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CARIBBEAN PEASANTRIES AND WORLD CAPITALISM

AN APPROACH TO MICRO-LEVEL STUDIES

THE THEORETICAL PROBLEM

The existence, in the Caribbean, of populations generally conceived as “peasantries” raises many questions for practitioners of different disciplines engaged in so-called “peasant studies.” Some of these questions have not yet been confronted. Within the dominant historical perception of the West, the word “peasant” usually evokes a being of another age — indeed, one most typical of the “Middle” ages — some specimens of whom have inexplicably survived “civilization” in the most “backward” areas of Europe. The presence of similar beings in Asia, Africa, and Latin America is integrated in that linear vision with the implication that the technologically advanced West first encountered such groups while the societies in which they lived were still going through their own equivalents of such “dark” ages.¹

The empirical record suggests that the Caribbean does not easily fit such a mold. The pre-Conquest Carib and Arawak populations do not come close to any general or specific notion of “peasantries” the way some pre-Colonial mainland groups might. But in addition, European violence reached such proportions in the Antilles that the pre-Conquest populations were virtually wiped out before the massive introduction of African slaves. Caribbean peasantries, then, are peasantries whose emergence and growth came with the penetration of the Antilles by the West. Caribbean peasantries are peasantries that depend principally upon plants and animals brought into the region in the course of that penetration. With such notable exceptions as maize, cotton,

manioc, and sweet potatoes, the flora that sustain these peasantries have come not only from other regions, but from other continents altogether, after the so-called "discovery" of the New World. Sugar cane and coffee, of course (Deerr 1949; Trouillot 1982) — but also coconuts, rice, mangoes, breadfruit, and bananas exemplify the point (Mintz 1983). Caribbean peasantries are made up of populations whose very physical presence in the territories they now occupy came as a consequence of world capitalist development: the ancestors of today's peasants crossed the Atlantic under the supervision of merchant capitalists. What we have in the Caribbean may thus be a unique historical record of peasantries emerging socially and *physically* after the penetration of a peripheral area by the West — a sort of zero-degree of peasant evolution within the sphere of Euro-American capitalism, where no reference can be made to a past within the past.

That history challenges in various degrees and from different angles more sophisticated definitional approaches to "peasants" which nevertheless confirm, in part, the dominant linear perception. S. Silverman (1979) rightly suggests that the notion of a "peasant tradition" is based on the idea of a perpetuation of cognitive and behavioral patterns such that the final object of inquiry turns out to be the disruption of such patterns by outside forces. But in the Caribbean, "tradition," in any given sense of the word, succeeded modernity: the "peasant way of life" fully blossomed only upon the ruins of the plantations, amid the remains of the developed technology and the highly stratified social structure that King Sugar had fostered. Here, the "disruption" is our starting point.

The variety of situations under which peasant-like behavior occurred in the Caribbean and the time-span covered by such occurrences (Mintz 1974a; 1978; 1979) also seriously undermine any conceptualization based on an empirical assemblage of economic or cultural qualifiers. If our approach to real "peasants" presents them as tokens of an ideal type, then the slaves who cultivated their provision grounds and sold part of their product in local markets were tokens of two types, not one. Even aside from the epistemological problems raised by such an approach, the category "peasants" becomes non-operational, not because

actual analysis would then require a potentially endless list of subdivision (peasant-slaves, peasant-proletarians, etc.), but because, in that context, the first half of any such binomial would still not provide a basis for comparison, having no independent roots outside of the binomial itself.²

The particular history of the Caribbean also calls into question the growing tendency to couch conceptualizations of “peasantries” in terms of a “pre-capitalist” mode (or modes) of production. To be sure, the debate continues over whether any such mode of production to which “peasants” belonged can or does, survive capitalism.³ But in the Caribbean, faced with the material impossibility of establishing an empirical connection with a pre-Conquest past, we would be forced to suggest that capitalism had generated “pre-capitalist” modes of production. Such a theoretical leap seems dubious.⁴ Yet, if it could be made, one would face the dilemma of explaining the new “articulation” in terms consistent with the historical record. The question of operational validity again raises its ugly head: how could such a theoretical distortion enhance our understanding of particular events, past and present, on the ground?

