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CHANGES IN THE PLANTATION SYSTEM OF ST. KITTS AND WORKERS' RESPONSE

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My purpose as an anthropologist-historian in addressing a conference of agricultural economists is three-fold. First, it is an opportunity to summarise my years of research in St. Kitts and Nevis and present some of my ideas to an audience of specialists in other related disciplines. Second, to contribute to a conference on development within this State by way of outlining some of the historical and contemporary human problems of economic and technological change. And finally, my purpose is to challenge you as technical specialists to take the human, social factors into account.

You are involved in planning organizational and technological change according to the principles of productivity and efficiency and in terms of whatever measures of wealth or material well-being you choose. I think it is obvious that such planning often creates more problems than it solves, and that one of the unsolved areas is the social-political. I believe I can show that most organizational and technological changes introduced into the Kittitian sugar industry have led to a counter-reaction on the part of the working classes. I believe so because the aim of innovation was to satisfy the interests of the owners of the means of production and was not aimed at satisfying the interests of society as a whole or of the majority, the working classes, in particular.

My main interest in Kittitian history has been the rise of a class-in-itself, a class-conscious and politically active proletariat. It is a lengthy process which began at Emancipation and, as I have shown elsewhere, the Kittitian apprentices did strike for wages on the eve of so-called freedom in 1834, thus engaging in, perhaps, the very first wage strike in the West Indies. The rise of a proletariat is bound to the nature of its work and I have discerned three major periods of post-Emancipation Kittitian history based on differences in the organization of sugar production. The first period I refer to as the *Nineteenth Century Plantation System* which dominated from 1834 to 1912. The second is the *Modern Plantation System* which began in 1912, and the third period which has recently begun with the nationalization of estates and factory, I shall refer to as the *Nationalized Plantation System*.

During the Nineteenth Century, the Kittitian sugar industry was organised around enterprises that combined into a single operating unit the estate or agricultural (cane-producing) side and the mill or industrial (raw-sugar-producing) side. Thus, the Kittitian sugar industry was decentralised and the individual units were in competition with one another for available labour and in seeking to produce muscovado sugar at the most profitable cost. For its part, labour was bound to these individual units as a plantation community through its tenancy-wage dependence on landlord-capitalist plantation owners and operators.

Control of labour meant ensuring sufficient workers in the cane fields and skilled mill-hands at work. The method of control used in St. Kitts

was through control of housing and through allocation of provision grounds for subsistence production. Unlike Antigua, St. Kitts never developed a free village system. Workers lived in settlements on estate lands and, although rents were often nominal, the right to rent and the privilege of using estate lands for provision-ground and pasture depended on regular employment on particular estates. The power of eviction was often used as were the various contract laws, preventing workers from seeking the most favourable wage rates among competing plantations.

The nature of the relationship between plantocracy and workers was a wage relationship: the one buying, the other selling labour power. This relationship, however, was hedged about by a series of extra-economic, informal, exploitative relations between plantation operators and their labourers. The operators provided free medical care and "free coffins" for their labourers, guaranteeing credit extended to workers by shops and others, all in exchange, of course, for the workers' continuing employment on the estates. In an economy suffering regular and severe cash shortages, these extra-economic ties added to the dependency of workers on plantocrats, a situation which the planters were quick to engineer for their own pecuniary and status purposes.

The workers, however, were not so totally dependent that they were paralysed from acting whenever it was in their interest to do so. During the 1870's there was a religious movement in St. Kitts similar to millenarian Black sects which exist today, e.g. the Black Muslims and Ras Tafari. This Nineteenth century sect advocated abstemious living, accumulation of wealth for communal purposes and an end to White rule in the island. I cannot say what became of this movement but it does indicate a form of passive resistance existing at this time. It is probable, though, that both extra-economic and economic relationships, not to mention the force available to the colonial state, constrained the working classes. This does not mean that active resistance was impossible.

