S. Mintz

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In: New West Indian Guide/ Nieuwe West-Indische Gids 57 (1983), no: 1/2, Leiden, 1-17

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SIDNEY W. MINTZ

REFLECTIONS ON CARIBBEAN PEASANTRIES¹

Consisting of perhaps fifty separate countries and territories, most of them insular but not all; the oldest colonial sphere in the European world outside Europe, conquered, settled and "developed" by a dozen different powers — the Caribbean region discourages ambitious attempts at comparison. Not surprisingly the application of the concept of the peasantry to the Caribbean region has so far been rather limited in character. The peasantry is not an old-fashioned subject of study for anthropologists; in the Caribbean region, it is a relatively new concern. Before World War II, and even for a few years afterward, American anthropological interest there was confined mainly to folklore and to the Afro-American tradition, exemplified by the work of such scholars as Melville and Frances Herskovits (e.g. 1936), Martha Beckwith (e.g. 1924), and Manuel Andrade (e.g. 1930). Beckwith also produced both an interesting monograph on Jamaican village life, which was the first of its kind (1929), and a short and important study of ethnobotany in that country (1928). But her pioneering work was for long not imitated.

On the British side there was little of interest to Caribbean anthropologists before the War. Afterward, and parallel to the North American unconcern with the peasantry, there was on the British side an almost obsessive interest in social organization, particularly in forms of union, the family and the domestic group, probably best exemplified by the work of Raymond T. Smith in then-British Guiana (1956), and the monographs by Michael G. Smith (e.g. 1962), Edith Clarke (1957) and others. The first substantial monograph on a Caribbean peasantry by an anthro-

pologist was probably Eric Wolf's study of San José (Ciales), Puerto Rico, which first appeared as a dissertation in 1951, and later formed part of the volume edited by Julian H. Steward and his co-workers, entitled *The People of Puerto Rico* (1956).

Yet we can easily find earlier, and important, non-anthropological contributions. In a volume published by the Brookings Institution in Washington D.C. nearly a decade before World War II, José C. Rosario offered an interesting series of observations on the Puerto Rican *jíbaro*, or highlander (Rosario 1930). For long the epitome of the supposedly canny countryman, who needed neither medicine, since he had leaves to boil, nor food, since he was hardened and cunning, the idealization of the *jíbaro* provides a good example of how honest sociology can succumb to ideological manipulation. Rosario's article rises above the romanticized vision of the *jíbaro* of the nineteenth century, and does so in an almost ignored and unknown work, published nearly half a century ago.

Again, in the case of Jamaica, it is striking to read the articles by Hugh Paget (n.d.) and Amy Lopez (1948) written just after the War. Both authors dealt with the emergence of a Jamaican peasantry out of slavery, long before this development had captured the imagination of any anthropologist. But even more important was the work of Sydney Haldane, Lord Olivier. In *Jamaica the Blessed Island* (1936) this Fabian Socialist, a governor of Jamaica, devotes an entire chapter entitled "The Unforeseen Sequels to Emancipation" to the peasantry of Jamaica, and uses the word "peasant" to describe the freedmen who had gained access to land there. During the postwar period, however, most anthropologists with any interest at all in the anglophone Caribbean were busily debating whether "matrilineal" was a more accurate term than "matricentric" or "matrifocal", and whether "faithful concubinage" described a stage in a developmental cycle or was simply part of some penchant for terminology. These same scholars were not even discussing the possible utility of history for the study of Caribbean peoples. Since they were being studied by anthropologists, since anthropologists only study primitives, and since primitive people — as we all know — have no history, the question seems not even to have arisen (though cf. Mintz, 1953, 1975).

