M. Craton

Reshuffling the pack : the transition from slavery to other forms of labor in the British Caribbean, ca. 1790-1890

Analysis of a century of (evolutionary) socio-economic transition in the British Caribbean.

According to the author, this process demonstrated aspects of a continuum, rather than sharply marked phases and abrupt changes. Before the abolition of slavery slaves behaved as proto-peasants and proto-proletarians and many aspects of slavery survived the abolition.

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MICHAEL J. CRATON

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TO OTHER FORMS OF LABOR IN THE BRITISH CARIBBEAN,
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PROLOGUE

The separate and rival imperialisms of the mercantilist era gave the First British Empire a distinctive functional identity, and the British system passed through successive stages of commercial and industrial capitalism in advance of others. Yet there is an artificiality in separating the transition out of a slave labor system within the British colonies from later processes elsewhere, and this is made all the more unacceptable by the general decay of mercantilism, the progressive spread of free trade and laissez faire principles, and the concurrent substitution of a world-wide and intensifying capitalist system. The British slave trade from Africa was ended in 1808 and British slaves were formally freed in 1838, whereas both the trade and the institution of slavery lingered on in other imperial systems. Slavery survived in the United States until 1865 and in Cuba and Brazil into the later 1880s. But this should no longer invite sequential comparisons, or even an analysis that features simply a cumulative widening of principles initiated in Britain. Instead, the transition should be viewed in its entirety. Even if there is a concentration on the British West Indies, we must conscientiously relate what happened in that restricted ambit to the larger hemispheric, Atlantic, and world-wide process. What happened in the British sphere initiated and to a degree set up the model for developments lasting almost a century. But it was itself but a part of the larger, longer process, with what happened outside the British colonial sphere flowing back and fundamentally affecting the pattern within.

EVOLUTIONARY RATHER THAN REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE: PREMATURE FORMATIONS

The socioeconomic transformation of the British West Indies, if more complete, was much more gradual and subtle than the violent change which occurred in Haiti between 1791 and 1804. There, a bloody servile revolution seizing the opportunities provided by the French Revolution as much as inspired by its ideals, quite suddenly transformed the most intensively developed slave plantation colony in the world into an independent black republic based on peasant cultivators. This proud new country and its economy were instantly marginalized, by the Haitians' own independent spirit and by the calculated indifference, or active antagonism based on racist paranoia, of the major powers, including the United States. Haiti, though exploited by the imperialists whenever they could, was thereby largely spared the trammels of developing world capitalism, at least until the twentieth century.

In the British West Indies there were also serious slave rebellions after the last French wars: in Barbados in 1816, British Guiana in 1823, and Jamaica in 1831-32. All seem to have had similar socioeconomic agendas, and the example of Haiti was a widespread inspiration. But they all failed, partly because of political confusion among the rebels, but mainly because the colonial regimes, alerted and fearful of the Haitian precedent, and no longer distracted by war, were easily strong enough to suppress them. The British West Indian slave colonies (like those of the other European powers including the French) were therefore preserved for the luxury of more leisurely change, upon principles ostensibly liberal. The result was a more orderly dismantling of the slavery system, the substitution of different forms of labor exploitation incorporating a peasant component, the preservation of planter and other local oligarchies in different guises, and the gradual incorporation of the island economies into a more generic world system.

Whether or not it arose from the often-alleged British national tendency towards evolutionary rather than revolutionary change and a concomitant facility for pragmatic adaptation, the process within the British West Indies demonstrated aspects of a continuum, with anticipations and survivals on each side of the formal emancipation of the slaves, rather than sharply marked phases and abrupt changes. According to recent analysts, long before the British slaves were freed they exhibited features of both proto-peasant and proto-proletarian behavior; while it has long been a commonplace that many aspects of labor relations after 1838 were no better than a modified form of slavery, with the chances of a pure peasant lifestyle little greater than in the last decades before emancipation. Put in other terms

(and perhaps mixing Marxian and Braudellian concepts), the evolution of the dialectic between the classes of capitalists and their workers was of long duration, transcending the mere punctuation of events such as the statutory outlawing of the African slave trade in 1808 and the proclamation of Full Freedom in 1838.

Slaves as Proto-Peasants

It has taken modern analysts of the slavery system in the West Indies a long time to acknowledge what were probably empirical commonplaces for practical planters, recognized by at least some contemporary writers on plantation management: that it was self-interest for planters to provide incentives as well as punishments for slaves; that allowing slaves opportunities for producing their own foodstuffs (even selling the surplus) cut down the cost of their upkeep and made them less unhappy; and that gang labor under the white man's lash was counterproductive and less effective than customary task allotments mediated by drivers drawn from the slaves' own natural leaders. It can even be argued that the terms of employment for slaves were as much the product of a species of transactional negotiation as they were of the exercise of the relations of naked power.²

From the earliest days of the sugar revolution in the British West Indies, slaves were put to grow provisions on land and at times that could be spared from export staple production. On islands suitable for absolute monoculture, like Barbados, where there was almost no marginal land and each acre of fertile land could make profits from sugar that could pay for imported produce it would take five acres to grow locally. Thus such slave provision grounds were a luxury, and slave provision production was more or less limited to the small plots on which the slave cabins stood. Two consequences were subsistence crises at times when importations were curtailed, such as in wartime, and the problem of controlling slaves who wandered from plantation to plantation or dissipated themselves in traditional dances once they were given Sundays to themselves.³

On some islands, and areas within islands, without much space and accessible fertile land a small proportion of estate land was allocated for food crops, which were then rationed out to the slaves – a system that became more common under metropolitan monitoring and with the intensification of staple crop production towards the end of slavery (Turner 1991:93). On most islands, and most notably in Jamaica, however, there was much land unsuitable for plantation production, and the most effective plantations had large areas of wooded hillside and mountain glade, either adjacent or within walking distance, that could be designated slave provision grounds. As

Barry Higman's (1988:262) painstaking analysis of the huge trove of estate plans preserved in the Institute of Jamaica has illustrated, by 1780 "only where almost all of the land within an estate was suited to the cultivation of sugar and backlands were not accessible did planters choose to purchase food or produce provision crops by supervised gang labour."

On many plantations, indeed, slaves had access to three tiers of ground to grow their own crops: "kitchen gardens" immediately adjacent to their houses (which included fruit trees and pens for small stock as well as vegetable plots), allocated areas called "shellblow grounds" close enough to the canefields that they could be worked during the two-hour midday break, and more distant provision grounds, worked at the weekends under minimal supervision (Higman 1988:261-67).

Despite the planters' habitual indifference to slave family arrangements and their attempted discouragement of all things African, all three types of land facilitated the preservation or reconstitution of African patterns of peasant family production. Hut plots and shellblow lands were allocated at the will of the planter to male household heads (as were issues of provisions, supplies, and clothing), and were subject to permanent oversight, sometimes mapped out, and scrupulously reclaimed once the slaves were freed. Yet even these nearer allotments often took on a customary African appearance – huts and plots seemingly laid out haphazardly and differing in size according to need, with female household heads dominant around the domestic hearth and the surrounding kitchen gardens.

Slaves in their quarters had a more independent existence than was once acknowledged; but it was in the more distant provision grounds that they were most able to shape a life of their own, albeit in that fraction of the week – a day and a half at most in the true plantation colonies – when they were left more or less to their own devices. Each family cleared and worked what land they could manage in what one exasperated surveyor called "a straggling way, here and there where they find the best soil ... so that it is impossible to form a judgement of the extent of it in the aggregate."⁴

Enterprising families not only grew most of the food they ate and provided extra food tribute to their owners, but were able to produce surpluses, as well as pigs and fowls raised in their kitchen yards, which the women sold in the informal Sunday markets that sprang up at crossroads or plantation intersections – bartering or purchasing with the money received such items which they were not issued by their owners or could not make for themselves. By the last half century of slavery, not only were the slaves providing most of their own subsistence but had so far upset the theory that as chattel property they could hardly own property or money themselves as to participate substantially in the cash economy. Of Jamaica it was said by Edward

Long (1774, I:537) as early as 1774 that a fifth of the coin in circulation was in the hands of the slaves, much of it made by actually selling their produce to their owners.