Thus, the Caribbean record helps us emphasize three major areas of inquiry in the field of peasant studies:

(1) Given that the record seems antithetic to the notion of a pre-capitalist mode of production, at what level of the socio-economic structure can we start a conceptualization of peasantries?

(2) If Caribbean peasantries could emerge and grow at times when the region was fully integrated in the capitalist world-economy, what is the logic of that co-existence?

(3) Since that logic — in view of what we know of both the Caribbean and capitalism — seems to suggest the overarching relevance of world-historical processes, how does one move down from such macro-processes to micro-level studies?

The following pages will try to clarify these three issues; particular stress will be placed on the third, the sphere of human agency, where any conceptualization should reach its full operational relevance. But the starting suggestion here is that most people usually covered by the empirical generalization “peasant”

do indeed share a common practice, and that there is an operational concept in the critical literature on political economy that could serve to isolate this practice — the concept of labor process.

The notion of labor process encompasses all human activity destined to produce useful objects (use-values). At such a general level, the elementary factors of the labor process are human activity (i.e., *work* itself), the *object* on which that work is performed, and the *instruments* used for that performance (Marx 1967, I: 178). But the universal necessity of organizing production only enhances the diversity of forms that such an organization can take. All human beings must produce, but they do not do so in the same manner, and the empirical conditions under which they act encapsulate as many labor processes as we can distinguish specific types of work organizations. We can speak of different labor processes because we can conceive of and identify particular organizations of labor which recur with structural consistency. Indeed, the material and social conditions under which labor is applied are often such that the technical processes they delineate constitute, through time, a micro-ensemble regularly grouping the same categories of workers and similar means of work (Bettelheim 1976: 93–94).

Defined as such, a labor process implies specific instruments of labor regularly deployed on a particular object, in a particular unit of production, with a particular organization of the workers, toward the production of particular items. We can apply the concept to different organizations of labor and identify, say, a manufactural labor process, a plantation labor process, or a peasant labor process. A peasant labor process then appears as an institutionalized process of work through which:

- 1) a discrete domestic group
- 2) performs agricultural labor
- 3) in a unit of production of which it has *possession*⁵
- 4) with instruments of work that it also controls, but which generally constitute a lesser input than the living labor itself.

Obviously, the concept of a peasant labor process, as couched here, is one with modest applications. As such, it does not exhaust the conceptualization built around it, and necessarily calls attention to the larger socio-economic networks in which the units of

production that it isolates are embedded. Yet, before giving full attention to that embedding, we can already sketch some of the social tendencies that the work arrangement itself is likely to nurture.

The fundamental trait that emerges from the peasant work process is the overlap of the unit of production with a unit of consumption, an overlap which emphasizes the paramount importance of the domestic group for all peoples engaged in that type of work. The priority of living labor over labor embodied in the tools also reinforces the already crucial role of the domestic group. Thus we can suggest a tendency for all units engaged in that process to achieve, maintain, or restore a proper balance between the needs of the domestic group as a productive team and its consumptive needs. Types of "peasant" families will likely vary, at least in part, according to the contextual modalities of achieving that balance (Wolf 1966). Household composition will often reflect that need for additional security by taking the form of variably organized extended families (Shenton & Lehinnan 1981).

The paramount importance of the domestic group as a productive and consumptive team, and the preeminence of living labor over labor congealed or crystalized in technology suggest a complementary tendency to maintain and reinforce solidarity among the members. Of course, conflicts do arise and, at times, threaten the fragile balance between production and consumption. So do sudden environmental changes, especially in light of the relatively low input of technology. Such broad and inherent vulnerability of the production/consumption unit thus calls for external insurance which can be normative as well as economic.⁶ Finally, a relatively firm set of rules and obligations, and their continuous reinforcement, are likely to reduce, if not the chances of conflict, at least the ways in which particular conflicts can be solved.

A second general set of tendencies can be derived from the multifold importance of land in "peasant" activities. All human actions require portions of the surface of the Earth as their spatial base; but there are several factors that distinguish the peasant labor process. The first, its agricultural character, seems obvious;

but it is less obvious that, as a consequence, land is *both* object and instrument of labor in addition to being the place of work. Second, the preeminence of living labor enhances the importance of land among the instruments of production.⁷ Third, the overlap between the productive and consumptive domains implies that the domestic group shares discrete portions of the Earth's surface in both types of activities, even when the field is spatially distinguishable from the dwelling place. In the peasant unit of production, the family that works together stays together. Land thus stands as a social identifier of those who participate in the work process and share the same dwelling area.