In other words, interest in the Caribbean peasantry was late in coming amongst anthropologists, and was never broadly comparative. In spite of individual scholars like the geographer J. B. Delawarde in the case of Martinique, the sociologist J. C. Rosario in the case of Puerto Rico, and local historians of top quality like Ansell Hart and H. P. Jacobs in the case of Jamaica, there is visible before the 1950's no social science concentration on the rise of Caribbean rural sectors.²

The reluctance of North American anthropologists to study Caribbean peasants was compounded by several different factors. First of all, the Caribbean was simply not considered properly anthropological, for its peoples were merely poor, instead of being primitive. But beyond this, North Americans have never been very comfortable with the word, let alone the concept, of, "peasant." There were no peasants in the United States, and never had been; the lack of a feudal past heavily colored North American attitudes, this one among others. A conception of the peasantry only finally began to sink in during the '60s, when rural convulsions in much of the world (including those addressed by North American adventures in Southeast Asia) were taking their effect. The idea was eagerly seized upon by a wide variety of policy and behavioral scientists, who apparently took it to mean angry bumpkins carrying machetes. Suddenly, everything rural was viewed as a source of peasant unrest. As a result, it may require decades to disaggregate seriously the social composition of the world's countrysides, and to begin to make new sense of their character.

In a thoughtful article in the *American Ethnologist* (1979), Marilyn Silverman has suggested why the peasantry as an analytical category has been little used by Caribbean anthropologists. Quite accurately, she stresses the tendency to see the peasantry as merely a facet of the plantation system. Citing the British West Indian economists Girvan, Best and Beckford in particular, she sums it up this way:

Briefly, historical developments in agriculture, always based on plantation organization, are said to have led to the incorporation of West Indian economies as the bottom level in vertically multinational corporations. The effect is a 'dynamic equilibrium of underdevelopment,' due to the misal-

location of resources within the society, because vertical integration prevents lateral linkages between the productive potential of plantation agriculture and the local economy (Silverman 1979: 467).

"The duality of the agriculture sector presented by the economists," Silverman adds, "is not untrue, it is simply not sufficient" (*ibid.*). The counterposition of plantations, commonly tied to large international corporations, and the peasantry, busily seeking to strengthen its hold on land and affiliate resources, is a useful exercise. I have often referred to this duality in my own work, and labeled Caribbean peasantries "reconstituted" (Mintz 1961); they developed in many cases alongside the lowland plantations and represented "a reaction to the plantation economy, a negative reflex to enslavement, mass production, monocrop dependence and metropolitan control" (Mintz 1964a: xx). Not surprisingly, the peasant's orientation was antagonistic to the plantation rationale; but "such peasants often continue to work part-time on plantations for wages" (*ibid.*). This duality, then, is not a simple one of two distinct unrelated sectors (after the manner of Boeke 1953, and his "dual economy"); instead it implicates developmentally those sectors with each other.

"To the economist," writes Silverman, "the peasant never succeeded, as evidenced in the continuing control by corporate interests and in the lack of input into economic growth that such a sector has made and can make" (*ibid.*). But if we acknowledge that the peasant struggle in at least some Caribbean societies has had real effects on the national social and economic structure, then a strictly dual approach will fail to explain the countryside. Trying to say it more clearly, I wrote that:

A peasant-like adaptation outside the plantation system . . . usually involved a total escape from the system itself — by self-imposed isolation . . . or else a permanently unbalanced oscillation between plantation or other outside labor and subsistence-producing cultivation, as in the case of many or most non-plantation rural settlements" (Mintz 1973: 100).

Says Silverman, at the microlevel (that is of villages, neighborhoods, districts in the country, etc.), "the issue is not the success or failure of the so-called peasantry, but the interaction between the

forces promoting dependency and the peasant struggle" (*ibid.*). It seems likely that "struggle" here is not meant in an explicitly or exclusively political sense. Silverman goes on to criticize (from the point of view of her own interest in linkages between local peasant adaptations and wider national issues) the concentration on plural society theory (as represented by Michael G. Smith), social organization (as in the work of Raymond T. Smith), and stratification as an aspect of ethnicity (as in the work of Leo Despres) — concerns which have attracted so many anthropologists of the Caribbean region. While emphasizing the limitations of such approaches, Silverman is also invoking a justifiable emphasis on class — which for the most part, has entered relatively little into Caribbean peasant studies. In different peasant societies, in the Caribbean and elsewhere, one faces the problem of societies with different "mixes," so to speak, in terms of the internal structure of the peasant sector: the relationships of those inside subsectors to each other; and of such sectors to other nonpeasant groupings. These groups arise out of prior social and economic arrangements: they fit with the rise and decline of other rural sectors; they do not exist in isolation, nor rise and fall in isolation.