As Sidney Mintz and Douglas Hall (1960) first suggested such a customary system was a prototypical form of peasant production – or more accurately, a foreshadowing of the common postemancipation mode in the British West Indies whereby the largest section of the black population spent what time they could in peasant production, what time they had to in wage labour on the plantations; in Richard Frucht's (1967) formulation, as part-peasants, part-proletarians. The Brazilian Marxist analyst, Ciro Cardoso (1987), identifying similar examples throughout plantation America, has fittingly termed this phenomenon “o brecha camponesa no modo de produção escravista,” [the peasant breach in the slave mode of production].⁵

Though proto-peasant activity among the slaves was common before the end of slavery – being concurrent with, and facilitated by, the demographic normalization and accompanying creolization of the slave population – it was most evident in areas and colonies where there were decayed plantations, or where plantations had failed altogether, leaving a population of slaves surplus to formal labor requirements. Such slave populations also tended to grow by natural increase because of the lightening of the workload. In a situation where the power of the slaveowners was absolute, this would simply have led to the redeployment of slaves from such “breeding areas” to areas of high labor demand. In the United States, this was to account for the steady transfer of slaves from the declining tobacco plantations and demographically favorable environment of Virginia to the burgeoning and chronically labor-short cotton plantations of the South West.⁶

In some parts of the British West Indies too, the owners of slaves surplus to former labor requirements ingeniously explored alternative ways of making a return on their human property; employing them in tasks previously thought uneconomic compared with plantation labor, hiring them out in gangs of “jobbing” laborers or, if skilled craftsmen, as individuals, and, in extreme cases, shipping them off to other colonies where there was a labor shortage. The economic weakness of slaveowners in decaying or decayed plantation areas, however, was further and progressively exacerbated by pressures from two directions: on the one side, by the rising concern for the condition of the slaves emanating from the metropole (which the slaveowners, of course, termed ignorant meddling), and on the other by the slaves' own growing awareness of their increased bargaining power, their sense that they now had allies and even rights, and their consequently heightened resistance.⁷

The abolition of the British trade in slaves from Africa between 1805 and 1808 highlighted the continuing shortage of slave laborers which was general in the sugar plantation colonies, with the single exception of Barbados. The need was greatest in those underdeveloped but promising colonies acquired in the last French wars: St. Lucia, Trinidad, and the Guianas. Slave-owners unable to find alternative gainful employment for their slaves therefore tended to ship them off to other colonies where there was a marked labor shortage, until this practice, like the African trade itself, was outlawed by the British Parliament in 1824. One island within the Caribbean to which such conditions applied was Tortola once sugar production there was no longer economic. But the most notable case was the Bahamas, where the failure of cotton plantations begun by the Loyalists led to the underemployment of a slave population which, largely for the same reason, was increasing at a phenomenal rate. Some owners managed to redeploy their slaves at the salt-pans of the central and southern islands of the archipelago, while those who could fulfill the requirement that they were simply transferring their slaves to their own estates elsewhere, transported them to new sugar plantations, mainly in Trinidad. In this way, over 2,000 Bahamian slaves, a fifth of the total, were moved before 1824, though the depletion was made up within a decade by natural increase (Eltis 1972; Higman 1984:79-85; Craton & Saunders 1992:291-96).

Where slaves were too numerous for profitable employment, and the imposition of statutory requirements over issues of food and clothing further increased the owners' maintenance costs, a majority of the slaves were left to their own devices as virtual peasant subsistence farmers. They combined their own will to support themselves by farming and fishing rather than engage in estate labor with their owners' reluctance further to erode already exiguous profits by the cost of issues of imported food. The practical bargaining power which such slaves held over their owners was reinforced by the slaves' growing sense that they had allies in England and that the new statutory requirements were tantamount to their rights; so that they refused to be moved, in the case of the Bahamas, first out of the colony and then from one island to another within it. They even began to claim that the land was their own.

The behavior of the troublesome slaves of Lord Rolle in Exuma was an extreme example of incipient bargaining powers held by a proto-peasantry. In the 1820s the Rolle slaves claimed that they had been promised the land on which they lived by Lord Rolle's father (who had brought them to the Bahamas from Florida in the 1780s) and resolutely refused to agree to be transferred to Trinidad. In 1830 some of them actually rebelled when a proposal was made to transfer them from Exuma to Cat Island within the Baha-

mas as a jobbing gang, seizing Lord Rolle's salt boat and sailing to Nassau to put their case to Governor Carmichael Smyth, who was thought to be sympathetic to the slaves. Though punished with whipping, they were not moved from Exuma, and thereafter performed ever less work for Lord Rolle. Governor Smyth's successor reported that the Rolle slaves only worked for the estate when there were soldiers present, and even then had completed their assigned tasks around midday – though at the same time he admitted that the slaves' claims that they were undersupplied by their owner according to the law was not unjustified (Craton & Saunders 1992:381-91; Craton 1979, 1983).

After Lord Rolle's proposal to manumit his costly slaves early had been turned down by the Colonial Office, they continued to work only under military supervision, and during the transitional apprenticeship period (1834-38) performed only nominal tasks. Lord Rolle was glad to be relieved of his turbulent charges in return for by far the largest Bahamian slave compensation payments, tacitly allowing the ex-slaves to assert commonage rights over the virtually unsaleable Rolle lands in Exuma. In the final twist in a complex transactional relationship extending over more than a half century, the Rolle ex-slaves expanded the alleged promise by Lord Rolle's father to claim that their commonage rights were based on a donation (seemingly just as mythical) in Lord Rolle's will. Wittily encapsulating the ambivalencies of all such "paternalistic" relationships, the Rolle ex-slaves all took their former owner's name; possession of the Rolle surname remaining to this day sufficient authority for a share of the use of the Rolle commonages in Exuma (Craton & Saunders 1991).

Variations on the same theme, with the interdependence of slaves and owner being yet more obvious, and the outcome being labor tenancies and a sharecropping rather than commonage-working peasantry, are apparent in the case of the Farquharson estate on San Salvador island, one of the few remaining Bahamian estates with a resident owner at the end of slavery, as well as the only one of which a day-by-day record survives (for 1831-32). Charles Farquharson, the aged owner had scarcely more options than his slaves. His over-mortgaged land not only made absentee ownership impossible but produced no more than was necessary to keep him and his family at the planter's level of subsistence. And even this depended on the labor of slaves over whom, in his isolation, he had limited practical power. Since buying imported provisions for a steadily growing population was out of the question, at least a half of the estate's limited fertile land, and a similar proportion of the slaves' labor, was given over to the production of corn and other food crops for feeding the slaves. In an island without any alternative demands for labor and seemingly without informal slave markets – indeed,

almost out of range of the cash economy – the slaves fed themselves from their master's land but were completely dependent on him for the issues of clothing and other items not produced on the estate.

Consequently, proximity, familiarity, and interdependence bred a delicate reciprocity, a customary balance, between owner and slaves. Though it was in the owner's self-interest to get what returns he could from his land and labor resources, and in the slaves' self-interest to perform the minimum work for the necessary benefits, it was the enlightened self-interest of the former not to exact too much, and of the latter not totally to upset the boat in which all sailed together. Even on the one occasion when excessive work at the height of the corn harvest and unusual punishment led to a strike and riot, one of the more obdurate slaves actually intervened to prevent the driver from committing murder, and, though the arraignment of the ring-leaders in the Nassau slave court was regarded as inevitable, all the other slaves returned to work without enforcement the following day, to gather the remains of the corn upon which their subsistence depended.

When slavery ended, Charles Farquharson's heirs, like many Out Island owners, gratefully took the parliamentary compensation for their slave property but did not (probably could not) sell their land. Instead, they sought to capitalize on this residual resource and on the habits of dependency engrained in ex-slaves unwilling or unable to find either wage labor or suitable land on which to squat without legal tenure. This was achieved by making either sharecropping contracts or labor tenancies – sometimes both. By such arrangements, the ex-slaves and their descendants retained the occupation and use of their familiar houses and grounds, and received issues of seed, fertilizer, and tools, even handouts if not cash advances in times of special hardship, at the price of a third or a half of their crops and/or the obligation to work from time to time on their former owner's demesne. As with the black Rolles, this special relationship was often signalized by the assumption and retention of their former owner's surname, which also sometimes remained the name of the settlement in which they lived (Craton & Saunders 1992).

Slaves as Proto-Proletarians

In respect of the tacit negotiations and customary arrangements made with their owners, Rolle, Farquharson, and similar slaves were already almost as much proto-proletarians as proto-peasants. But elements of similar relationships were to be found throughout the British West Indian slave system, climaxing in the period between abolition and emancipation (1805-34), but with roots traceable almost to the earliest years of the slave plantation system.