To be sure, many of the traits sketched above — and others that could be derived from the factors inherent in the work process — have been previously drawn in various forms in the literature on peasantries.⁸ The point here is not to claim major empirical discoveries, but to suggest, on the one hand, that many of the socio-cultural commonalities derive their impetus from the common work process and, on the other, that one cannot derive from those tendencies their specific modes of actualization, since the degrees and forms of engagement of any “peasant” family in that process vary.⁹ As noted before, the concept of a peasant labor process is one of limited range; but its very limitations allow us a greater flexibility in historical analyses and, eventually, comparative studies.¹⁰

In a stimulating article on definitional treatments of peasantries, Mintz (1973) suggested a re-orientation of “peasant studies” toward the production of historically-derived “middle-level” categories which would flesh out the historical diversity of peasant groups within a national society or a specific peripheral area such as the Caribbean. While Mintz had long demonstrated his powerful insight in deriving such sub-groups from the Caribbean record (1961b; 1974a), little has been done systematically, since then, to enable others to further such a categorization, or even to repeat the feat in the Caribbean or elsewhere. An approach rooted in the concept of a peasant labor process may allow us to move to that middle level and produce such categories, since the concept of a labor process inherently points to that of *relations of production* which, in turn, restore historicity.

A few pages after sketching the notion of labor process, Marx (1967, I: 184) pointed out its inherent limitations:

As the taste of the porridge does not tell you who grew the oats, no more does this simple process tell you *of itself* what are *the social conditions under which it is taking place* [Emphasis added].

The concept of a peasant labor process thus necessarily calls attention to the social embedding of the peasant unit of production, and to the structural ties that bind the domestic group to larger social ensembles. Wolf (1966) had already emphasized the importance of such ties, but a most effective first step to their systematic discovery may be a study of the manner in which the peasant labor process is subsumed within diverse relations of production.

Limitations of time and space do not allow here for a comprehensive treatment of the distinction between formal and real subsumption of a labor process within capitalist relations of production (Marx 1967; 1971; 1976; Banaji 1978; Dallemagne 1978: 84–96; Faure 1978). Still, for our purposes, couching the coexistence of “peasantries” and capitalism in terms of the subsumption of a peasant labor process within capitalist relations of production has several related advantages. First, as noted before, we remain consistent with the particular historical data on the Caribbean. Second, though we acknowledge a common material base for “peasant” activities, human beings and their historically derived social relations remain at the center of the analysis. Thus, we give precedence to the circulation of values and the accumulation of capital as social processes (Dallemagne 1978; Salama 1975). Our starting point, the productive forces, remain secondary (Pouillon 1976) and we thus avoid any “technologism” or the “agronomic determinism” (Somers & Goldfrank 1979) for which Paige (1976) has been rightly criticized. Third, we can nevertheless integrate the rich fruits of particular studies couched in terms of mode(s) of production (Scott, 1976; Cliffe 1977; Hedley 1981; Soifer and Howe 1982; Bennholdt-Thomsen 1982) which have followed anthropologist Pierre-Philippe Rey’s seminal treatment of articulation (1973). Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, we can more easily produce the particular historical

categories necessary to bridge the gap between our understanding of trends within the world-system and that of particular "peasants" of different times and places.

Such categorizations should enable us to determine the particular historical trajectory of each group defined, the logic of its coexistence with capitalism, and the levers of its economic, political, or cultural resistance. Yet the specific criteria that differentiate any two groups are not necessarily operative in shaping the distinctions between those two groups and any third group. Thus, the production of such historical categories implies a procedure that not only organizes an extensive range of factors leading to the discovery of the characteristics noted above but also allows for the differential relevance of such factors in particular situations. Such a procedure, then, requires at least:

(1) the identification of the particular historical conditions under which the group defined first engaged in the peasant labor process, and maintained that engagement;

(2) a study of the degrees and forms of that engagement, as determined by the relations of production, i.e., property and labor relations, as well as surplus relations or relations of distribution (Cliffe 1977).

(3) a determination of the means and degree of integration by which that three-prong set of relations inserts the group within a process of valorization (Dallembagne 1978: 85) — that is, a process of value circulation and, ultimately, of surplus-value production and capital accumulation (Marx 1976: 985–992).