One way of looking at Caribbean peasantries is in terms of their slavery antecedents, even though each historical case is understandably different — sometimes very different — from every other. Peasantries arose, became stabilized and consolidated (sometimes on what soon turned out to be a rapidly declining resource base, however) as slavery came to an end, either by emancipation or by revolution, in one Caribbean society after another. In most cases, this process was paralleled by others of a different sort, designed to increase the supply of labor power available to the planters. The reduction of economic alternatives available to the already existing labor supply on the one hand, and the mechanical increase of the supply (by immigration, so-called vagrancy legislation, etc.) on the other, were the axes of Caribbean plantation discipline after slavery and the apprenticeship. The post-slavery period was generally one of intensified competition on the world sugar market. In the long term, the victors of the competition would be planter groups that successfully underwrote and incorporated large-scale technical improve-

ments. On the level of the individual colony and in the short term, planters were more united in controlling the labor supply. But they were also in some competition locally with each other *for* it.

To increase our understanding of post-slavery peasantries in the region, we may have to deal with two intersecting and chronologically overlapping processes, while taking for granted that local planter groups were internally differentiated. One process was the struggle to contain and to supplement the labor power of the "potential" peasantry. The other was the move toward technical improvement, based on scientific achievement and the availability of intensified capital inputs. The two processes may have occurred as between, say, big planters and small, or old planters and new; they may have revealed themselves in one region of a colony (for instance, the Puerto Rican south coast or Oriente Province, Cuba, in the 1880's), or in the whole colony; as between planters in one colony (Barbados) and another (Jamaica) of the same power; as between one planter group (English) and another (Spanish or French); or even as between the Caribbean region and other regions.

At each such level of competition, the relevant forces were somewhat different; at each level, the relationship between local productive arrangements and the world economy is exactly what needs to be exposed and analyzed. From the wider perspective, one sees a long-term technical progression away from dependence upon labor-intensive production — a kind of worldwide technical evolution of industrial agriculture. Yet more narrowly one sees local, shorter-term struggles to avoid the capital commitment required by technical improvement, and to maintain cheap, labor-intensive production.

Labor and capital, then, are counterposed upon a canvas where the availability of land, the guarantees of the market, and the politics of support for planter objectives are to some extent a function of the homogeneity of the planter class, and of its collective strength vis-à-vis other capitalist groups in the metropolis. One would want ultimately to take account of the land/labor ratio, as that might be determined in any particular case and at any particular point in time; of the readiness or reluctance to invest, on the part of metropolitan sources of capital (which would

depend on calculations both about imperial resoluteness and the breadth of the market, real or potential); and, of course, of the possible sources and magnitudes of outside and inside labor power. Over time, the struggle for labor on an international scale was superseded by the struggle for capital on a national scale; the planter-capitalist groups with access to sufficient capital for technical advance would withstand better the decline of slavery and the growing apparent "scarcity" of labor.

This abstract and even somewhat imaginary scenario (which first appeared as an introduction to a discussion of the rise of the peasantry in six Caribbean cases; see Mintz 1979), is of course concerned primarily with the plantation. But it would be mistaken to infer that the peasantries of the region were distinct from that system, or merely dependent segments of it. It is exactly because peasantries and other adaptations *co-exist* in dynamic interaction that these variant forms must be taken into account, and a dualistic approach ruled out.

In each locale and in each period, the plantation system had to deal with the presence, the character, and the availability of labor — labor often embedded in a peasant labor process. Hence the peasant and plantation sectors are not two separate and parallel adaptations, but are linked dialectically; and the opportunities for the expansion of the plantation sector are actually affected by peasant successes, the management of family labor, and other factors lying partially outside plantation control. It is this interdependence, and the capacity of the peasant sector not only to respond to initiatives from outside, but also to limit those initiatives, that has to be kept in mind, and any definition of the peasantry must be weighed against these assertions.

In an earlier attempt to explore this ground (Mintz 1973), I had in mind something like the following: a class (or classes) of rural landowners producing a large part of the products they consume, but also selling to (and buying from) wider markets; and dependent upon, and subject to, wider political and economic spheres of control. Caribbean peasantries are, in this view, "re-constituted" peasantries (Mintz 1961), having begun as other than peasants — in slavery, as deserters or runaways, as plantation laborers, or whatever — and becoming peasants in some kind

of resistant response to an externally imposed regimen. Caribbean peasantries thus represent a mode of response to the plantation system and its connotations, and a mode of resistance to externally imposed styles of life. That mode of resistance, however, exists on the ground: real, live persons, coping with genuine constraints. It is on that microsystemic level that we may be able to derive some better understanding of how the local character of peasant life may affect wider adaptive issues.