Despite the attempts of the plantocratic system to treat slaves simply as parts of an animate machine, slave labor clearly was a commodity with a negotiable cash value from the beginning, and this reality soon became manifest. Manuals of slave management continued to stress the importance of ganging the slaves according to their labor effectiveness, and assigning work to them as a gang unit under the impetus of the drivers' whips (Ligon 1657:43; Beckford 1790, II:47-48; Stephen 1824, I:54). It was regarded as the index of a planter's efficiency, moreover, how well he balanced his labor force against the needs of his plantation throughout the year. John Pinney of Nevis (1740-1818), for example, took pride that he never had to hire extra slaves and was actually able to capitalize on his surplus labor by hiring out his slaves from time to time (Pares 1950:103-40). Nonetheless, the very fact that slaves were commonly hired out, either as jobbing gangs or as individuals with special skills, brought home the measurability of their value, not just to the owners but to the slaves themselves. Estate record books that list the slaves in their gangs and include alongside each slave his or her assessed market value are therefore not merely an indication of an owner's assessment of his capital assets, but an indicator of the slaves' actual value, potential bargaining power, and consequent status (Craton 1978:135-87).

Jobbing gangs were naturally assigned specific tasks for costing purposes, and perceptive owners soon noted that pre-assessed daily tasks that made it possible for energetic slaves to finish early were more efficient than unlimited drudgery through the hours of daylight. All that then had to be determined from the point of view of labor efficiency was what was the optimum level of work that could be extracted under this method: what was the maximum amount of work that could still provide an incentive to the worker. This was a differential equation; as many commentators noted, the amount of work that could be expected or extracted from slaves varied according to the relative power of masters and slaves, and steadily decreased over time. The Barbadian William Dickson (1814:121, Morgan 1988), the most perceptive of all planter commentators, for example, remarked that pure gang work was "a vulgar system which perhaps was the only one that was practicable 150 years ago, with an untamed set of savages." Even those experts on plantation slave management who continued to believe that ganging was essential as a means of control, advocated what Philip Morgan (1988) has called "collective tasking." By the end of slavery, it is likely that the seemingly rigid allocation of slaves into separate gangs in plantation record books was more a system of classification by age and strength than a reflection of reality in the allocation of work.

Similarly, the need for owners to provide an incentive for individual slaves to go off to work for others, to work efficiently, and, most important,

to return when they were instructed to do so, inevitably led to the slaves first to expect a share, and then to negotiate an increasing proportion of their hiring charge. The practices of allowing slaves to retain a share of their hire and of assigning slave gangs fixed daily tasks began first and developed most quickly in marginal plantation or non-plantation areas, but became widespread and almost general in slavery's last decades. The fact that the amount of work that could be expected – as measured by the size of tasks assigned and the number of hours worked – steadily declined towards the end of slavery attests at least as much to the growing negotiating power of the slave proto-proletariat relative to their owner-employers, as to the increasing vigilance of the imperial authorities as to what the owners extracted out of their slaves.

The eagerness of slaves to become at least partial wage-earners – as of slaves in general to become involved in the cash economy by whatever means – was also determined by the chances of obtaining manumission by purchase, which steadily increased towards the end of slavery (speeded, among other things, by the increasing willingness of owners in a declining economy to capitalize on their chief remaining asset, their property in slaves). Moreover, the way that slaves were able progressively to negotiate smaller tasks and a larger share of their hiring wage underlines the fact that the switch from slavery to wage labor was not only inevitable but also a steady transition rather than a sudden change. Mary Turner (1991:102) even characterizes this phase as a “cash labour breach in the coerced labour system.”

Premature Transformations Under Slavery: Antigua, Jamaica, Belize, Bahamas

The processes described above could be illustrated in any colony in the British West Indies. Certainly they are consistent with all that has so far been analyzed in scholarly detail; by Hilary Beckles and Andrew Downes (1987) for the “old” sugar monoculture of Barbados, Barry Gaspar (1985) for the declining monocultural system of Antigua, Barry Higman (1990) and Mary Turner (1988, 1991) for the incomplete monoculture of Jamaica, and Nigel Bolland (1981, 1991, 1993), Howard Johnson (1991), Gail Saunders and the present writer (1992 and forthcoming) for the marginal colonies of Belize and the Bahamas. From this recent work and these significantly different territories alone a convincing composite picture has already emerged.

As the work of Elsa Goveia (1965) and Barry Gaspar (1985:160-62) shows, the socioeconomic system of Antigua had initially developed in a

more relaxed and less efficient manner than that of Barbados. The unravelling of the slave plots of the 1730s revealed that not only were some Antiguan planters (notably Christopher Codrington) ingenuously lax in not controlling their Akan slaves or punishing runaways, and in willing to manumit slaves no longer capable of useful work, but African and creole slaves alike were allowed a dangerous latitude in self-employment. The Act of 1757 to limit manumission and tighten controls in general, declared that "a Custom hath prevailed ... for permitting slaves to go about the Towns and Country to hire themselves and take their own liberty and pay their Masters and Mistresses for their Time, by which many Negroes who were actually Runaways, under Pretence of working out, or being at Liberty to hire themselves, have been employed in the Towns or Country unknown to their Masters and Mistresses, and often Robberies are committed by such slaves."⁸

Fines were enacted for delinquent owners and the manumission requirements tightened, but the continued need for re-enactments argues for the ineffectiveness of the laws and the strength of custom rather than the reverse – as does, perhaps, the curious fact that Antigua never suffered from a major slave uprising, or even a repetition of the island-wide slave plot of 1736. A large proportion of Antiguan slaves – probably around 40 percent – were employed in non-plantation labor (as domestics, craftsmen, mariners, or hired laborers at the port and naval base) and as the profitability of Antiguan plantations declined, leading to the collapse of sugar estates, increased absenteeism, and a general emigration of whites, the practical control of the Antiguan plantocracy over their slaves reached a point where it appeared that the slaves controlled the terms of labor.

In Antigua, as throughout the Leeward Islands, managers wrote to their absentee owners of the ineradicable laziness of their slaves and their tendency to larceny. This can be decoded to mean that managers obtained progressively less production on a daily basis and in a similar way were unable to prevent the slaves from engaging in the informal market economy of the island. One reason why the Antiguan planters were the first in the British West Indies to allow Christian missionaries – first Moravians and then Methodists – into the colony to proselytize the slaves may well have been a calculated effort to socialize them as dutiful and hardworking servants. If so, the attempt was a failure. The missionaries had such success in religious conversion that by the 1820s virtually all Antiguan slaves could be categorized as adherents of the Moravian, Methodist, or Anglican churches.⁹ But this simply attested to the slaves' degree of creolization and to the benefits they themselves perceived from Christianization. Far from leading to greater productivity and malleability, it seems to have produced a greater sense of self-worth or even political power, backed up by an awareness of

sympathetic allies in England and of the declining economic and political clout in the metropole of the planter lobby.

Certainly, the creolization process was accompanied by a growing assertion of the slaves' customary rights. As Gaspar (1988) has shown, the climax occurred in 1831, fittingly over the banning of the slaves' long-established Sunday markets. Under the influence of the sabbatarian evangelicals of the Clapham Sect, the Bathurst Circular of 1830 had suggested this measure – and the granting of a half-holiday on Saturdays instead – under the impression that it was genuinely “ameliorative.” Not only would it give the slaves a better chance to attend divine worship on Sundays, but it would cut down on the disorder and dissipation that were often associated with Sunday activities, and leave the slaves in better condition for labor on Monday mornings. That the slaves saw the matter differently was revealed by the fact that the first weekend the ordinance came into effect thousands of them marched to Government House in St. John's and demonstrated noisily against it.

Though their behavior bordered on the riotous, the Antiguan slaves' political position was quite sophisticated and their combined action might also be taken as evidence of a nascent proletarian consciousness. It was not just that Sunday markets were both customary and convenient; they had actually been enacted by the laws of Antigua and were therefore a right, taken away in favor of an alternative which depended not on law, but the will of individual masters. Though the crowds were dispersed and their informal petition for the continuation of Sunday markets formally rejected, the protests were in fact successful in two respects. Not only did the Governor decree that all masters would henceforth grant a Saturday half holiday without a choice, but the government forces found themselves unable to prevent the Antiguan slaves carrying on much as before, including the holding of informal markets on Sundays.