That integration in the process of valorization might, in turn, occur in varying degrees:

(a) through the direct sale of labor power by those otherwise engaged in the peasant work process (Mintz 1974b);

(b) through the indirect sale of labor power by way of usurers' or merchants' capital (Roseberry 1976; Shennton & Lehinan 1981);

(c) through the production of commodities outside of the peasant labor process, e.g., handicrafts (Wolf 1955);

(d) through the production, within the peasant unit, of commodities taken over directly by foreign capital (Trouillot n.d.);

(e) through taxation (Paul 1876; Tanzi 1976).

Obviously, such mechanisms are not mutually exclusive (Trouillot 1980) and serve as criteria of differentiation only in terms of their unequal importance. The chronological precedence of a mechanism of integration likely affects the subsequent emergence of others. Furthermore, the last three criteria imply an evaluation of the degree to which "outside capital" (Wolf 1955) is necessary to production. Also, while cases (b) and (d) nearly fit the model of formal subsumption of a labor process by capital, cases (a) and (c) suggest a slightly different form of symbiosis. Only empirical studies can reveal the predominant conditions under which wage labor or handcraft production coexist with the peasant labor process.¹¹ But the point is exactly that the procedure for differentiating within the "peasantry" must be applicable to particular historical contexts.

Indeed, the first major advantage of this procedure may be its utility for producing or verifying long-range historical categories. Agrosocial groupings such as Mintz's "early yeomen," "proto-peasants," or "reconstituted peasantries" of the Caribbean can all be differentiated, first of all, according to the conditions under which they engaged in the peasant labor process and the subsequent degree of their engagement. The procedure thus expands our chronological, spatial, and social boundaries, since we can isolate, at that first level of differentiation, groups that spanned several centuries, on a multi-national base — some of whom do not even fit the traditional image of the "peasant."¹² But more interestingly, one could also produce sub-groups within those long-range historical categories themselves, especially by differentiating in more detail, according to varied mechanisms of integration.

Indeed, since our first criterion rests on the historical evolution of the peasant labor process, we can always reduce that historical base, so to speak, to produce categories of a smaller range by applying the procedure to ever smaller segments of population. (Extensive use of those criteria within that narrower scope is likely to produce categories that may fall within the range of the two types usually treated as "middle" and "poor" peasants; but that is precisely where further differentiation seems most needed [e.g., Wolf 1955; Patnaik 1978; Bernstein 1979]). That increasingly

detailed differentiation of the peasantry (in terms of the embedding of the labor process) brings us closer to bridging the gap between local particulars and world historical forces. On the one hand, we can produce categories manageable at the micro-level but, on the other, the smaller groups so produced have been identified primarily in terms of their integration within macro-level processes.

Still, this identification does not consummate a micro-level analysis, if only because it does not inherently enable us to engage in, or profit from the meticulous observation of the groups engaged in the peasant labor process in ways that would bring out the relevance of individual actions. Yet such actions accelerate, duplicate, or, at times counteract the mechanisms of economic integration. Even if individual deeds eventuate directly from the particular embedding of the peasant labor process — and they rarely spring up as mechanically as this formulation would imply — they always influence the actualization of that process, if only by establishing new areas of emergent loyalties or conflicts for the groups involved. Most important among such actions are those that bring into contact members of the different groups defined by the mechanisms of integration in an empirical encounter among themselves or between themselves and the larger order. In the second part of this paper, I will suggest complementary means to integrate in the analysis the effects of human agency on the actualization of the peasant labor process and the form of its embedding.

AN EMPIRICAL FIELD

The principle suggested here in the organization of the ethnographic data is that of *mediation*, understood as a broad empirical field. Yet before laying out the modalities of use of that principle, and before building somehow on a particular “critical moment of mediation” in the Caribbean island of Dominica, it is perhaps best to denote, by way of a very cursory example, the potential results of the procedure of differentiation suggested above. One will perhaps then see more clearly the kinds of groups likely to emerge

from an analysis of the mechanisms that integrate the peasant labor process, and then turn to the field of mediation where various linkages between such groups are not only observable by the fieldworker, but also subjected to change.