As an example of active mass, if relatively unorganised, resistance to the Nineteenth Century Plantation System, are the events of 1896, the so-called Portuguese Riots. Most of the estates were owned by residents; of the 56 estates over 100 acres 44 per cent were absentee-owned. There were 52 steam mills producing muscovado sugar. One estate, Brighton, also had a centrifugal mill but was handicapped by having only a single, British market for its sugar and by unfavourable local laws that allowed the importation of centrifugal beet sugar from Europe.

The major markets for muscovado were the United States and Canada and, in spite of price fluctuations, muscovado production was generally profitable. Apart from steam mills and the use of clarifiers in the separation process there had been no revolutionary innovations in muscovado production. Although the scale of production could be enlarged, new methods requiring less labour or new skills were not characteristic of the Nineteenth Century Plantation System. Despite slow rises in the price of muscovado in the early 1890's, wages were not raised and there was a series of strikes, cane fires and other threats. Some operators were able to respond to the demand for higher wages (often by reducing the task-work) and it is clear that these were estates where worker-planter relations were least unfavourable, where planters were noted for their kindnesses to workers, for their *noblesse oblige*. In general, though, wages remained steady or fell in relation to the amount of task-work required.

In late 1894, Joaquin Farara, a former Portuguese indentured worker who came to own a number of estates in the Basseterre Valley began a process of technological replacement on his estate at Needsmust. He installed a larger crushing mill and larger clarifying tanks, holding 600 gallons instead of the usual 500 gallons. Mill workers were paid by the clarifier since it was known how many clarifiers it took to produce one ton of muscovado and the workers were able to check the amount of sugar produced from the clarified liquor. Now that Farara's clarifiers held 600 gallons it upset the traditional calculations and the workers demanded one-half penny more, but were refused. Farara also demanded that the cane cutters increase their task in order to supply the larger mills. All of this was going on amidst endemic industrial unrest, contained primarily through the threat of state-force. In February 1896, however, just as the crop season was beginning, the workers on Farara's estate not only struck, but fired the canes in the field and then burned the stores and shops belonging to Farara and other Portuguese merchants and shopkeepers in Newtown and Baker's Corner.

This wage riot, which resulted in loss of workers' lives, imprisonment and increasing hostility between capital and labour, did result not only in higher wages for a short period, but also in a serious consideration on the part of the planters for reorganizing the entire industry. This was not only to meet the challenge of labour, wherein capital's usual answer is to mechanize, but also to meet the competition of other Caribbean territories as well as European beet-sugar.

The second period of post-emancipation Kittitian history begins in 1912, with the opening of the Central factory in the Basseterre Valley. Financed, primarily, by London-based investors through a London-based company and, secondarily, by Kittitian plantation owners, the factory commanded cane production in St. Kitts. At the outbreak of WWI it had contracts with fourteen (14) estates and by 1926, thirty-five (35) estates had contracts to supply cane to Central factory. Thus a new era had begun: the era of the Modern Plantation System.

The characteristic of this period is the separation of the field and factory in both ownership and location. The estates became cane suppliers and the rational, efficiency-based demands of a centralized, foreign-controlled, profit-oriented, dividend-sharing factory company set the pace and the level of agricultural production in St. Kitts. The sugar industry became highly integrated and centralized with an emphasis on technological innovation. The introduction of tractors, Broussard loaders, and siding cranes was made to satisfy the needs of factory production despite the fact that agricultural labour was displaced.

During this Modern Plantation period, the working class is divided into an agricultural sector and an industrial sector. The latter is in conflict with a corporate management, and the foreign domination of the factory process exacerbated the race/class conflict in St. Kitts.

The workers in the agricultural sector, however, found themselves in very much the same dependent relationship as before: dominated in many extra-economic ways by resident planters or their managers and attorneys. There is a certain irony in the fact that the opening of the central factory was a first step in the modernization of the Kittitian sugar industry, but it also carried with it, into the modern era, the socio-political inequalities of the Nineteenth Century.