Though a careful re-reading of planters' writings – such as the absentee “Monk” Lewis's (1834) account of master-slave relations on and around his two Jamaican estates (1815-17), or even of the journal of the brutal and insecure eighteenth-century plantation manager Thomas Thistlewood (Hall 1989) – reveals how the relations of power were less unbalanced than usually described, the actual process of labor bargaining within the slave system has only been unravelled through Mary Turner's brilliant microhistorical studies (1988 and 1991) of the two related estates of Grange Hill and Blue Mountain in eastern Jamaica between 1770 and 1830.

Of the two estates, Grange Hill was the more marginal as a sugar producer and had a longer-entrenched slave population, and these features gave its slave workforce a bargaining power in advance of that of Blue Mountain. The estates shared a proprietor absent in England and an attor-

ney in distant Kingston. Moreover they had, like most Jamaican estates, neighboring maroon and free colored smallholders who illustrated the possibility of an alternative lifestyle, and were adjacent to the small port and market town of Manchioneal, which gave ample evidence of the value of labor in the opportunities it provided for skilled wage laborers, and for the exchange of the surplus produce of the slaves' more or less voluntary labor in their provision grounds for cash.

Even by 1770, the Grange Hill slaves had been granted Thursdays as well as Sundays to work their provision grounds and attend the market in town. There was a marked hierarchy of slaves, with privileges proportional to their value to the estate, and some of the most skilled craftsmen were hired out and probably kept at least some of their wages. When the black slave carpenter Joe (who lived three months a year at attorney Malcolm Laing's house in Kingston) complained of a dispute with the Grange Hill overseer to the attorney, the overseer was dismissed. The slaves then refused to work for the overseer's militaristic replacement, David Munro, ran to the woods and sent delegates sixty miles to Laing in Kingston. The slaves returned to work when Laing promised to investigate and, in the event, Munro too was sacked (Turner 1988:15-18).

In 1825, to counteract the steady decline in profits, the estates' owners appointed an "improving" overseer, Charles Lewsey, from Barbados, an island widely believed to have established firm but effective relationships between masters and slaves. Lewsey found the situation at Grange Hill almost hopeless. Under a defiant and powerful black head driver, John Reay, the slaves spent more effort in producing provisions than sugar. Most of the heaviest labor, such as digging cane-holes and making sugar, had to be performed by jobbing gangs at up to two shillings and sixpence a day per slave or £7.10 per acre, the Grange Hill slaves were accustomed to carrying their own produce as much as thirty miles to Morant Bay, using either their own mules (worth up to £8 apiece) or those belonging to the estate. The provision grounds became the customary refuges of "skulking runaways" – that is, slaves individually protesting working conditions. Threats to sell all the slaves if any more runaways were found in the provision grounds or to send Reay to the workhouse had no effect. The threat to rent out the provision grounds to strangers and issue the slaves with corn instead, which prompted the slaves to be more industrious, effected only a temporary improvement. Surrounded, as he claimed, by "A set of subjects which meet me on every Quarter with Low Cunning and Vile Cant," Lewsey decided to give up the struggle to produce sugar at Grange Hill and turned it to pasture and livestock. This "complemented the slaves' provision ground production and rationalised the economic transforma-

tion which they had effected" (Turner 1988:26; see also Craton 1978:1-49; Higman 1976:9-44).

The situation at Blue Mountain Charles Lewsey found almost equally problematic. There the concentration on sugar had been achieved by Malcolm Laing and his successor as attorney through importations of Africans before the slave trade was ended. This may initially have divided the slaves in a manner beneficial to the owners. But since the new Africans found it difficult to obtain provision grounds of their own, the move entrenched an increasingly troublesome slave elite who even employed some of the "poorer sort" of slaves to work their grounds for wages (eventually at up to one shilling and eightpence a day). As early as the 1790s, when the Haitian Revolution and the French and Maroon wars exacerbated the threat of slave unrest, the Blue Mountain slaves had been able to effect the dismissal of two of their overseers. But after the slave trade was ended and the continued mortality among Africans led to a decline in the Blue Mountain slaves from a peak of 350 to 176, the overseer was faced by an ever more unified "village interest bloc," cemented by adherence to a black Baptist preacher, and led by a powerful black slave driver called Becky.

In order to sustain sugar production at Blue Mountain, Charles Lewsey was forced to make considerable changes in the estate's management, which amounted to concessions in the labor bargaining process: a reduction in the level of work expected, occasional rewards such as a steer for crop-over, and a closer attention to the slaves' notion of justice in the matter of punishments. This was in response to threats of work stoppages, go-slows, and running away, to near riots, or more subtle tactics such as the complaints against Lewsey's white Barbadian under-manager of misdemeanours and inefficiency. While Lewsey's decision to rationalize estate production by cutting down the cane acreage and the hours of factory operation could be justified to the owner by a genuine local labor shortage, his reduction of the slaves' individual workload and the granting of other concessions could only be rationalized on grounds similar to those put forward by Adam Smith under the principle of Enlightened Self-Interest: that inhumanity and coercive attempts to raise the tempo of work were counterproductive.

As Lewsey testified to the Parliamentary Inquiry of 1831-32, before he made concessions concerning the hours of sleep allowed the slaves during the cane harvest (thus cutting down the number of tasks to be completed) his head field driver had found it impossible to make up his gang in the morning or to keep them at work without the whip. Always a half dozen laborers had gone absent, either hiding in the cane pieces to sleep or running farther away. As the driver expressed it, "those that had *Heart* to take the Flogging would come up and receive it and go to work and those that

none would *Run*." In this, Charles Lewsey was more or less echoing Robert Scott, a planter-attorney of Trelawny parish at the other end of Jamaica, who commented of the slaves at the same Inquiry: "They are excessively impatient of control, if you exact more from them than you ought to do, they will not submit to it, but they know very well what duty they have to do on a plantation, and if no more is exacted they are very easily managed and require no harsh treatment whatever."¹⁰

Similar processes can also be detected in the marginal colonies of Belize and the Bahamas. Despite significant differences in their economies – between logwood and mahogany cutting in the former and a mainly maritime economy punctuated by an era of attempted plantations in the latter, with only the economy centered around the small colonial capitals more or less similar – the proto-proletarianization of the Bahamian slaves showed remarkable parallels with those of Belize as analyzed by Nigel Bolland (1991:600-11).¹¹ In 1784, before the Loyalist influx, a German visitor said of the slaves of the "Old Inhabitants" that they were able to earn money for themselves in their free time, being left "undisturbed in the enjoyment of what they gain from other work" on the payment of "a small weekly sum" to their owners. Bahamian slaves, he added, had "never experienced the inhuman and cruel treatment which draws so many sighs from their brethren in the neighbouring sugar-islands or the rice-plantations of the main-land" (Schoepf 1911; see also Craton & Saunders 1992:171-74).

Several thousand of the latter slaves involuntarily migrated with their Loyalist owners in the 1780s after the American War of Independence and were put to the onerous work of clearing the bush for cotton production or toiling at the salt-pans. The owners' preference was for gang-work, but the difficulties of control and Bahamian traditions, as much as the failure of the cotton plantations made inevitable by poor soils and insect pests, determined that task-work soon became the general norm. By 1823, Bahamian slaveowners reported that task-work had been universal throughout the islands "within the memory of the oldest of us" for all slaves except domestics, tradespeople, or sailors.¹²

For the two latter categories, and for an ever-widening spectrum of Bahamian slaves, moreover, partial self-employment became ever more firmly entrenched. Governor Carmichael Smyth reported in 1832 that it had "long been a custom in this Colony to permit the more intelligent of the Slaves, & more particularly Artificiers, to find employment for themselves & to pay to their owners either the whole or such a proportion of what they may gain as may be agreed upon between the Parties."¹³ Two years earlier the Governor had similarly reported (with some exaggeration): "The greater part of the slave population here are seafaring people. The crews in the wrecking ves-

sels are in great measure composed of slaves – these people are paid in shares, & they almost all invariably work out their freedom.”¹⁴

Though modest, the rate of manumission in the Bahamas towards the end of slavery was still the highest in the West Indies, rising from 3.1 per 1,000 slaves in 1808, to 4.5 per 1,000 in 1820, and 11.4 per 1,000 in 1834. The usual method was for owners to allow the slaves to pay their agreed value in return for manumission (plus the owner’s bond until that was abolished) either in a lump sum or instalments – even allowing the slaves to build up a credit balance by retaining their share of hiring wages. By the system of self-hire with manumission as a goal, the will of the slaves to achieve full wage-earning independence could be said to have reciprocated neatly with their owners’ determination to capitalize on a declining resource; first by gaining a share of the slaves’ wages by hiring them out (having no profitable employment at home), and then receiving recompense for their slave property through manumission (at a time of generally low and further declining slave prices) (Higman 1984:380-81; Craton & Saunders 1992:8-10, 258-96).