In the Caribbean island of Dominica, most peasants first appear to be integrated in capitalist relations primarily through the sale of the bananas produced in their gardens to a British-based transnational company. Further, most are primarily dependent on the peasant labor process for the food that they consume: their diets include a high proportion of home-grown root crops, including plantains and, for that matter, bananas. Yet despite this appearance of structural homogeneity in a nationwide rural population of about 72,000, closer attention to the relative importance of diverse mechanisms of integration reveals further differentiation. The other mechanisms of integration rarely take precedence over the sale of bananas (and bananas still constitute the bulk of Dominican exports), but the existence of those secondary mechanisms, and their relative importance for particular sub-groups, do enable us to isolate sub-groups within that small population.

In the Mahaut area, for instance, which is relatively close to the capital town of Roseau and to industrial plants, integration through the direct sale of labor power (our mechanism *a*, above) predominates among sub-sections within some villages, as many "peasants" intermittently or regularly engage in plantation or industrial work, or provide domestic or other services to non-cultivating classes. The subsequent population surplus that those activities fostered eventuated in the creation of what I dub a *lumpen-peasantry*, torn between the security of the peasant unit on the one hand and individual ventures in a totally commoditized world on the other. Transistors and sweat suits abound in the area, but most villagers seem to hold to "a piece of land," through kinship or alliance ties, while desiring to benefit as individuals from the greater cash flow of wages. In the southeast of the island, the production and sale of bay leaf and bay oil lead to patterns of indebtedness toward richer peasants or landlords (often indebted in turn to urbanites). Peasants there depend on a few individuals even to bring their bananas to the buying points. A markedly

different ecotype, historical isolation, and the juxtaposition of mechanisms of economic integration has led there to the formation of a much more *clientized* sub-group — not just “poorer,” but more bound as well. Further south, on the west coast, peasants in the villages of Souffrière and Scotts Head are integrated in the valorization process not only through the sale of bananas and occasional labor on citrus estates, but also through the sale of fish on the national market. One could argue that the *fishermen-peasants* are often as “poor” as the bay leaf gardeners, and often in debt (especially when boat-engines are not fully amortized) — but also that the particular mechanisms of integration, notably the sale of fish (our type *c*, above) allows them more room for maneuver. They are not as threatened by the immediate presence of other rural groups, nor by the national contractions of the banana industry. Finally, all these sub-groups could be fruitfully contrasted with the *yeomanry* of St. Andrew’s (the most northern parish), whose integration occurs primarily through the sale of commodities independently produced on peasant farms (our type *d*, above). Yet while in St. Andrews South, in the area around Marigot, Wesley, and Woodford Hill, such commodities are usually restricted to bananas and coconuts, both of which are subject to monopsonistic control, peasants in the more northern Vieille Case area have long maintained a tradition of independent exchange, notably with Guadeloupe and Marie Galante, which often by-passes government control. This secondary outlet gives the same mechanism of integration through the market a different impetus in the case of the partly *independent traders* of Vieille Case from that of the equally “middle” peasants of Wesley of Marigot.

This sketch overlaps spatial differentiation within Dominica, but only because the island’s particular history of difficult internal communications has tended to produce or reinforce remarkable sub-regional differences. The procedure can be carried forward, with greater precision at the level of the village itself, providing that one clears the historical grounds for such a choice. Sub-groups within Wesley and Marigot, for instance, do present some of the characteristics of the *lumpen-peasantry*, particularly because of the proximity of the Melville Hall airport. Some fishermen in Marigot are integrated in the valorization process in a manner

very similar to what happens to those of Souffrière. The point remains that the exercise of differentiation according to the criteria proposed above does permit the production of categories of diverse spatial and historical ranges which can then be contrasted with each other, with other rural groups not at all engaged in the peasant labor process (e.g., a landless rural proletariat) and, ultimately, with non-rural groups as well.

The illumination provided by the juxtaposition of those categories in a particular historical context, in turn, sets the stage for empirical studies which could further bridge the gap between micro and macro levels. A broadening of the concept of mediation may provide the organizing principle necessary to classify the ethnographic data. The procedure suggested here involves a systematic search, during fieldwork, for *the empirical elements of mediation*, the observable links that tie the rural groups engaged in the peasant labor process among themselves to other rural groups, to urban classes, and to other areas of the world economy.