Anyone who approaches seriously the study of Caribbean rural forms, and especially the rural life of people who produce some part of their subsistence, will be struck by the patterning and integration of the agriculture and the cuisine, and the bright light it casts upon the Caribbean past. This reveals itself in cultivation methods, in horticultural implements, in domesticated plants and animals, in cooking methods and dishes, in lexicon and otherwise. Here are just a few instances. The aboriginal people of the Greater Antilles — those who were horticultural — cultivated manioc (*Manihot esculenta*) and sweet potatoes (*Ipomoea batatas*), numerous other “root” crops, beans (probably *Phaseolus lunatus* and *P. vulgaris*), maize (*Zea mays*) and a squash or pumpkin (perhaps *Cucurbita moschata*). One or more species of red pepper (*Capsicum frutescens* and/or *C. annuum*) were also cultivated; and perhaps it needs saying again that there was no red pepper in the Old World — neither in Africa east or west, nor in the Mediterranean Basin, nor in the Middle East, India or Asia — before Columbus (Sturtevant 1961, 1969). Their fruits included the mamey (*Mammea americana*), the jagua or genip (*Genipa americana*), the soursop (*Annona muricata*) and (at least in Jamaica) the pineapple (*Ananas comosus*). They also had the domestic guinea pig (*Cavia* sp.), and hunted the iguana (*Iguana iguana*), and hutía (*Capromys brachyurus*) and other rodents. The guinea pig, the hutía, and even the iguana have disappeared; but all of the horticultural items, and many more from the pre-Columbian past, are still cultivated and eaten.

To these have been added items such as the papaya (*Carica papaya*) from the American mainland, arrowroot (*Maranta arundinacea*) from Dominica (by way of Barbados; cf. Sturtevant 1969), and other New World cultigens like the tomato and potato. But some of the most interesting additions have come from Africa,

such as watermelon (*Citrullus vulgaris*), okra (*Hibiscus. esculenta*), and the so-called "great" millet (actually a sorghum, *Andropogon sorghum*) and pearl millet (*Pennisetum spicata*). In fact, some of the most important weeds in the Caribbean region are also African in origin! (Street 1960). From Oceania and Southeast Asia came rice, chickens, mangoes, coconuts, bananas, the sago palm, bamboo and breadfruit. From Europe there came most "fresh" vegetables (though of course not the tomato) and most domestic animals, though these mainly originated elsewhere and were diffused subsequently to Europe.

All of these domesticates — and of course there are scores more — have been interwoven into specific agricultural and culinary complexes in particular locales, and their study can be historically rewarding (cf., for instance, Sturtevant 1969, on the pre-Columbian and post-Columbian uses of processed root foods, and Handler 1971 on a cognate theme). There may be some items that are mutually supportive, and appear to cluster together in Caribbean horticultural practice. In his brilliant little book *Plants, Man and Life*, Edgar Anderson (1952) describes a Guatemalan garden which is based, he says, on the "dump heap" principle. Because the items in it are mutually supportive physically, chemically, and mechanically (providing each other with needed nutrients, support and shade, and utilizing all of the earth's potentialities, both subsurface and at different heights above it), Anderson argues that this land use is more efficient than the clean tillage more characteristic of western agriculture. And in two interesting papers Carl Sauer (1954, 1981) has explained the multistoried efficiency of this *conuco* horticulture. From manioc, taro, yautía, yams and sweet potatoes below the surface; upward to surface creepers including pumpkin, watermelon or squash (particularly the unusual Caribbean squash, *Sechium edule*, known as *mirliton* in Haiti, *chocho* in Jamaica, *christophine* in the French Antilles, and *chayote* in the Spanish Antilles); upward to tobacco, tomatoes, many sorts of peas (beans), and through millet, sorghum and maize; and ending uppermost in coffee, shade trees, fruit trees, trees providing craft materials, palms and cover — the system tends to support itself.