On the other hand, it might be argued that even in the Bahamas the rate of slave-bought manumissions was surprisingly low (barely reaching 1 percent) and that countervailing forces were at work. The majority of slaves actually wanted the best of both systems – virtual self-employment while retaining those handouts that their owners were obliged by law to provide – whereas the masters did their utmost to retain all their slaves’ labor value, raising the price of manumission as high as possible, and at the very end of slavery holding on to their property in the hope of generous compensation from the imperial government.

Certainly, as Howard Johnson (1991) and the present author with Gail Saunders (Craton & Saunders 1992:358-80) and Godwin Friday (1984) have shown, the prevalence of “working out on wages” in the Bahamas and the problems which resulted are attested to by the Governors’ correspondence, the often frenzied manoeuvrings of the Bahamian legislators, and by the numerous advertisements concerning hiring and running away in the local newspapers. In 1808 a local Act was passed with the expressed purpose of controlling the practice of hiring out. It was no longer lawful for slaveowners on New Providence (Nassau’s island) to allow their slaves “to hire themselves out to work, either on board of vessels or on the shore, as porters or labourers, without first registering the names of such slaves in the police office, and obtaining therefrom a copper badge, with the number of such slave marked thereon; which badge is to be work on the jacket or frock of the slave, in a conspicuous manner.”¹⁵

This Act (which in any case only applied to laboring slaves) seems to have been ineffectual, and slaveowners resorted to more subtle forms of controll-

ing or appropriating the slaves' labor value. As Governor Carmichael Smyth went on to report in 1832:

Almost every Slave is anxious to enjoy this species of Liberty [self-hiring] & will readily promise & undertake to pay more than, at times, he may be able to acquire. Many of them have a sort of account current with their owners; & in hopes of better times get deeper into debt each month. There are of course some dishonest and dissolute Slaves who will spend whatever they may gain & state to their owners that they have not been able to get work. The day of reckoning is however sure to arrive at last & I have had occasion to observe, in the weekly returns, Slaves repeatedly confined in the Work-House & punished for not paying wages.¹⁶

A rising proportion of the five hundred or so slave runaway advertisements in the local newspapers related to disputes over wages and hiring conditions. One remarkable early absconder was the African-born ship carpenter Dick, who broke out of jail in 1799 after being put there for "not paying his wages regularly." Returned to his owner, the master ship carpenter Timothy Cox, who had offered a \$20 reward, Dick was absent again within a month. "Run away on Monday last, immediately after having received his Wages for four Days Hire from Mr. Ritchie," advertised Timothy Cox, "a Negro Man called Dick belonging to the Subscriber, a Ship Carpenter and well known about Town. He frequently saunters around the Western Suburbs, and there is Reason to suspect he is occasionally employed there."¹⁷

Runaway advertisements frequently mentioned or suggested disputes over wages. They often referred to slaves who had stayed away after their job was supposed to have finished, and almost always referred to persons, whites and free coloreds as well as slaves, who "harbored" them – these persons being sometimes threatened with direr punishments than the runaways themselves. Some runaways were clearly seeking a better job or a more congenial or complaisant employer, while others ran away for fear of being transported away from their familiar location, family, or customary employment – such as Nassau tradesmen or domestics threatened with fieldwork in the Out Islands or agricultural laborers consigned to work on the dreaded salt-pans. In nearly all such cases, slaves were making a statement of wishes and placing pressure upon their owners. On their side, owners ran the whole gamut of threats and inducements in order to get their workers back, or at least to regain control over their labor value. From the beginning, however, the advertisements disclose that the negotiating power was not entirely one-sided. A surprising number of advertisers promised that they would not punish slaves who "returned to their duty." And at least one (as early as 1784) made the remarkable offer to permit the slaves to choose another owner – presumably if such a person would be willing to buy

them (Craton & Saunders 1992:379). Such a symbolic mutual rejection of power or even paternalistic relationships was surely the closest one could ever get to a true dialectic between a proletariat and a bourgeois employing class within a system of chattel slavery.

METROPOLITAN LIBERAL IDEOLOGY AND THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD, 1808-1838

The will of the British West Indian slaves to work their own grounds whenever they could, and to work for wages when they had (or wanted) to, was quite congruent with what metropolitan philanthropists and their missionary agents considered civilized alternatives to slavery, and what imperial policy makers, under the influence of liberal economists, were coming to regard as a more generally efficient, as well as more politic system. Few planters, however, were won over by arguments that free wage labor would be preferable to slavery and, standing on their property rights in the slaves and their labor, stood out for compensation and a transitional period of compulsory labor where necessary (called apprenticeship). They also, of course, argued vehemently for the continuance of their plantocratic privileges – asserting that direct imperial rule in the new Crown Colonies was contrary both to the historical right to self-legislation enjoyed by the older colonies and to the liberal ideal of *laissez faire* itself.

The ending of the British slave trade by 1808 had already greatly affected labor conditions in the West Indies and changed attitudes towards slavery and its alternatives on all sides. Denied fresh recruits and faced by a declining and strongly resistant slave population in those colonies with the greatest labor need, planters dug in their heels, while philanthropists and policy makers, appalled at the evidence of population decline revealed in the slave registration returns after 1815, moved with increasing resolution towards what colonial official James Stephen (1824) among others, argued was the healthier, as well as more efficient, alternative of a free wage labor system.¹⁸ A staged emancipation with slaveowners' compensation was imposed on the Crown Colonies and negotiated for those that were self-legislating in 1834. But the four-year apprenticeship phase and following few years was a period of even more vigorous adjustment on both sides, in which gains for the more fortunate ex-slaves in the form of workable lands, saleable produce, and liveable wages were predictably countered by planter complaints that their former slaves would only continue to work on the plantations when it suited them, for wages were so high that they threatened the economy's ruin.

It was not mainly the wage labor system that threatened the plantation economy, however, but the larger adjustments to a free worldwide market economy, the first fruit of which was the catastrophic collapse of the prices of export produce at the end of the 1840s. The former slaveowners and their legatees showed a tireless ingenuity in retaining political power, adjusting to new economic realities (becoming to some extent an agrocommercial bourgeoisie), and even adapting allegedly liberal reforms to their own advantage. They were helped by a metropole that while ostensibly dedicated to laissez faire principles directed what aid it gave to the West Indies to the plantation sector rather than aiding peasant production. Ironically, for most of the former slaves the status of part-peasant, part-proletarian which had seemed so preferable to slavery was now an unavoidable choice, with the cards stacked in favor of those who continued to control the political system, the allocation of land, and at least the local aspects of the economy. So, as was instinctively felt by many ex-slaves at the time, and has been more clearly discerned by most recent historians, the British West Indian plantocracies and other local oligarchies, imperial policy-makers, and even missionaries, in the longer term conspired to fix the peasant and laboring classes in a Gramscian hegemonic grip.¹⁹

Missionaries, Education and the Liberated Africans

The role of white missionaries was most equivocal of all. In the early days of plantation slavery, British planters had been ambivalent about Christianizing their slaves, for just as Roman Law continued to subsume slavery as an institution after English law (at least in the metropole) had given it up, so established Protestantism lacked the confidence long enjoyed by Roman Catholicism that religion could help to make good slaves (as well as godly masters). While occasional lip service to Christianizing the slaves was made in the British colonial codes, sectarian missionaries specifically targeting the "godless" slaves – first Moravians (1754) and Methodists (1787), with LMS (London Missionary Society) Congregationalists, Baptists, and Presbyterians following between 1808 and 1820 – were only tolerated as long as they upheld slavery, and to the degree that they aimed to make their converts good Christian workers (Grant 1976; Turner 1982).²⁰

Many planters remained bitterly opposed to sectarian missionaries, especially when LMS slave converts were prominent in the 1823 Demerara rebellion and so many Baptists were involved in the 1831-32 Jamaican uprising that it was popularly known as the Baptist War. But the tide of conversion was irreversible, and efforts were bent by regime and missionaries alike to ensure through preaching and teaching that the Christian message

was not subversive. Even the established Anglican church made belated efforts – including mass baptisms – to ensure that they would not entirely “lose” the slaves.²¹