M. Silverman rightly argues that mediation not only links societal levels, but also competing sub-groups within the countryside and, in so doing, affects the "dynamic of economic differentiation" (1979: 482). She draws on the history of Rajgahr, Guyana, to demonstrate the multifold roles of mediators in faction and class formation. But agents of mediation are not always at the front of the stage, and primordial loyalties (Alavi 1973) do not always coalesce on the political scene. Thus, if (following Silverman) we suggest that mediation turns out to be a sum of unequal and contradictory processes, we will further insist that its various elements — and their differential relevance — are neither obvious nor predictable. *Mediation*, as such, does not have a logic: individual mediating processes may lead to dead ends; and mediation as an empirical field, its full of holes and broken lines, for it is the social "coefficient" of *integration*.

Two factors explain this empirical "disorder." First, though studies of mediation have emphasized formal economic or political ties (e.g., patronage, clientage), the actual liaisons from which individual mediating processes eventuate may belong to any "sphere" of human activity, or overlap different arenas of social life. For instance, a particular marriage or christening may rein-

force economic and/or political arrangements, but it remains, in its own right, a marriage or a christening. Second, not all the events that may constitute individual mediating processes are the results or products of conscious and rational decisions. Many come as unintended results of routine actions in which people might engage without any transactional aim.

The field of mediation, understood in such broad terms, is by definition, then, empirical, and we penetrate it by way of the discovery of *the empirical elements of mediation*. Such elements, characterized by their function at particular points in time (rather than by their functional nature) can be spatially fixed or mobile. Mobile elements of mediation can in turn, be material (*instruments of mediation*) or human (*agents of mediation*).

Spatially fixed elements of mediation can be first located within the village or the community itself. First among those are the economic "relay points" (Girault 1981) of distribution and circulation: for instance, the banana boxing plants of the Windward Islands, where peasants weekly deliver their products to be loaded on trucks which will carry them to the docks; or the shops of various kinds and sizes where peasants buy imported goods. But churches, post offices, health and police stations, schools, or, indeed, the frequently visited house of a broker are also, in different ways, spatial elements of mediation.

Other spatial elements may be located in rural towns, like the coffee buying point of the Haitian *spéculateurs* (Girault 1981). An empirical survey might also list locations in the cities (banks, financial, administrative, religious or political headquarters, or the house of a major absentee landowner) inasmuch as such places physically bring together diverse sub-groups of the peasantry in a common encounter with the larger order. Spatial elements do not always facilitate encounters in the most obvious and expected manner: many police stations in the rural Caribbean are traditional loci for domino contests which bring together players from diverse sub-groups of the peasantry and non-peasants alike. Such activities cannot be inferred from the nature of the station and require empirical observation.

Likewise, any mobile object can function, at times, as an *instrument of mediation*. Commodities, obviously, most often fit that

category; but so do newspapers, trucks, letters, and, at times, musical instruments or remittances. In many Caribbean countries, specific radio programs bring to the peasants messages from relatives or friends in town or abroad. It is not at all unusual to hear the announcer appeal to listeners in Trou to transmit to Janet X the message that her sister, now in Guadeloupe, wants her to pick up a package from the Boat "Cecilia," due to land in town the next day. Again, the range of interlocked individual actions implied in such an event, and the consequences of the long term repetition of events of that kind remain subject to empirical verification.

Yet anyone contributing to those empirical linkages can be seen, for that particular moment, as an *agent of mediation*. The older child of a peasant family working as a cook on a nearby plantation or as a gardener in town, pre-teenagers who daily walk to another village to attend the nearest elementary school, or the urban housewife who participates in a *pratik* relationship with a rural market woman (Mintz 1961a) all contribute to the general process of mediation. The term *agent of mediation* should not evoke, then, the image of a petty investor in social relations; nor is it restricted to the "mediators" traditionally favored by the anthropological literature.