At the beginning of the Modern Era conditions were not different from those of the Nineteenth century, except for the concentration of industrial workers in Basseterre and the growth of the town due to the settlement of Basseterre Valley plantation workers in new sub-divisions. It was here, in 1916, a small group of skilled workers, some of whom were recently returned migrants, attempted to form a trades and labour union. This was immediately hindered by a statute prohibiting such combinations. The workers formed a Friendly Society instead, the Universal Benevolent Association, which was registered in 1919 and known as the 'Union' - perhaps to spite the plantocracy.

During this early period the sugar industry was not yet fully integrated and there was a difference between the politically conscious and active Basseterre Valley workers and workers elsewhere on the island. The former played an important role in the Union and in every subsequent attempt at working class organization. In 1921, the *Union Messenger* became the first working class newspaper published on a daily basis, run by working class and lower middle class intellectuals sympathetic to working class demands and in favour of democratic self-government for the colony. In that same year the Wood Report noted the immiseration of the Kittitian working class.

Social conditions in this modern era were characterized by poor housing and diet, high infant mortality and oppressive laws, especially the Masters and Servants Act which the planters used to prevent workers from seeking advantageous wage rates among competing plantations. The Universal Benevolent Association and the *Union Messenger* dealt with those basic issues of everyday life. The recalcitrant, plantocratic colonial government responded only to the threat of force and to strikes; thus, most gains were wage concessions, although these were often shortlived and each year new pressure had to be put to maintain the previous year's position. The "Union" however was mostly on its own. It imported a printing press and, in the early 1930's, imported an ambulance.

By the time the World Depression came in 1929, the sugar industry of St. Kitts was fully integrated: estates supplying cane and the factory producing the island's sugar for export. In spite of depression conditions and drought years at the beginning of the 1930's, windfall profits accrued to factory and planters from the preferential tariffs on West Indian sugar. The workers, however, suffered a series of wage cuts in each of those early years. Although the 1930's did not see any technological improvement in the industry or a reorganization of production, this decade proved fateful for the future of the working classes in the islands.

There were three basic conflicts in society during this decade.* The conflict between Capital and Labour hinged on the refusal of the estate operators to increase wages and to pay an annual Christmas bonus despite these windfall profits. The conflict between Estates and Factory hinged on the planters' complaints that they should get a greater share of Factory profits considering that the original investment had been paid back some time before. The planters were caught in the middle of workers' demands and factory company refusal to reorganize the shares more equitably. The third conflict was that between colonial rule and the desire for democratic self-government; to a degree these were reflected in a class struggle between the Black and Coloured middle classes (including I might add, some Coloured planters) and

*I have previously dealt with the social and political events of this period in a draft paper read before the Guild of Graduates in St. Kitts in September 1977.

the White plantocracy and their merchant allies.

These struggles culminated in a two-day action in 1935, known as the Buckley War, and led to the election of workers' and Black and Coloured middle class candidates to the Legislative Council in 1937. In 1940, the St. Kitts/Nevis Trades and Labour Union was registered. Later that year, the St. Christopher Sugar Producers' Association was registered and the conflict between Labour and Capital became organized and institutionalized.

It is my tentative contention that the middle class leadership of the true Union followed a cautious line with respect to negotiations and there was a series of "lightning" or wild-cat strikes in the early forties. It was not until the mid-forties that Black working class leadership took over (mostly factory men) and the harder line was taken. Even so, some workers disregarded the Union and struck for higher pay in spite of agreements. But the problems of organizing labour lay elsewhere. If the Union was part of the modernization of productive organization in St. Kitts, it still had a problem with the essentially Nineteenth century conditions on the estates.

Kittitian society was and is small scale. The class struggle was complicated by the traditional ties of estate workers to planters, and by the circulation of a handful of men in positions of economic, social and political power. Even factory workers as well as others were constrained by economic and extra-economic ties to merchant-planter-landlords. Economic reprisal, the cutting off of store credit and the threat of eviction affected the day-to-day struggle for economic and political justice. This is illustrated by the problems the Union had in maintaining membership on estates in the country districts. In 1946, for example, only 500 out of 7,000 were unionized. Even the SPA along with the Union posted flyers encouraging membership (the SPA wanted an agreement binding most if not all of the workers, not a minority). By February, only 1,000 had enrolled and the Union was unable to negotiate with the SPA. The SPA raised wages that year by some 12½ per cent but their refusal to negotiate with the Union at this time can also be seen as an attempt to reduce its creditability. There were successes for the Union, though, and the late forties and fifties were the period of its greatest militancy. By 1952, universal adult suffrage was granted, resulting in the electoral victories of Labour's party.