Though the attractions of Christianity to the slaves were more spiritual than social, the established church and missionary societies alike were as concerned to teach “civilized behavior” as to preach correct theology. All churches played a vital role in providing education for West Indian blacks in the transition out of slavery, beginning with Sunday schools in the last decades of slavery and providing the majority of full-time schools after emancipation, with some help from the Negro Education Grant voted by the imperial government between 1834 and 1846.²²

Once emancipation removed the ambivalencies of the churches’ role, what the white clerics preached and taught was unequivocally conservative and intended to sustain the socioeconomic order. Some sectarian missionaries – largely to ensure close-knit communities of client adherents – sponsored peasant-style villages, and were thus accused by the planters of encouraging the ex-slaves’ “flight from the estates.” Missionaries in general also seem to have had more success with peasant and urban blacks than with wage-earning proletarians, catering, indeed, more effectively to those who were most free to make their own choices. But all missionaries accepted the desirability and inevitability of the ex-slaves’ shift into the cash and wage economy, and the qualities they aimed to inculcate were the “civilized” and “respectable” virtues of hard work, reliability, fidelity, thrift, and the stable, monogamous, nuclear family. More fundamentally, church inspired schools (virtually, all West Indian schools for blacks), taught only those subjects that would be useful for “useful citizens” of the “lower orders”: no skills that would help them to a different or better employment, bare literacy in reading and writing, minimal arithmetic, plentiful doses of the Christian scriptures, and homiletic anecdotes masquerading as history (Gordon 1963:19-42).

Such values were perfectly attuned to what the policy makers at the Colonial Office – headed by the ardently evangelical Anglican James Stephen – believed were the essence of liberal principles. The marriage of official policy with the missionary impulse, and the role of both in guiding the British West Indian blacks through the transition out of slavery, is best exemplified by the confident statement by Colonial Secretary Lord John Russell in 1841 that explained the reduction and removal of the Negro Education Grant by 1846: that the purposes for which it had been instituted had now been effected (Gordon 1963:38).

The Negro Education Grant of 1834-46, however, was only one of the means by which liberal policy makers induced or facilitated the translation

of a predominantly slave into a predominantly wage-earning labor force in the British West Indies, without permanently upsetting the established local white regimes. The process had been latent since the British slave trade itself had been abolished, in the provisions for the "apprenticing" of slaves liberated from illegal British or foreign slave-trading vessels. As early as March 1808, an Order-in-Council decreed that such recaptured slaves as could not be repatriated or voluntarily recruited into the British Army or Navy (the war still being on) were to be placed in charge of the Collector of Customs in the nearest British colony. The Collector would then bind them as apprentices (usually for seven but sometimes for fourteen years) to "humane masters or mistresses to learn such Trade and Handicrafts or Employments as they seem from their bodily and other Qualities most likely to be fit for and to gain their livelihood most comfortably after their terms of Apprenticeship or Servitude shall expire" (Asiegbu 1969:27).

The largest total of liberated Africans – some 33,000 – were resettled in the recent colony of Sierra Leone. But from the first slave cargoes seized and adjudicated in 1811, through the treaties imposed on Portugal and Spain in the 1820s, down to the effective ending of the slave trade to Cuba and Brazil in the 1860s, many thousands of liberated Africans were resettled in the British West Indies; not just in colonies like the Bahamas and Belize with more space than obvious labor needs, but in the newly acquired Crown Colonies of Trinidad, Guyana, and St. Lucia where there were genuine labor shortages. In Jamaica, the planters claimed a labor shortage after the legitimate slave trade ended, and after emancipation they were eager for any laborers who might be more easily coerced than the local ex-slaves. In all colonies, officials were instructed to supervise the welfare of the liberated Africans, and such provisions may have been relatively effective in the Crown Colonies. But as Monica Schuler (1980) has shown, the liberated Africans in Jamaica were treated little differently from – and suffered even worse than – slaves, having only their inevitably slow acclimatization, their lack of usable skills, and their native ingenuity, to protect them from complete exploitation.²³

As Howard Johnson (1991:55-68) has recently suggested, though, it is the way that the liberated Africans were regarded and treated in the Bahamas that tells us most about the transition from slavery to an allegedly free labor system (see also Dalleo 1984; Saunders 1985:193-204). At first the Africans were kept in camps at government expense, but females and those males not willing to sign up for the Navy or the local battalion of the West India Regiment were offered as domestic or laboring apprentices. Local employers, openly complaining of the Africans' lack of sophistication, treated them as far as they could as an underclass. At first, these newcomers could be more

easily exploited than slaves, and after slavery ended they constituted a competitive reservoir of cheap labor. An African Board was appointed to prevent liberated Africans being given short rations or extended working hours, tricked into an extension of their apprenticeship terms, or illegally shipped off to the Out Islands in laboring gangs, particularly to work the salt-pans. But officials lacked the power, money, and probably the will to remedy all abuses. They measured their success by the number of liberated Africans for whom they found employers, regretting the alternative, which was to settle them on tracts of Crown land, where it was feared they would be an expensive embarrassment to the government.

Such a case was the scandalous deployment in 1832 of some 400 "Angolans" on barren Highborne Cay in the Exumas, where many perished from hunger and thirst. In fact, the majority of liberated Africans once freed from their indentures and left on their own succeeded quite well. But the official attitude towards them can be gauged from the correspondence of the allegedly liberal Governor Smyth and his appointed supervisors concerning the government settlements, such as Carmichael, named after Smyth himself. The first superintendent appointed complained of the Africans' godlessness and inveterate promiscuity, their failure to work to order, their tendency to squat on unappropriated land, and to wander away from the settlement. The Governor professed a strict paternalism, sponsoring an Anglican chapel, regular visits by a clergyman and doctor, a schoolhouse for adults as well as children, a "female school of industry," and a resident policeman. Moreover, there was no shortage of high-minded volunteers, mostly single ladies, eager to bring "civilization" to the unfortunate Africans. Of the twenty children under the tutelage of a Miss Scott in the Adelaide School in 1835 it was said by the slightly less reactionary of the two local newspapers:

Some of them have learned the Alphabet and are spelling words of three letters, are spending part of the day in reading and attending to the various lessons that are taught, and part in learning to sew. When it is remembered that these children of African parents were growing up in ignorance of all that is useful and good, and to whom the English language was almost unknown ... [we] cannot but regard the establishment of a School among them as one of the most valuable favours that they have received from the British nation.²⁴

Certainly, those outside the protective orbit of government often fared worse, in New Providence competing, as the master class intended, in the local produce and labor markets, and in the Out Islands sometimes almost becoming debt peons under a prototypical "truck system" of payment in kind rather than cash, and credit advances. In 1827, for example, Governor Smyth's predecessor described liberated Africans working in the fields, at

the salt-pans, in cutting ships' timbers, and quarrying stones in the Turks Islands for a white family called Lightbourne. "The Holder Lightbourne would be earning two Dollars and a half for each pr. week," he wrote, "and the Africans would be receiving from him each 8 Quarts of Corn pr. week and two suits of Osnaburgs pr. ann; which together would not cost the Holder one days earnings of the Africans – a quarter Dollar pr. week which was given also, I believe, to the African might make the weekly cost to the Owner about one days earnings."

Governor Smyth's successor reported to Lord John Russell in 1840 of other liberated African apprentices toiling at the salt pans: "In some instances they work on Shares [that is, some salt for themselves, most for the master], in others they receive from their employers, Eight Quarts of Indian Corn – 2 lb of Salt Fish or Meat, 2 Hs of Molasses or Sugar Weekly – Two Dollars a Month as Wages and three suits of clothes annually with Medical attendance when sick."

The Ex-Slave Apprenticeship System

In all respects, the method of apprenticing the liberated Africans provided a trial run for the more general system of apprenticeship by which the West Indian white oligarchies effected the transition out of slavery between 1834 and 1838, if not also suggesting means by which some of the methods of exploitation from the slavery era could be perpetuated.

Though the general form of apprenticeship emanated from the Colonial Office, there were local options and variations in its operation. Two colonies, indeed, opted out of the apprenticeship phase altogether and went straight from slavery to free wage labor: Bermuda and Antigua. In Bermuda, the mainly maritime and domestic slaves had long been involved in the cash and wage economy, and in any case had virtually no alternative but to continue working for their former owners. In Antigua, the planters in 1826 had somewhat whimsically offered to sell the whole island and its slaves to the Colonial Office for large-scale experimentation in the operation of a free wage system (Ward 1978:203). Many plantations were struggling but continued to monopolize the land, so that ex-slaves had no chance of setting up as independent peasants, and were immediately forced to compete for the limited and declining wage-earning opportunities. Antigua can even be accorded the dubious distinction of instituting, by a local Act of 1834, a system of labor contracts enforced by the local courts which as "the Antigua system" served as a useful model for other colonies once apprenticeship was terminated (Hall 1971:28; Bolland 1981:595).

