1960 to 1966.

2 C.Y. Thomas. *Op.cit.* 1970.

3 H.R. Brewster. "Jamaica's Life or Death: The Sugar Industry." in Girvan & Jefferson, *Op.cit.* 1971b.

Finally, the policy of product diversification contains a large element of risk minimisation within revenue-constraints objectives, somewhat analogous to those of the theory of investment portfolio behaviour. That is, in face of market uncertainties, resulting for example, from geo-political changes and regional integration schemes, policy-makers may deliberately broaden the range of products locally produced as a means of risk minimisation consistent with certain desired levels of revenue.

The proposition argued here is that coastal plantation agriculture presents serious obstacles to agricultural diversification. Beckford<sup>1</sup> contains a brilliant and exhaustive discussion of these obstacles and other debilitating effects of plantations. Our analysis for the remainder of this section draws heavier on that work. Two obstacles may be singled out for mention. Firstly, there is the fact that the maximising objectives of the sugar plantation extend over ranges of productive activities that do not stop at the farm output level. For instance, Bookers Sugar Estates Limited - the largest estate cane producer - is a part of an economy-wide and international complex that produces refined sugar, molasses, alcohol, drugs, and other products. Sugar cane acts as an input into many other processes within the ambit of the firm. Decision-making thus takes on a more 'global' character, which results in relatively lesser importance being attached to the direct profitability (or utility) of cane farming as such. For smaller single product centred decision-making units, the converse is the case. Private utility-maximising considerations are consequently more likely to produce attempts at output diversification for smaller size farms than in the case of plantations. A practical case in point is the switch of many small farmers to cane farming in response to the relatively greater remunerativeness of cane farming - a situation produced by marketing uncertainties and lack of ancillary supports with respect to other crops.

Secondly, capital stock in plantation sugar tends to be more specific than that in other lines and scales of agricultural activities. This tends to limit a flexible reallocation of inputs in response to product market changes.<sup>2</sup>

Another important dynamic argument for land reform is the need to establish greater productive interdependencies between different agricultural activities, and between agricultural and non-agricultural industries. The internal economic resiliency of an economy, measured by, for example, its sensitivity to foreign trade fluctuations, varies directly with the degree of intra and inter-sectoral interdependence.<sup>3</sup> Dairy and beef cattle-rearing is an important example of an agricultural activity that generates strong linkages between agriculture and 'industry' with their associated multiplier effects. For instance, their outputs provide valuable inputs for leather and leather products, confectionery, and meat products industries; and they demand stockfeeds, building materials, and machinery from other industries. Livestock again provides an example and intra-agricultural linkages, pigfeeds possibly taking the form of combinations of such agricultural products as molasses, coconut meal, rice bran, rice polishing, and dried root crops.<sup>4</sup> Corn and sorghum are examples of crops which can be efficiently produced in the coastal and riverain areas for livestock feeds. Plantation sugar does not foster such linkages partly because of the nature of the product, but mainly because of the form, particularly the "foreignness", of the industry. Even the linkages resulting from packaging and processing are denied the domestic economy, as these activities take place largely in the metropolitan branches of the firms.

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1 G.L. Beckford. *Op.cit.* 1972.

2 For elaboration, consult Beckford, *Op.cit.* 1972, pp.161-164.

3 See, for instance, the various contributions in Tibor Barna (ed.) *Structural Interdependence and Economic Development*. MacMillan, London, 1967.

4 See F.E. Mongul. *Possibilities in Animal Production with specific reference to Swine and Poultry*. Unpublished paper presented to Guyana National Cooperative Bank's Conference on Agricultural Credit, Georgetown, 1971.

At the conceptual level, land reform can result in capital stock growth and technical progress. Raup<sup>1</sup> points out that capital formation in the early stages of agricultural development as well as in the transition from a 'cash-crop economy to a livestock-feed economy' is predominantly "accretionary". This capital formation often takes the form of buildings, fencing, drains, irrigation facilities, etc., and involves mainly a greater allocation of farmers' time to work rather than to leisure. Moreover, the time spans required for effective operation of these accretionary processes are measured not in terms of years but in decades. Land reform is important insofar as it leads to "patterns of production, consumption and investment that maximise accretionary processes." Rights of property either as an individual or as a member of a group by granting him security of expectation is alleged to heighten the farmer's motivation to work and invest.