To be sure, many agents of mediation may consciously partake of transactional aims (Barth 1963); and political leaders, brokers, middlemen, and hucksters do function more visibly and more systematically in the global mediating process. Their preponderant role in articulating group relations should be emphasized, especially since the tools for analyzing such preponderance have been increasingly refined (Wolf 1956; M. Silverman, 1979; Soiffer & Howe 1982). But a whole range of other people who may not systematically function as brokers or middlemen may, because of their occupations, participate in the invasion of the village by outside forces: teachers, police and health officers, truck drivers, missionaries, hikers and campers, or, indeed, anthropologists. In cases where the preponderance of traditional "mediators" is low, their presence may strongly affect the cultural or political balance. At other times, they may unintentionally contribute to the erosion of the traditional mediators' power. Other people

provide empirical linkages among the peasants themselves with various degrees of systematicity: owners of rum shops, organizers of cockfights, local choir leaders, village calypsonians, or policemen supervising domino contests

The differential weight of diverse elements of mediation can sometimes be perceived at *critical moments of mediation*, that is periods of time when diverse individual mediating processes coalesce and agents of mediation are more likely to appear at the front stage. Political rallies are such obvious moments. But so also are the "banana days" in Dominica — and, likewise, in the other Windward Islands — when the purchase of bananas in "boxing plants," usually located in the confines of the village, sets in motion crossing mediating processes.

In Wesley, Dominica, for instance, the actual manner in which a particular family's fruits reach the plant reveals ties between and across rural sub-groups. The vehicle used might belong to a distant "cousin," and the fees for that use vary in light of reciprocal obligations; it might be hired from a richer peasant, a civil servant, or a shopkeeper, and its owner-driver might be paid by the bunch. But vehicles are in such demand on "fig day" that, at equal volumes, the order in which the owner decides to meet individual requests also reveals his own social priorities. Further, vehicle owners are not necessarily "richer" than their clients of the day: many are heavily indebted; others are civil servants with better credit but not necessarily greater income. The efficiency with which bananas are brought to the plant, then, is not always a function of one's financial situation but often an indication of social standing.

At the boxing plant itself, ties are constantly reinforced, broken or established. Bananas are evaluated, accepted, or rejected by fellow villagers temporarily working for the government trade board which functions as an agent of the transnational. Occasional employment as a "selector" may well improve a poor peasant's standing and bring him the friendship or the wrath of fellow villagers. But the proportion of "rejects" that a particular grower is forced to accept is also a measure of his/her social influence. The repetition of the constant power play between "selector" and grower, in turn, creates grounds for further dif-

ferentiation: in any given year, the returns of a more outspoken peasant are likely to surpass those of a quieter individual with similar technical and economic resources. Older men also tend to obtain fewer "rejects" than older women or younger men. Moreover, such displays of influence occur in front of a relatively large audience. Out of a village population of some 3,500 people, 800 individuals may gather at the boxing plant in the course of one day, some selling bananas, others selling food or drinks, others accompanying a friend or relative, and others — most often adolescent males — just "checking the scene." The continuous formation and breakup of groups at the plant provide to those participant-observers a mirror in which to perceive their own alignments across the boundaries of economic differentiation; but that consciousness itself may be put to use in reinforcing or changing those very alignments.

The accumulation of ethnographic material of that sort will not necessarily lead to the discovery of the structural linkages between the actors engaged in the peasant labor process and world capitalism, especially if differences of scale are treated in terms of a quantitative continuum rather than as the occasional manifestations of different levels of organization (Barth 1978). Often, the very perception of size will deter the observer from an analysis of the complex networks involved (Trouillot 1983), and the nation or the village will be held, *a priori*, as the "obvious" unit of analysis.

Yet the hope is that the systematic search for the empirical elements of mediation will at least bring to the surface events, people, and objects often missed at the time of fieldwork. Second, one also presumes that these data will necessarily include material not easily washed away at the micro-level and will force the analyst to recognize the limitations of his/her boundaries or pursue the empirical track up to the discovery of larger processes. Ideally, the search for those empirical elements should be done in light of the differentiation proposed above. The study of those elements could then allow the empirical re-evaluation of the historical categories which first lead to their discovery. A return to those middle-level categories with the more documented knowledge of their interaction, on the ground, may perhaps help us flesh out more satisfactorily the peculiar coexistence of "peasan-

tries" and capitalism. At any rate, the above suggestions remain tentative and should be read as a partial contribution to the continuous and multi-disciplinary search for a methodology that is sensitive to world-historical forces yet able to acknowledge particulars as sources of change in their own right (Trouillot 1982: 334).

