B. Williams

Sugar and politics in Guyana

In: New West Indian Guide/ Nieuwe West-Indische Gids 59 (1985), no: 3/4, Leiden, 219-224

This PDF-file was downloaded from <http://www.kitlv-journals.nl>

BRACKETTE WILLIAMS

SUGAR AND POLITICS IN GUYANA

Plantations, peasants, and state: a study of the mode of sugar production in Guyana. CLIVE Y. THOMAS. Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, UCLA and Mona, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, U.W.I., 1984. xviii + 215 pp. (Cloth US\$ 26.00, Paper US\$ 13.95)

A political and social history of Guyana, 1945–1983. Thomas J. Spinner, Jr. Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1984. 244 pp. (Cloth US\$ 23.50)

To understand the ironies and paradoxes that have all too often characterized international perceptions of the People's Cooperative Republic of Guyana, a South American country with a Caribbean history, is a complex undertaking. It requires an analysis whose selected empirical focus makes it possible to penetrate the apparent uniqueness of the Guyanese situation in order to disclose its similarities to other economic and sociopolitical situations without falling prey to an ultimately non-explanatory emphasis on its cultural diversity. Guyana is, after all, less culturally diverse than many other nations which do not share its political and economic problems. The difficulties, pitfalls, and potential fruitfulness of efforts to construct such analyses may be seen in these two publications.

Thomas, a Guyanese economist and political activist, begins with the premise that, "Sugar production has been the major economic activity underlying the colonial penetration, later capitalist consolidation, and subsequent underdevelopment of the national economy of Guyana" (p. xv). In a brief well-written text, he provides a study of the

sugar industry which has as its major objective, "... to fill in the real informational and analytical gaps that exist in our knowledge of the sugar industry in Guyana" (p. xv). This objective organizes his examination of the particulars of the sugar industry in Guyana as well as his efforts to construct an analytic framework broad enough to provide a better general understanding of Guyanese society, its problems, and the concrete steps essential to its transformation. Although Thomas's analytic framework focuses on Guyana, he also intends that it serves as the basis for a comparative analysis of other sugar-producing regions and agrarian systems within a world economy characterized by many of the same problems faced by the sugar industry in Guyana.

Rejecting the "plantation economy" position on the ground that it equates the institutional form of the basic unit of production with the mode of production, Thomas instead takes the position that "the essential point of departure must be to determine the form and content of the dominant mode of producing the means of livelihood in the society" (p. 10). In his view such a determination requires attention to the form in which the material elements of production are technically combined, as well as to the socioeconomic form of human relationships, both in relation to each other and to the means of production. Moreover, it requires attention to the dialectical relationship of these to the technical and organizational content of the social connections that underlie production. Here social connections refer "... not only to the object of labor, and to machinery and equipment in use but to nature in general as an object of labor, and to persons as producers" (p. 10). From this perspective he argues that the mode of sugar production in Guyana may be studied in terms of three distinct but interrelated production structures: plantation, state, and peasants. Each of these production structures is influenced by and participates in the dual character of sugar production as a major export commodity and as a primary source of livelihood for the Guyanese population.

The first of the nine chapters provides a broad overview of historical and environmental factors that have shaped the development of the sugar industry in Guyana. It also establishes the sociopolitical significance of sugar production as a salient empirical focus for a general understanding of Guyanese society. It was sugar production that was most influential in (1) sustaining the interest of European powers in the Guiana territory, (2) establishing the particular character of human interaction with the unique ecological features of the territory, (3) contributing to the development of the particular character and quality of social relations, (4) accounting for the contemporary ethnic compo-

sition of the Guyanese population, and (5) promoting the development of the state and its role in establishing a pattern of labor-management relations which consistently favored the interests of management over those of labor.

Chapter 2 focuses on quantitative indicators of the importance of sugar in the Post-World War II national economy, a period during which the locus of decision-making and authority in the plantation structure shifted from the resident-manager to the central bureaucracies of Georgetown (the capital city) as the dominance of multinational corporations (MNCs) was consolidated. Next, the complex relation between the sociopolitical bases of sugar production and its sociocultural consequences are examined through an economic analysis of labor-capital relations (chapter 3), accumulation and profitability (chapter 4), and the technical relations of productions (chapter 5) in the plantation sector.

The picture that emerges in these first five chapters shows an economy dependent on sugar produced through the MNC plantation structure, a perpetuation of a previously established pattern in which the sugar estates were "... essentially institutions based on commandist and authoritarian structures of social relations" (p. 89). Surpluses generated in this sector were either diverted elsewhere or, when invested in the rural sector, aimed at reinforcing plantation expansion and control over resources for production. Further, faced with a decaying technological apparatus, ecological conditions which made the introduction of technological innovations slow and difficult, rising wages, and an increasingly militant labor force, the MNCs responded with political solutions. Thomas's treatment of these political responses substantiates his conclusion that the technical relations of production in the sugar industry cannot be understood apart from issues of politics and power in Guyana.

Chapter 6 highlights the other side of the dualism: sugar production as a primary source of livelihood for Guyanese peasants. In this and the next two chapters, Thomas demonstrates that as a source of livelihood peasant cane cultivation and their general participation in the industry has been based on relations of dependency and marginality. He carefully demonstrates that this dependency and marginality have not diminished as a result of either the transition to state farming through nationalization of the industry (chapter 7) nor through the actual experience of state farming (chapter 8). The final chapter provides an overall assessment of the problems in the industry stemming from internal sources such as political opportunism, mismanagement, and

coercion of labor organizations by the government, as well as from international problems, such as the general crisis in a world sugar market faced with ongoing fluctuations in prices and, more recently, increasing competition from artificial sweeteners.