This is emphatically not to say that it does so without immense

inputs of human labor. But such intercropping helps to insure a continuous (even if often feeble) trickle of edibles to the house, and of craft materials in season, while maximizing land use and the maintenance of the topography. Though such horticulture has been often damned as destructive (and though it often is), a good deal of destruction is the consequence of engrossment of more favorable areas by estate agriculture, so that horticultural techniques have been confined to less favorable land, where severe and erosive runoffs are more difficult to avoid, and more costly in labor.

As with most of the rest of the rural world, the cuisine in the Caribbean region is built around one or several central complex starches, such as maize, millet, manioc or sweet potatoes, with a fringe of seasonings, flavors and contrasts. But in the Caribbean there has been a fairly continuous movement toward the consumption of imports, especially rice, in place of other starches traditionally associated with poverty and a bitter past. In Puerto Rico, rice has almost completely supplanted the more traditional cornmeal and mashed plantain; in Jamaica, rice has similarly displaced cornmeal; and even in Haiti, rice is preferred to cornmeal or "millet" (*pitimi*) and eaten in their place where it can be afforded. These parallel polarities between a preferred item, usually imported and more expensive, and cheaper, more traditional, locally-produced foods stand for parallels in social aspiration, as well.

Indeed, one feature that may make all Caribbean peasantries somewhat contrastive with peasants elsewhere is their deep and ancient involvements in wider circuits of trade, expressed both in consumption and in terms of sources of cash via wage labor. The Caribbean peasant adaptation is actually able to survive only because of labor outputs on land other than its own; but that is not true for all Caribbean peasants. The peasantry in any particular Caribbean society cannot be considered homogeneous. Moreover, while a good deal of the labor output of peasants is absorbed off the farm, less may be sold to other peasants than is sold to estates — or to the state, in some instances. Because of this complexity of resource use (especially labor), peasantries cannot be studied in isolation. Some understanding of the whole class structure of the societies within which they nest seems essential.

Just as the crop repertory of Caribbean peasantries reveals on decomposition the unusual history of the region and its peoples, so any other major aspect of rural life there manifests similar complexity. But particular local adaptations involve solid knowledge of rainfall, soil types, plant characteristics, and the market, as well as estimates of available labor power within the effective kin unit. Peasant productivity is usually heavily taxed by the society, in both visible and hidden ways, and both by the state and its mercantile classes. Internal market systems, which function in varying degree in most Caribbean societies, provide an arena of conflicting class interests, mediated in large measure through a price system. Elsewhere I have argued that the internal market system may be used by the peasantry as a form of defense (e.g. Mintz 1959, 1960); but of course it can also serve other classes and groups as a means for excavating peasant surpluses. These processes, however, are enacted and ongoing, and deserve to be studied — not consigned to some limbo by assumptions about peasant helplessness or unresponsiveness.

The undiminished relevance of the peasantry in our understanding of contemporary Caribbean societies may sometimes be overlooked. An example or two may serve to justify this assertion. Anyone familiar with Caribbean marketing, which is principally done by women, knows that such persons have low social status relative to the insular bourgeoisie, yet retain substantial autonomy in their own lives. Such women often enjoy complete economic independence; hence they and their spouses may participate in quite separate risk structures (e.g. Mintz 1964). In contrast to the image of the peasant family under the domination of the father, some Caribbean peasant kin groups reveal considerable give and take in their division of familial authority. Moreover — and contrary to western stereotypes of our superior evaluation of the individual — traditional West African trading societies such as the Hausa and the Ashanti, and traditional peasant societies in the Caribbean, often provided more opportunity for independent economic activity by women than has the West (Mintz 1971). Indeed, the so-called “westernization” in some sectors of indigenous non-western societies has often meant a decrease in *female* autonomy. This is not, in fact, paradoxical, since

the economic subjection of women in the course of European history is a familiar theme. The readiness of the West to impose its own backwardness upon others and to call it progress is an enthusiasm of tragically long standing.

In the light of these assertions, understanding the rural sectors of Caribbean societies requires serious knowledge of male and female roles and of the sexual division of economic activities among peasantries, and clear distinctions between economic and cultural forces. If one were to compare Puerto Rican, Jamaican and Haitian peasantries in these regards, one would discover immediately the absence of parallels along any purely economic lines. In other words, cultural factors intervene powerfully in the working out of economic arrangements, and it would be misleading to assume that similar economic forces must produce homologous social results under different historical conditions (Mintz 1981).