NOTES

1. The fieldwork in the Commonwealth of Dominica from which some of the following material is drawn was carried out in 1979, 1980, and 1981, and was supported by the Program in Atlantic History and Culture of the John Hopkins University, the Inter-American Foundation, and the Social Science Research Council. I wish to thank Sidney Mintz, Sally Price, and Brackette Williams for comments and criticisms on this paper, even though I was unable to incorporate some of their suggestions. Finally, I did not have access, at the time of writing, to Chevalier's article (1983) on petty commodity production which enlightens some of the issues raised here.

2. A list of such binomials cannot help us determine, for instance, whether similarities and differences between eighteenth-century slaves and contemporary peasant-proletarians have roots in their common participation in plantation work or in their common engagement in "subsistence" production.

3. Many reject such survival as a mere "guise" or "form." (Ennew et al. 1977); but that solution begs the question of the nature and function of such "form." Moreover, to posit a necessary linkage between contemporary "peasantries" and "pre-capitalist" modes or forms still evades the questions raised by the Caribbean data.

4. Hedley (1981) comes close to such a leap in discussing petty commodity production in the Canadian Prairies, but one might also want to further the distinction between relations of *work* and relations of production.

5. *Possession* here does not imply jural ownership, but rather a power to dispose of, a form of control which excludes similar control by group(s) of the same kind (Bettelheim 1976: 93-101).

6. Kinship, alliance and patronage ties, may, for instance, provide additional use-values or money when the consumption level falls too low, or additional labor when production falls. But they often act also to reinforce from the outside the cohesion of the domestic group, by providing forums where internal conflicts can be aired and diffused.

7. That importance strongly differentiates, for instance, the peasant techniques from those of the capitalist farmer who generally relies much more on the dead labor embodied in tools.

8. Chayanov (1966), Redfield (1956), Wolf (1966) have emphasized in various ways the production/consumption balance, the importance of land, the role of the domestic group as well as the inherent vulnerability of the unit.

9. Thus, the disagreement with the marginalists or Neo-populist approaches rests on our contention that no labor process can fully account for the social ensembles in which the units of production are embedded, that no "society" is an addition of enterprises. Likewise, this conceptualization differentiates itself from the moral economists' approach by emphasizing the practical "basis" of peasant behavior, yet also by acknowledging that those tendencies are not to be found in any pristine form in the real world, and can even be reversed under certain conditions. Thus, rather than claiming that *the* peasant "aims" at subsistence (Wolf 1955: 454), we suggest that the relative importance of living labor gives rise to a tendency to secure the reproduction of the domestic group before any expansion or renewal of the instruments of work. The argument is not simply about terminology: in certain cases, a "peasant" family may very well use the wages of one of its members to face those reproductive needs. At equal income, a capitalist-farming family may very well cut down on "subsistence" as the only means of acquiring new tools. Still, we cannot derive from the "laws of motion" of the labor process itself any peasant "culture" or "tradition" (Redfield 1956) that would recur, *mutatis mutandis*, in all peasant "communities."

10. That flexibility does solve, for instance, the theoretical dilemma raised by the "peasant breach" (Lepkowski 1968–69) in plantation slavery. While it is difficult to imagine how and why "capitalism" would have created a separate mode of production (Cardoso 1979), one can easily understand the pragmatism of local planters who allowed or even encouraged an organization of work that shifted the responsibility of reproducing labor power from the master of the slave. Moreover, whether we call such laborers "peasant-slaves" or "proto-peasants" (Karasch 1979; Mintz 1961b; 1974a), we can effectively compare them with other historically derived groups engaged in the same type of activities.

11. It is clear that in many cases low wages or low prices of handicrafts can be explained only in light of the secondary engagement of the producers in a peasant-type activity that contributes to their reproduction. In such cases, the subsidiary nature of the peasant household — as a unit of production sustaining laborers otherwise integrated in the valorization process — allows us to speak of the formal subjugation of the peasantry. In other cases, we might want to keep the notion of an articulation of modes of production (Taylor 1979).

12. "Proto-peasants," for instance, did not engage in this labor process to the same extent as the early yeomen, or the post-slavery peasantry. Property relations particularly ensured that the slaves' gardens were only appendages of larger units of production, the plantations. Yet one could also argue that the planters' emphasis on the plantation work process may have allowed the slaves a greater control of distribution than some of their free successors. Likewise, property and surplus relations generally imposed more stringent conditions on the post-slavery groups than on the early yeomen.

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