These aspects of the capital formation process and motivation argue strongly for a close examination of land tenure and land reform in the coastal peasant economy, particularly among paddy planters, where tenant-farmer cultivation is believed to be prevalent.

Furthermore, land reform aids the process of capital accumulation because it increases the creditworthiness of small farmers. Lending institutions attach great importance to the repayment capacity of borrowers and to the availability of adequate collateral. Land reform to the extent that it increases the economic viability of small farmers by providing them with better and more land, and by giving them title to land raises the credit-rating of these farmers. Finally, land reform, if it results in a fragmentation of plantation agriculture may break the monopoly which sugarcane plantations have in obtaining the private institutional credit allocated to the agricultural sector in Guyana.

The argument for land reform as a stimulus to technological innovation is based largely on disparate bits of evidence gathered by Raup. He cites historical examples from the researches of Everett Hagen on England and Colombia, G.E. Mingay on England, and Shujiro Sawada on Japan to show that large farmers were not often the technological pioneers and that new or superior inputs such as improved ploughs, and rotary weeders were the inventions of traditional small farmers. It appears that centralised decision making and excessive size in agriculture, as in industry, is a major obstacle to innovation. On this basis, Raup concludes: "A structure of land tenure that encourages widespread initiative in investment may be best calculated to promote continuing acceleration of agricultural progress."<sup>2</sup>

In the surplus labour economy of Guyana, it is necessary to be concerned not only with the rate of innovation but also with the *nature* of the innovation. Technological progress that increases the level of unemployment over considerable periods of time is in our view bad social economics. From this wider perspective, we are especially critical of the nature of 'innovation' in plantation sugar. New techniques of production have resulted in massive displacement of labour, while failing to increase land productivity. Over the last two decades a total of seven thousand field-workers (i.e. 33 per cent of the work force in 1950) have been replaced by machines, and yet productivity is no higher now than it was in 1950. Social economy demands that technical progress does not result in the reduction of the absolute numbers of labour units in the face of expanding output. Our conclusion, therefore, is that the sugar plantations have not demonstrated any genuine capacity for innovation, neither in product nor in technique.

On the contrary, given the extremely centralized nature of its decision-making apparatus, and the arguments of the preceding paragraphs, one can assert that the sugar plantations are *inherently* incapable of engaging in innovational activity for the development of Guyanese agriculture. Furthermore, the nature of the plantations involvement as owners of businesses that manufacture their machine inputs in the U.K. as well as the rising demands by Guyanese workers for a better than subsistence wage, highlights a built-in

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<sup>1</sup> P.M. Raup. "Land Reform and Agricultural Development." Ch. 8 in Southworth & Johnston, *Op.cit.* 1967, pp.272-278.

<sup>2</sup> P.M. Raup. *Op.cit.*, 1967, p.197.



dynamic tendency for labour displacement and rising unemployment in the coastal plantation society or the community at large.

In a sense, we have only dealt partly with the employment argument for land reform on the Guyana coastland, for the issue of labour is not without its social and political dimensions. A consideration of these serve to introduce some socio-political arguments for land reform.

### *Social and Political Arguments*

Raup<sup>1</sup> has stated that land reforms are major cultural events. Though they have political dimensions, they extend beyond that to the very essence of people's relationship with each other, and in our case, one would venture, nations' relationship with each other. The view contained in this study is that any meaningful land reform in the Guyanese context must 'shake roots, not branches', and we would add 'not leaves' - for too often, our experience has demonstrated, official policy 'shakes only leaves'.