An example from the past is of a very different order, but may serve again to underline the relevance of the peasantry to our understanding of contemporary Caribbean society. Our recognition of the nature of the peasant sector in the contemporary Caribbean often rests, as it should, upon some historical sense of the region, and of the lengthy processes by which its societies assumed their characteristic shape. In contrasting the pasts of the hispanophone societies — Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic — with, say, the anglophone islands, one grasps immediately that the swift initiation of the plantation economy on a grand scale in the British cases was a historical watershed. In the hispanophone islands, a very early stage of plantation development withered because of metropolitan unresponsiveness, which doubtless had to do with the relatively low level of capitalist development in Spain itself.

But whereas British development led rapidly to demographic africanization of the plantation system, the hispanophone islands accumulated large creole populations whose antecedents, both culturally and physically, were more mixed. By the time the so-called “sugar revolution” reached Cuba in the 1760s, and Puerto Rico in the 1810s (but only very tardily in Santo Domingo), the influxes of enslaved Africans in those cases were counterbalanced

by the presence of large, creolized populations. Accordingly, emancipation in each instance necessarily involved questions of preexisting local adaptations. In the anglophone islands generally, we commonly associate peasantries with persons who are physically at the darker end of the scale. But if we look at the hispanophone islands, we discover that the newly freed did not move easily or commonly into a peasant adaptation. The most dramatic instance is that of Cuba, where a black peasantry never really coalesced (Scott 1982). This appears to have paralleled what had happened in Puerto Rico somewhat earlier, and — though it is less significant — what would eventually happen in Santo Domingo as well.

It is in the light of this contrast that we are in a position to ask certain questions of a historical sort concerning the peasantry. What is the significance, for the economic and social development of these societies, of the absence of a numerous class of black small-scale cultivators in the hispanophone rural sectors? Or to put it differently, what is the political meaning of the fact that the peasants in these agrarian societies are prevailingly white as are their ruling groups, even though large segments of their national populations are nonwhite? Such questions may seem coincidental or, at best, “racial.” They are, however, political, because they have to do with opportunities for representation of the needs and stakes of the rural sectors in the political process.

These materials are meant only to highlight by example the continuing importance of peasant adaptations in the Caribbean economies, and of the peasant sectors in the social, political and economic life of Caribbean societies. Even while retaining the contrast between plantation and peasantry on a general and a typological level — for it surely has both heuristic and some analytical value — one must guard against surrendering anthropological common sense, which underlines the need to see how people “on the ground” earn their livings, work out their daily associations, and deal with their problems. What may seem like minor details to the economist or political scientist — the character of the soil and rainfall, the crops traditionally cultivated, the organization of effort within the family, etc. — actually constitute the raw materials out of which adaptive peasant microsystems are

fashioned. Building up and out from these adaptations, rather than generalizing about them — rather than seeing them as residual and defensive, mere downward derivations from the crushing weight of the plantation — we will be able to raise significant questions about how such microsystems differ from region to region; how they are geared in, in each case, with the national society; and how particular peasantries — Jamaican, say, or Cuban — differ from those others with which they also share so much.

In the flurry of activity created among Caribbean intellectuals by dependency theory, the plantation system appears to have won a victory among the theorists that it has not yet quite succeeded in winning on the ground among the peasants themselves. The peasants are still there, many of them. They need to be heard, quite without romanticism or what might be called anti-plantation ideological animism. What is more, their case needs to be understood and, where necessary, defended.

NOTES

1. This paper was originally presented at the Department of American Studies, University of Warwick, as well as at the 1982 Annual Meetings of the Society of Caribbean Studies. I wish to thank Professor J. A. G. Hennessy, of the University of Warwick, who arranged for my visit to the United Kingdom; and Dr. Elizabeth Thomas-Hope, the Society's President, who invited me to speak at the Annual Meetings.

2. I have dealt with some of this background from a North American perspective in Mintz, 1977.

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SIDNEY W. MINTZ,
Department of Anthropology
The Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, MD. 21218, U.S.A.