It can be argued that this period of militancy by the Union was met by Capital's usual response to labour militancy - mechanization, the attempt to replace men with machines. Although this process is usually justified in terms of efficiency and productivity (the economists' canon) reliance on foreign-built technology increases dependency (on fuel, parts, expertise) and exacerbates unemployment in an industry already suffering built-in handicaps of seasonality. The introduction of the Iron Man, the Broussard cane loader in the late fifties, was not accomplished without resistance, and this innovation not only reduced the need for a whole category of cane workers (packers), but contributed to a reorganization of the division of labour in the cane fields. Cane cutters now had to cut two rows instead of one, in order to make room for the loader to operate. They also cut at their own pace and, from the introduction of the loaders, they no longer hired on as gangs under a head cutter who set the pace. In a sense, this new system individualizes the cutting process, reducing co-operation and creating competition among workers from which only the planters gained.

These technological innovations together with the factory production schedule determined the pace of work on the estate, generally increasing the demands on workers' energy and time. During this period opportunities for emigration meant that numbers of workers withdrew from estate labour or became dependent on remittances. In the early sixties, numbers of cane cutters from other islands were brought in, but only for short periods of time. This did not mean that there was an absolute shortage of labour, but, as Frank Mills suggests, it was symptomatic of the "despicable and undignified" conditions of work whereby Kittitian labourers withheld their labour because it was the only way of asserting their freedom from these conditions.

Even as recently as the sixties, social conditions in St. Kitts approximated those of the Nineteenth Century Plantation System. Despite unionization, universal adult suffrage and Labour Party control of the governmental apparatus, real economic and social power was still in the hands of the plantocracy especially through means of estate organization. There were two main agency companies in St. Kitts, Horsfords and Thurstons, that controlled estates through ownership and/or management and served as the commercial means whereby sugar was exported and both capital and consumer goods imported into St. Kitts/Nevis. Workers on estates tied to one of the companies were expected to do most if not all of their purchasing at that company's stores. The general pattern was for credit to be extended by virtue of a note from plantation manager or overseer that such and such a worker was in good repute, i.e., he or she worked steadily on that estate. One can cite numerous cases where such power over the very necessities of life was abused. To a degree the entire social and economic existence of the planter class depended on that power over the working classes.

The planter class of St. Kitts is a peculiar one within the West Indian context. It is largely made up of resident owners/managers/merchants. The existence of a large working class, largely under-employed, provided the planters with a reservoir of servants. The nuances of colour categories are testament to the importance of maintaining distance from the workers on the basis of race. Whatever the economic situation vis-à-vis sugar, their status and privilege was based on the distance from and power over the working masses. Perhaps, this is a reason why some planters resisted the first attempts to rationalize the estate side of the industry by combining estates into larger production units. This would have meant their interest was only pecuniary as owners and investors devoid of the direct social and political power over others..

This leads me to my final consideration, the period of Nationalized Plantation System. I shall not rehearse the economic problems of the sixties and early seventies that led to the reorganization of the estate side, since this has been summarised elsewhere, but the acquisition of both estates and factory represents the logical conclusion of the process of modernization that began with the opening up of the Central Factory in 1912. Thus, the culmination of this process of modernity and rationalization, the very epitome of my Modern Plantation System, is itself the point of transformation into the era of Nationalization, however inauspicious the conditions of world economy. And, with the transformation to State ownership of estates and factory, a whole host of new problems and contradictions come into play.