It is perhaps surprising that the two colonies where conditions were most

similar to Bermuda and Antigua, respectively the Bahamas and Barbados, actually opted for apprenticeship; in the former case probably because of the surplus of undeveloped land, and in the latter perhaps because of the planters' fear of organized unrest and of the ex-slaves upsetting the social equilibrium by roaming the island in search of the best employers.

In all colonies where apprenticeship was imposed or adopted, there were great local variations in the amounts of work exacted for the forty-five hours per week of compulsory labor for former owners, and in the wages paid for work in the remainder of the working days. As far as was possible, the standards were laid down by committees of planters and other employers at the parochial level. But the very variation in what constituted a daily or hourly task in every branch of laboring activity – indeed the very assumption that tasks rather than simple hours of work would be the measure – showed that what had been customarily negotiated in slavery was at least as deciding as the variations in soils, topography, climate, and season of the year. Even more significantly, the variation in hourly and daily wages paid reflected great practical differences in the cash value of labor and the relative power of laborers and employers, even before a fully competitive free wage labor system came into operation.

The tendency of the former owners to assess their slave property at the highest possible level for compensation purposes, and their willingness to negotiate self-manumission even up to the last months of the apprenticeship period, gave the apprentices a sense of both their relative and absolute labor value, as well as valuable transactional experience. Apprenticeship, though, was scarcely anywhere successful from either the planters' or the ex-slaves' viewpoint. The planters set the task-rate as high and wages as low as they thought possible, while the apprentices naturally went even further than to resist both tendencies – to show unwillingness to work at all without wages when a free wage labor system was already scheduled so soon ahead. It was because of the effects of the coercion which had to be employed to get the apprentices to work as much as the feeling that apprenticeship was neither necessary or workable that brought the system to a premature conclusion in 1838.²⁶

The ending of apprenticeship, however, merely accelerated the process of adjustment by masters and employees already well under way. Suggesting the fulfilment of prophecies made since the 1820s, planters complained of a wholesale flight of the laborers from the estates and a consequent shortage of labor, especially at the busiest times in the agricultural cycle – for planters and peasants alike – when laborers were most needed on the estates but expected wages which the planters regarded as uneconomic. Undoubtedly ex-slaves did transfer into preferred lifestyles – peasant agriculture on their

own lands or life in towns – and this caused problems in many colonies, especially in British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica. But studies by Douglas Hall (1978) and the present author (1978:275-315) have suggested that the alleged “flight” has been exaggerated and that the process was much more complex than the planters claimed (Chace 1988; Higman 1990; Trouillot 1989).

IMMEDIATE POST-SLAVERY ADJUSTMENTS

A detailed look at most sugar estates still active during the first decade after 1838 discloses that most of the adjustments made on both sides were entirely consonant simply with the ending of a system whereby all slaves were tied to their masters and for whom the masters had legal responsibility, irrespective of the precise labor demands of the estate. Responsibility for the ineffective members of the community – infants, elderly, and the incurably sick – immediately shifted from owners to the ex-slaves’ families. A more resolute shift into subsistence farming was therefore a necessity. A more rational management of the plantations, moreover, demanded a much greater periodicity in the employment of laborers, so that efficient plantations maintained a comparatively small nucleus of permanent workers: predominantly factory operatives, craftsmen, and other types of relatively elite workers, virtually all males. At the times of peak demand, especially the cane-cutting season, a large temporary labor force was employed. This also naturally tended towards the partial peasantization of the laboring force. A third major way in which the simple change out of a slavery system subtly transformed plantation society was the tendency, in which the choice of planters and ex-slaves concurred, to make the field labor force as predominantly male as that of the factories had always been, cutting down as far as possible the 60 percent female component of the field labor force.

All these trends are detectable in the few early plantation wage employment records that have survived. When the planters complained (as to the British Parliamentary Inquiry of 1848) of the flight of the ex-slaves from wage employment and of their inability to get enough workers (especially males) except at ruinous wages, what they really meant was that they were unable to persuade enough ex-slaves to fit their ideal; that is, to keep a minimal nucleus of faithful retainers throughout the year and for sufficient male laborers to be available when they were wanted, for the lowest possible wages. The quest for this ideal, in the face of the ex-slaves own preference for peasant farming, the incompatibility of the annual cycles of peasant and plantation production, and the ex-slaves’ sheer ingenuity in negotiating

the best possible terms, explains both the tension between planters and ex-slaves and the forms of employer-employee transaction.

In Jamaica, planters more or less unsuccessfully tried to reduce their wage bills by charging ex-slaves rent for their cottages and customary grounds. In practice, there was generally enough adjacent undeveloped land to enable the ex-slaves to desert their former quarters for new villages and to squat on farmable hillsides and glades. In many cases, the planters did not even discourage squatting on lands they technically owned, especially if those lands were surveyed and the squatters identified, regarding the squatters as a convenient, and theoretically evictable, reservoir of seasonal labor. In Jamaica and Barbados alike, permanent workers became tied cottagers, while in nearly all colonies forms of labor tenancy were negotiated. The terms of employment, wages offered, and conditions under which tenants could be evicted, varied according to the relative availability of labor, the demand for it, and the harshness of the local laws.²⁷

Only in colonies like Trinidad and Guiana with a genuine labor shortage and much fertile spare land was the balance weighted towards the ex-slave laborer, and even there only relatively, and not for long. In marginal or decaying colonies, such as Belize, the Bahamas, and, perhaps, the Virgin Islands, some ex-slaves were left in a kind of benign neglect, at least for a time. At the other extreme, though, was Barbados, where labor was plentiful, spare land virtually non-existent, and wages a quarter of those in Trinidad. At the same time, plantocratic laws and courts applied the harshest conditions concerning the tenure of tied "chattel houses" and condoned eviction for failure to work on the employers' terms, yet placed great difficulties in the way of those laborers wishing to migrate to more favorable areas (Beckles 1990:102-47).

Stipendiary Magistrates, Law, and Order

The interests of first the apprentices and liberated Africans, and then the ex-slaves and all other ordinary blacks, were supposed to be protected by Stipendiary Magistrates (SMs), appointed by the imperial government from 1834 onwards to counteract the locally appointed white Justices of the Peace (JPs). With certain honorable exceptions, however, the SMs were reluctant to challenge and incapable of effectively countering the interests of the local whites. The SMs (retired military officers and impoverished gentry for the most part, including many Anglo-Irishmen) were, moreover, indelibly predisposed by class and temperament to favor an ordered over a more open society, and employers and landowners over employees and the landless. They were also exponents of a corpus of law that while ostensibly

liberal was similarly slanted, and in the final analysis were the salaried servants of an imperial authority that in the face of tightening economic conditions gave what help it afforded to the plantations, planters, and other colonial oligarchs, rather than to mere peasants and proletarians (Burn 1937; Green 1976; Marshall 1977a; Cox 1990; McDonald 1990).

A study of the writings left by the SMs, particularly their correspondence through colonial Governors to the Colonial Office, discloses that their primary concern was to establish peaceful, orderly, and effective relations between ex-slaves and their former masters, now landlords and employers. Many SMs prided themselves on the promotion of written contracts—dealing with share-cropping arrangements and labor tenancies as well as labor contracts strictly defined. These contracts were assumed to be of reciprocal advantage, and undoubtedly gave ex-slaves a legal status as negotiating parties for the first time. But they were still subject to the general operation of laws slanted towards the landlord and employer and against the tenant and employee. Despite the steady liberalization of metropolitan law throughout the nineteenth century, land law still greatly favored the holders of registered freehold title over those with leasehold or squatter tenures. Vagrancy, police, and poor laws virtually made it a crime not to have “visible means of support” and made the workhouses for the unemployed and unemployable as unattractive and arduous as possible. In addition, masters and servants and combination laws actually made criminal the failure by workers to fulfill implied contracts by leaving employment in mid-week or mid-task, or any attempt by laborers to organize themselves. And as in the metropole, the liberalization of the law was accompanied by the creation of new police forces, which, though doubtlessly better regulated and less corrupt than formerly, were at the same time more effective in enforcing the law (Beckles 1990:102-47).