Our analysis is based on the premise that plantation agriculture is the root of Guyanese society. Plantation agriculture accounts for the presence of the whole of the present population, except the 40,000 Amerindians of Guyana. It also accounts - as we shall indicate later - for the present state of the Amerindians in Guyanese society. Moreover, the structure of plantations has shaped the lives of the people. Beckford in a paraphrase of R.T. Smith indicates that: "The plantation is a total economic institution . . . And because it is omnipotent and omnipresent in the lives of those living within its confines, it is also a total social institution."<sup>2</sup>

As an economic institution, the plantation has resulted in the transformation of the African and, to a lesser degree, the Indian from an independent cultivator in his homeland to a landless proletariat completely dependent upon the plantation. As a social institution, the plantation, as Patterson<sup>3</sup> and Beckford<sup>4</sup> have noted, has resulted in:

- (a) the subversion of "the institution of the family, and, by extension the entire social fabric"<sup>5</sup>
- (b) a rigid class system which had overtime developed into a caste system as well
- (c) weak internal centres of community decision-making, and
- (d) "the formation of demoralized personalities and unsystematic, though understandable attitudes to work" thereby undermining efforts at agricultural and industrial development.

Moreover, the plantation is "morally repugnant" - a state of affairs that has led Patterson to question why unlike the Jews of Nazi Germany, or prisoners, one expects the descendants of ex-slaves to work in their forefathers' concentration camps and "graves". This latter aspect of plantation economics goes a long way towards explaining the coexistence of agricultural unemployment and excess demand for plantation labour in some West Indian islands.

Finally, because of the massive share of the sugar plantation complex in such a small economy, there develops a situation in which the economy is grossly and dangerously dependent upon one or a few firm(s). All these arguments are well-known. Were it not for the fact that they have been generally ignored by

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<sup>1</sup> P.M. Raup *Op.cit.* 1967, p.297.

<sup>2</sup> G.L. Beckford. *Op.cit.* 1972, p.95.

<sup>3</sup> Patterson. 1971.

<sup>4</sup> G.L. Beckford. *Op. cit.* 1972,

<sup>5</sup> Patterson. 1971, p.64.

policy-makers, raising them again would have been superfluous.

### Summary

The analysis of this section indicates that:

1. With respect to rice farming, comparative static considerations do not yield unambiguous arguments for land reform.
2. With respect to sugar, though yield comparisons do not produce clear-out results, other comparative static factors suggest that the reform of land use in the sugar industry may be desirable.
3. Dynamic considerations in our view present an unassailable case for altering the size and form of plantation sugar.
4. Social and political factors present additional cogent arguments for land changes in the plantation economy.

Consequently, it is hard not to agree with Beckford's conclusions that "the plantation system must be destroyed if the people of plantation society are to secure economic, social, political, and psychological advancement".<sup>1</sup> Land reform is an essential ingredient in that process of destruction.

### Land Reform in the Hinterland Indigeneous Communities

The nine tribes of Amerindians, numbering about 40,000, which now inhabit Guyana are the remaining indigeneous people of the country. Economically, politically, and socially they are in the lowest strata of Guyanese society. The existence of an indigeneous people outside the mainstream of their country's activities invited enquiry. The paucity of material, while making the following discussion somewhat sketchy, emphasizes the need for investigation. It also highlights a hitherto neglected effect of plantation agricultural activity.

In a very real sense, the present deprived state of the Amerindians can be attributed to the nature of plantation society. The explanation lies in the initial impact of the plantation on the Amerindians, as well as in the continuing role of the plantation in shaping its members' attitudes towards the hinterland and towards the people of the hinterland. The direct result of the initial contact of the early plantation settlers, i.e. the Dutch and the English, with the Amerindians was to transform many of them independent subsistence farmers into dependent hangers-on and instruments of plantation slavery. The Amerindians were recruited "more importantly for the capture of runaway slaves, the destruction of communities of escaped slaves, and for assistance in putting down slave revolts."<sup>2</sup>

The nature of the Amerindian contact with African slaves also served to engender an element of ethnic conflict and contempt which, according to Sanders, still exists. Plantation society also had its impact by engendering,

(a) a deep-seated dislike of rural life

(b) a system of differentiation by ethnic background and class as a means of rationing opportunities and rewards.

Consequently, the interior, and the Amerindian within it, became with the growth of the plantation society an area for studious neglect by the coastal and Atlantic-oriented section of Guyanese society.