Despite the theoretical debates which Thomas's treatment of mode of production and his analysis of peasant production structures might generate, he has avoided many of the pitfalls of a preemptive emphasis on cultural diversity, ethnic hostilities, and individual motivations, which too often limit interpretations of Guyanese society and history. When contrasted with Spinner's effort to chronicle the social and political history of Guyana, 1945–1983, the nature and consequences of these pitfalls emerge in sharp relief.

Noting with Benedetto Croce that, "all history is contemporary history" and Karl Marx that, "history is made behind men's backs," Spinner sets out to "... discover behind some of these backs why Guyana has descended to a point where a government subverts its own constitution and where talk of violence, partition, and racial war fill the air" (p. xiv). His selected period covers roughly twenty years before and twenty years after Independence.

Following a brief overview of the ecology, demography and early history of the colony, the remaining nine chapters chronicle aspects of the struggle for independence and the formation of political parties. These chapters emphasize the shifting alliances between Guyanese parties as their leaders vie for power against one another and within constraints established by the British, who were simultaneously concerned with divesting themselves of a colonial burden and appeasing their own concerns, as well as those of the United States, about the potential formation of another Castro's Cuba in the Western hemisphere.

Although an analysis of this critical period in Guyanese history is much needed, Spinner's predilection for explaining complex political and economic problems in terms of individual motivations, superficial and often contradictory psychological profiles, and the ethnic affiliations of the actors all too often results in little more than a tale of who done it. The tone of his commentary, and it is more commentary than systematic analysis, is set in the first chapter.

Take, for example, his comments on the failure of the African communal village movement, the development of the Portuguese retail monopoly, and the riots against Portuguese shopkeepers (1856, 1889, and 1905). In the first case we are told that the Africans, lacking sufficient capital to develop the village lands and hating to seek season-

nal employment on the white-owned estates, preferred to move to villages and towns, where they became an urban proletariat (p. 6). Nothing is said of the sociopolitical factors that resulted in a lack of credit for the development of peasant agriculture or for the maintenance of drainage and irrigation on non-estate lands. Nothing is said of the factors that weighed against efforts by Africans during this period to negotiate fair wages for estate labor as they were being replaced by indentured laborers (cf. Adamson 1972). In the second case, Spinner tells us that indentured Portuguese so loathed plantation labor that they quickly left the estates and "promptly" dominated retail trade. In this connection, nothing is said of the favorable legal and financial terms extended to the Portuguese, by the colonial government and bankers, but denied to others, especially Africans who were already involved in developing this sector of the internal economy (Wagner 1975, 1977). Thus, while noting Portuguese domination of this sector of the economy, Spinner explains the subsequent riots against Portuguese shopkeepers as the result of religious hostilities (i.e., suspicions about Roman Catholics in a Protestant-ruled country), and of actions instigated by "all who were unable to pay their bills" (p. 7).

If this kind of superficial commentary were limited to an introductory chapter it might be ignored. Unfortunately, it is built into the "analysis" and combined with inferences about individual psychological profiles and motivations, it is consistently invoked throughout the text to explain complex sociopolitical activities. For example, Spinner initially claims that except for the "molding and shaping" influences of Cheddi Jagan's wife Janet, the "Chicago girl," Jagan might have become a "prosperous, contented Georgetown dentist" (p. 17). However, a few pages later he states that Jagan probably would have become a socialist without his wife's influence though he "probably would not have become such an ardent advocate of the Soviet Union" (p. 22). As a result of his overemphasis on the importance of the personal motivations, weaknesses, guile, and deceit of major actors, their substantive political and policy differences and the factors, in Guyana and in the international arena, underlying these differences tend to serve only as a backdrop for a schematic presentation of who did what to whom and when.

Had Spinner given equal attention and emphasis to the economic problems faced by the country and its politicians, he might have provided a valuable contribution to our understanding of Guyanese polity and society during this critical period. To do so, however, would have required that he rephrase his initial question. It is less a matter of

why Guyana has *descended* to a point where a government subverts its own constitution than it is a matter of trying to specify the conditions essential for any government in Guyana to *transcend* an historical pattern of government in which solutions to economic contradictions have been based on the subversion of personal liberties and political participation, and where violence and racial divisiveness have been utilized to retain power against all opposition.

Despite its more limited empirical focus, anyone interested in the social and political history of Guyana would gain more, in this reviewer's opinion, from reading Thomas's analysis of the mode of sugar production in Guyana than from Spinner's schematic tale of who done it.

REFERENCES

ADAMSON, ADAM, 1972. *Sugar without slaves: the political economy of Guyana, 1938-1940*. New Haven, Yale University Press.

WAGNER, MICHAEL, 1975. *Structural pluralism and the Portuguese in nineteenth-century British Guiana: a study in historical geography*. Ph. D. dissertation, McGill University.

———, 1977. Rum, policy, and the Portuguese: or, the maintenance of elite supremacy in post-Emancipation British Guiana. *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 14 (4): 406-16.

BRACKETTE WILLIAMS
Department of Anthropology
Queens College, CUNY
Flushing NY 11367, U.S.A.