One of the questions that come to mind as a result of the State ownership of fields and factory is: what becomes of the class struggle? If the local bourgeoisie, the local, resident land owners, and owners of Factory Company shares no longer exist in that role, does the class struggle become a conflict

between workers and bureaucrats and other government functionaries? This is, indeed, a possibility and probability. St. Kitts is too small a place to maintain separate bureaucracies and it is unlikely that a British type separation of Government, Union and State Corporations can be made to work in this State.

Another question that comes to mind as a result of nationalization has to do with the traditional privileges that workers enjoyed as employees of particular estates. Some Nineteenth century survivals are important to the working class - the right to cultivate estate lands for provisions (which right has in fact been expanded and aided by the State Corporation) and the right to pasture livestock. And while the agency companies no longer control the export of sugar and import of plantation goods, they still dominate the consumer goods sphere of the local economy, thus the question of credit for workers, once extended by the plantation, is a matter of concern. Of course, the larger question is: do corporation bureaucrats replace plantocrats in terms of power and privilege?

If the plantocracy maintained social and political distance from the masses of people by means of skin colour categories and racist discrimination, the new bureaucrats are in danger of maintaining such distance in terms of their assumed social and educational differences. There is a similar patronistic, superior attitude at work among employees of the Corporation above the labourer level. Indeed, the question of worker self-management, *autogestion*, has never been raised. Who can say what success any plan for development of this State will have without the co-operation of the working class? And workers are not the same as they were forty (40) years ago. The fact that their government owns the means of production raises their expectations for the future. To deal with the same kinds of supervisors and managers as on the Nineteenth century and modern plantation must be a letdown. If the nationalized plantation system is to be more than an enlargement of productive scale, a wholesale reorganization with a different, perhaps revolutionary, set of assumptions and attitudes about the working class and its relation to management is needed.

The recent events in St. Kitts and Nevis address themselves to the controversy among West Indian and other Third World economists and sociologists over the viability of the plantation systems and it has yet to be convincingly shown that large scale productive organization is inferior to small farming, especially for certain crops (I am thinking here of the recent publications of Georg Hagelberg on the Caribbean sugar industries). The case of Nevis is instructive.

Nevisian economic history has followed a different course. It has had a small farming class for a far longer period of time. Declining markets for muscovado and the success of the central factory in St. Kitts created a crisis in Nevis which was met by a shift to cotton cultivation and by becoming a supplier of supplementary canes to the factory, albeit at high transportation costs.

The organization of production in Nevis changed in the late Nineteenth century from plantation gang labour to farming-out and share-cropping systems. This gave Nevis a decidedly "peasant" cast, but land was still owned and controlled by large landowners. The *peasant-like* means of production was combined with *proletarian* relations of production and was well-suited to cotton cultivation when it was introduced at the beginning of this century.

The depression, WWII, and declining markets for Nevis produce (muscovado and cotton, and latterly the declining need for Nevis canes at the St. Kitts factory) led to emigration and remittances. This high rate of remittance money - at times greater than the amount received for all agricultural production - led to the sale of small plots, thereby increasing by a wide margin the class of smallholders and *independent commodity producers*. Nevisians are not peasants in the classic sense of subsistence cultivators paying rent or tribute. They are small scale *commodity producers*, producing for the market and as such they respond most readily to market pressures and alternative sources of income, such as wage labour elsewhere. In fact, so many people between the ages of twenty-five (25) and forty (40), left the island during the peak post-WWII emigration from the West Indies that cultivation became even more desultory. Receipt of remittances provides the largest share of income in Nevis. The domestic organization of production is threatened; there is a failure of independent commodity production to provide the necessary wherewithal for growth and development. The ability of Nevis to support itself is indeed in question.

To advocate similar systems for St. Kitts ignores the possibility that Kittitians may not be successful farmers, as indeed, Nevisians seem not to be. The question, as it appears to me, is not one of changing means of production, of technological innovation which sets up new dependencies between St. Kitts and the capitalist world, but one of changing the relations of production, of reorganization with the role of workers as the primary consideration. This is on the order of a quantum jump in the evolution of Kittitian society as well as a revolution in the way in which people think of one another in this State. This State is not too big for such a quantum jump not to occur.