Within recent times,<sup>3</sup> there have been signs of a reversal of the old pattern of neglect. More pertinently, a Commission<sup>3</sup> has recently reported on the general question of Amerindian lands. To this

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<sup>1</sup> G.L. Beckford. *Op.cit.* 1972, p.215.

<sup>2</sup> A. Sanders. "Amerindian Attitudes and Integration." *New World*. Vol. 1, No.1, 1969, pp.21 & 22, Georgetown, Guyana.

<sup>3</sup> Established by the Government of Guyana in August 1967 to study and make recommendations on Amerindian land use and land tenure. The report by the Amerindian Land Commission was published in August 1969.

issue, we now confine our attention.

### *Amerindian Land Tenure*

Some indication of the main areas of Amerindian settlement can be gleaned from Map 1. It is evident that they occupy a vast part of the landed area of the country. The density of the population is not uniform overall districts, varying between 6 to 31 square miles per person. In several countries, particularly the USA and Continental Africa, white settlers, confronted by this low population density, have appropriated the land of the indigeneous people. The rationale often has been that resources were idle and not owned by any individual.<sup>1</sup> This approach reveals a fundamental misunderstanding or unwillingness to recognise the basic societal nature of land ownership and land use in many tribal communities. Especially in view of the land utilization argument for land reform in the coastal plantation society, it is essential to recognise the socio-cultural aspects of land tenure in indigeneous communities. A proper emphasis on these may lead to attempts to adopt *different* political criteria for the 'morally' different cases of the plantation and the Amerindian.

The Report of the Amerindian Land Commission provides an essentially correct description of the nature of Amerindian land ownership:

"Ownership in the Amerindian sense differs from that of the coastal people who have for generations proudly owned lands as their exclusive property. The Amerindians by contrast have a vague idea that they own vast areas but their concept of ownership is based upon use. The Commission has been advised that in many areas the concept of ownership and competition *within* a tribe scarcely exists, instead land is held by use and if a man has ceased to use a field someone else can make use of it."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, land ownership forms an integral part of a system of social organisation in which the concept of "exclusive property" does not apply. Land is communally owned - a point emphasized by many Amerindian communities in their demands for communal titles<sup>3</sup> and in their suggested restrictions on alienation of land by members of the community.<sup>4</sup> On the latter point, the view was expressed that

- (a) individuals should only be allowed to alienate their private holdings after a lengthy span of time, and only to Amerindians; and
- (b) communal land should be inalienable.

The system of land ownership and land use is critical to Amerindian society not only in terms of defining the rights of individuals, but also in terms of the kind of economic existence upon which it is founded. Amerindian communities are nomadic. Their agriculture, conditioned largely by the poor quality of the land and rudimentary agricultural knowledge and supporting services, is of the 'clash and burn' kind. Land is often left fallow after 2 years of use. Hunting too forms a basic part of Amerindian life. As a consequence, the subsistence landed requirements of a single community is much larger than that of a commercial coastal-based one.

In this respect, Amerindian customary land tenure and society is not widely dissimilar to that of traditional African societies such as the Tiv of Nigeria. Bohannan<sup>5</sup> argues that in this kind of society "the

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<sup>1</sup> For evidence of white settler - UK government rationalisation of land thefts in Kenya, see M.P.K. Sorrenson, *Origin of European Settlement in Kenya*. Oxford Univ. Press, 1968, pp.44-58.

<sup>2</sup> M.P.K. Sorrenson. *Op.cit.* 1968, p.47.

<sup>3</sup> *Report by the Amerindian Lands Commission*, para. 151. p.49.

<sup>4</sup> *Report by the Amerindian Lands Commission*, para. 153, p.49.

<sup>5</sup> P. Bohannan. "Land Use, Land Tenure and Land Reform", Ch. 7 in M.J. Herskovits & M. Harwitz (eds.) *Economic Transition in Africa*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1964.

social unit is . . . the important group, and is a "given" land, as a resource, is dependent upon the dimensional aspects of the social organisation." In Euro-American society the reverse obtains. As a consequence, rigid application of European land laws which transfix the community to that landed area occupied during a short period of time runs the danger of destroying the social basis of the Amerindian community. One inference that may be drawn from this is that there is a strong cultural case for conserving existing landed areas of indigeneous occupation. Arising out of this is the resultant non-uniformity in the application of economic criteria as a basis for land reform. If low land utilization ratios provide an argument for the plantations, why not for Amerindians? In our view there is no clear-cut answer to this question; much depends on how one views the complex of political, economic, and social factors behind and arising out of any land reform measure. In the decision to apply criteria as well as in the formulation of policy, special socio-political considerations may be dominant. For both cases - the plantations and the Amerindians - we suggest that is how it should be. *If nothing else, the African people of Guyana who have seen their ancestors' lands 'huffed', i.e. confiscated by Europeans for not being in use, should not commit the same crimes against the Amerindians.* However, there arises the possibility of a trade-off between the security of existing social institutions and norms on the one hand and material progress on the other hand. To understand the nature of this trade-off, we must have a clear conception of the state of Amerindian agriculture.

#### *Amerindian Agriculture*

The bulk of the Amerindian population is settled on relatively infertile land. Furthermore, where the land is arable efficient agriculture requires the use of chemical fertilisers, the application of scientific methods of soil conservation, adequate transportation and marketing facilities, and considerable knowledge of farm management techniques. In the face of these technical difficulties, Amerindian agricultural activity was not progressed beyond a subsistence level.

This is not to say that the Amerindians have not engaged in the production of cash crops either as independent producers or as wage labourers. In some areas, cattle rearing has taken place though on a small scale and relatively inefficient. For instance, in 1968, 8 per cent of cattle handled by the Lethem Abattoir in the Rupununi - the major beef cattle producing area - were from Amerindian farms.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the numbers have been increasing rapidly in recent years. In cattle-rearing as in vegetable and tree crop agriculture, poor land quality, a low level of technology and inefficient production methods have been major limitations, and have reduced the carrying capacity of the Rupununi to 10 to 15 head of cattle per square mile.

Timber is another major aspect of the Amerindian economy. In this industry, hinterland Amerindians operate mainly as wage labourers. One estimate puts the Amerindian labour force at 50 per cent of the total. Independent Amerindian operations are rudimentary, except in the Orealla district of Berbice where they do most of the logging on a small scale. Perhaps over-optimistically, the Conservator of Forests predicts<sup>2</sup> that because of the Amerindian's comparatively greater skills in the forests, Amerindians will feature importantly in a reorganised timber industry.

The overwhelming impression one gets from this admittedly sketchy review of Amerindian economic activities is that the hinterland agriculture of the indigeneous people is in a very depressed state. We consider lifting the depression to be an integral element of land reform.

#### *Ancillary Supports to Land Reform for Amerindian Agricultural Development*

Soil surveys and crop experimentations have indicated that many of the crops highlighted in the official agricultural diversification programme can be grown in the main areas of Amerindian settlement.

<sup>1</sup> Report by the Amerindians Land Commission, paras. 101-128, pp.33-40

<sup>2</sup> Report by the Amerindians Land Commission, p.43.

However, certain infrastructural changes are a prerequisite.

The critical roles of adequate marketing, transportation, farm education, and technical facilities have been too thoroughly discussed in the general literature of agricultural development to need repetition here. We therefore confine ourselves to stating summarily two ways in which ancillary supports could raise the economic standards of the Amerindian.

Firstly, improved transportation - generating lower costs and demanding less time - can bring the Amerindian within the ambit of a market economy by

- (a) making the hinterland products competitive with those of the coast or more accessible areas, and
- (b) increasing access to better inputs, e.g. fertilisers, weedicides, and pesticides.

Thus for example, the introduction of a special freight service to selected border districts and the provision of fertilizers, seeds, and tools, have resulted in dramatic increases in the production and commercial sales of crops, such as cabbages, peanuts, tobacco, and blackeye peas.

Secondly, better education and other training facilities, especially the provision of more basic schools nearer to the centres of settlement, would raise the general level of the community's education as well as provide its members with specific agricultural skills.

#### *Land Reform as a Means to Integration*

Ultimately, however, the approach to Amerindian land reform hinges on the extent to which the rest of the society is committed to the Amerindian as part of that society. There may no longer be a policy of treating the indigeneous peoples as museum pieces or as embarrassments to be herded away and forgotten in distant reservations as in the United States. But there certainly exists the danger of doing nothing more than paying lip service to the concept of Amerindian integration. And the likelihood is greater where the bases for integration have not been clearly defined.

The definitive statement of this basis is perhaps that of McCann<sup>1</sup> who wrote: "The only integration which is normally defensible is on the basis of equality of opportunity." The implications of a policy of integration based on 'equality of opportunity' are profound. It is worthwhile quoting Sanders<sup>2</sup> again. "For Amerindian integration to be a reality then there must be fundamental changes in the whole value-complex of Guyana society . . . (because) . . . you can't integrate an ethnic group on terms of equality into a society which is based upon ethnic inequality and conflict."

Put this way, it can be seen that land reform for the hinterland indigeneous community cannot be divorced (except perhaps in time and strategy) from land reform for the coastal plantation community. Destroying the roots of inequality in the society means inevitably destroying the plantation upon which inequality was founded and nurtured.

#### **Concluding Remarks**

This paper started out intending to demonstrate that land reform in the "unlimited supplies of land" economy of Guyana was a real and relevant issue. In our view, it has done that and more. Our analysis of the dimensions of and the arguments for land reform lead to the conclusion that land reform measures must rest on a complex of economic, political, and social considerations. All of these argue strongly for reform of the plantation sector. They also argue for a more comprehensive and sensitive approach to the question of Amerindian land tenure and land use. The two apparent polar cases of the coastal plantation society and

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1 *Report by the Amerindians Land Commission*, para. 198, p.64.

2 A. Sanders. *Op.cit.* p.27.

the hinterland indigeneous communities also serve to pose even more sharply the political nature of the issue, while at the same time exposing the fundamental unity of a society rooted in plantation sugar. The major inference to be drawn is that land reform policy whatever starting point it defines cannot be successful until it deals with the plantation.

TABLE 1. EXPENDITURE FIGURES FOR SELECTED PROJECTS: GUYANA, SELECTED YEARS

Year	Project	Acreage Drained and Irrigated	Costs (G\$m.)
1959	Boerasirie	130,000	9
1961	Black Bush Polder	31,000	13
1963	Tapakuma	36,500	12

TABLE 2. SIZE DISTRIBUTION OF FARMS

A. Small Farms (i.e. Under 50 acres)

Size Group (acres)	No. of Farms (no.)	% Frequency (per cent)
0 - 0.99	189	17.5
1 - 4.99	423	39.2
5 - 9.99	200	18.5
10 - 19.99	200	18.5
20 - 49.99	66	6.1

B. Large Farms (i.e. Over 50 acres, excluding  
sugar plantation)

Size Group (acres)	No. of Farms (no.)	% Frequency (per cent)
50 - 99.9	61	56.6
100 - 199.9	26	23.6
200 - 299.9	4	3.8
300 - 399.9	8	7.6
400 - 499.9	2	1.9
500 - 599.9	2	1.9
600 - 699.9	2	1.9
700 - 2999.9	3	2.8
All Sizes	108	100.0

TABLE 3. CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS: SAMPLE SIZE FOR FIVE DISTRICTS OF GUYANA

District	Sample Size	Correlation Coefficient
Essequibo Coast	70	-0.3436
Essequibo Islands	47	-0.1713
West Coast Demerara	37	-0.2551
East Coast Demerara	48	-0.1815
West Berbice	73	-0.2601

TABLE 4. PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION OF SELECTED PRODUCTS: JAMAICA, 1967

Commodity	Per Capita Consumption (per month)
Beef	1¼ lbs.
Pig, Goat, Sheep	2¾ oz.
Butter	5¼ oz.
Cheese	3 oz.
Milk	2½ lbs.
Eggs	3
Fish	3¼ lbs.