To describe the process in just one colony, the first SMs in the Bahamas in the 1830s and 1840s zealously toured the Out Islands, tried disputes and negotiated contracts between former slaves and former owners, praised those ex-slaves who industriously and peacefully worked for themselves and for what wages were available, and actually chastised those landowners who tried to exact excessive shares, evicted unwilling workers, or insisted on payment in kind instead of fair cash wages. But at the same time the SMs and the Governors to whom they reported had a predilection for those Out Islanders who were hard-working, law-abiding, thrifty, regular churchgoers with a respectable family life, and eager to provide education for their children. In supervising the communities of ex-slaves, the ideal of SMs and Governors seems to have been an integrated and nucleated village based on the old slave units, dominated by church, school, and a government building that could serve as court, police station, and lock-up.

For it was not an ideal that was expected to be achieved simply by the magic of *laissez faire*. In the colonial capital, Nassau, the focus of all social, political, and economic activity, a small but efficient, professional, and eventually even para-military, police force was gradually created between 1835 and 1888, at first locally recruited but, following imperial practice, increasingly drawn from outside the colony, particularly from Barbados (Johnson 1991:110-24; Craton & Saunders forthcoming). This force, however, was of limited effectiveness throughout such a scattered archipelago. From the time of emancipation, Governors and SMs were also involved in setting up a local constabulary – necessarily on the cheap – drawn from those members of the community who already enjoyed a good reputation and respect, and were often in fact former slave headmen. As Governor Colebrooke wrote when originating the system in 1835, such unpaid Special Constables ought to be appointed in a ratio of one to each ten families “according to local circumstances.” They would have no power to act unless called on by a magistrate “to assist in the suppression of tumults and disorders,” though they would be at all times “competent to advise the Apprentices to preserve order” and could always advise the magistrates of trouble before it got out of hand. Ideally, wrote Colebrooke, they would therefore be drawn from the “Heads of families who are thought well of by their employers, and who are possessed of some influence with the Apprentices.”²⁸

Imperial Government and Colonial Oligarchies

Imperial administrators naturally assumed that colonial social legislation would echo “liberal” trends in the metropole but certainly would not exceed them. Given the incomplete “civilization” of the Afro-Caribbean majority, indeed, they would rather expect to lag behind. Imperial inertia, moreover, decreed that, despite *laissez faire* ideology, what aid continued to be given to the colonies would accrue to the plantation system, the plantocracies, and other local ruling classes, rather than to peasant production, the emergent peasantries, or other ex-slaves and liberated Africans.

At the most general level, such inertial thinking (rather than the principle of not meddling unnecessarily in colonial affairs) explains the reluctance to extend the principle of direct Crown Colony rule beyond those colonies acquired in the last French wars: British Guiana, Trinidad, and St. Lucia. It spread nowhere else before the scandal of the suppression of the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865 led to the dissolution of the Jamaican Assembly in the following year. It was applied very slowly elsewhere, and never imposed on Barbados, Bermuda, and the Bahamas. These colonies were regarded both as sufficiently untroubled to be left alone, and, not coincidentally, to

have sufficiently large white minorities to manage efficiently and peacefully their own affairs through self-legislation (Ayearst 1960; Lewis 1968:95-288; Dookhan 1975:112-28).

The colonial office vetoed blatant attempts to deny the franchise to Africans and all ex-slaves, and the most extreme cases of local legislatures using the taxation system to deprive poor non-whites of the fruits of their labor (or to force them in effect to work for wages against their will). But this did not lead to a democratic or predominantly non-white electorate, or to more than an ineffectual handful of non-white members of the legislatures, in any colony. The bulk of colonial revenues, moreover, continued to be paid by the under-represented non-white majority in all the self-legislating colonies. Even in the colonies ostensibly ruled directly by the Colonial Office the white planters retained disproportionate influence or even power; in British Guiana by monopolizing the Court of Policy left over from the Dutch system of local government and in all colonies by continuing to be chosen for the Governors' Councils.

At least four policy decisions by the imperial authorities were more directly aimed at aiding the beleaguered planters – in the Crown Colonies at least as much as in the self-legislating. The decision to postpone the final removal of the protective sugar duties from 1848 to 1854 in response to desperate pleas from the planters was no more than a temporary palliative. The Encumbered Estates Act of 1854 (designed by the formerly slave- and plantation-owning but now Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer and future Prime Minister, William Ewart Gladstone) changed the laws of bankruptcy to enable the sale of estates hopelessly encumbered with debt and was also intended merely as a relief for distressed planters, but seems to have had more fundamental effects. Far from unlocking the prime plantation lands for peasant farmers, in the fertile Crown Colonies of Guiana and Trinidad it facilitated the consolidation of plantation holdings which, with the help of improved technology, made possible the necessary economies of scale that led to the nearest British equivalents to the Cuban *centrales*. In Barbados and Jamaica too it permitted some consolidation, but in the former more notably enabled the resilient local plantocrats sufficiently to redeploy and refinance their holdings that they were able to maintain a united front against any desperate renegades who wished to break up their estates for sale to non-white smallholders or independent villagers. Even in Jamaica, where the sugar industry was almost beyond saving and a considerable number of decayed estates were in fact broken up into smallholdings, a more obvious effect of the Encumbered Estates Act was the purchase of former sugar plantations by enterprising capitalists for knock-down prices (though still out of the reach of smallholding peasants) and

their conversion into virtual cattle ranches called pens (Beachey 1957:1-39; Shepherd 1990).

East Indian Indentureship

Much more wide-reaching was the decision of the Colonial Office to permit, if not always encourage, what Hugh Tinker (1974) has termed “a new system of slavery,” in the form of indentured labor, imported overwhelmingly from the Indian subcontinent. From the end of formal slavery down to its termination during World War I, this system brought some 420,000 East Indians to the British West Indies, only a quarter of whom ever returned home. Of the total number of migrants, some 240,000 went to British Guiana, 144,000 to Trinidad, 36,000 to Jamaica, and about 10,000 divided between St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Grenada – an average flow at least half that of the African slave trade at its peak and having an even greater sustained impact in the two areas of greatest concentration.²⁹

East Indian migration stemmed from the ability of the Indian subcontinent to fulfill the absolute need for labor in the new plantation colonies, a need which was exacerbated by the comparative ease with which the “creole” ex-slaves were able to obtain lands and set up “free villages” of their own and were consequently unwilling to toil on the plantations save when they wished to do so, for adequate wages. After 1834, Guianese and Trinidadian planters sought voluntary labor recruits wherever they could: from Portuguese Madeira, China, and Africa. John Gladstone, the future Prime Minister’s father, tapped a new source of migrants in the south eastern and central regions of British India. Gladstone found that “hill coolies” could be persuaded to agree to work under indentures for five years, for nine to ten hours a day compared with the apprentices’ 7.5 hours, for monthly wages that in effect (along with free housing and some issues of food and clothing) were equivalent to the going rate for two daily tasks (Adamson 1972:42; Checkland 1971).

The mortality and general conditions for the first migrants were so horrific that the Colonial Office was led to impose the “Stephen regulations” in September 1838, limiting written contracts to one year and verbal contracts to one month (as in most other colonies), which virtually amounted to a free wage labor system. For a time the planters tried to live with this system by relying on the flow of recruits, but the economic crisis of the late 1840s and the appointment of a series of planter or pro-planter Governors enabled the local planters to persuade a vacillating Colonial Office to let them change the rules. The planters now funded immigration largely on the colonial rev-

enues, constructed cunning systems of bounties for re-indentures (coupled with monetary penalties for non-fulfilment of labor contracts), and cruelly tightened the terms of indenture and their enforcement. In this they were only intermittently and ineffectually challenged by the British Indian Government (Adamson 1972:42-47).

Even before the supposedly liberal Earl Grey left the Colonial Office in 1852, the Guianese planters had been able to obtain local ordinances that while theoretically establishing a one year minimum, made the normal indenture last three years, required a minimum five years' "industrial residence" before the immigrant qualified for a return passage, and included provisions intended to ensure that immigrants reindentured themselves for a second five years. Immigrants not under contract were obliged to pay what amounted to a monthly fine equal to two daily tasks. For each monthly sum unpaid, the immigrant could be sentenced to fourteen days at hard labor. Immigrants under contract could be apprehended without a warrant if found more than two miles from their estate without a ticket of leave. For every day away from work the immigrant not only forfeited his wages but was also required to pay his employer twenty-four cents. Six dollars per annum for lodging and three dollars for medical expenses were deducted from his wages.³⁰

In the years between 1855 and 1870, when East Indian immigration was actually rising rapidly to its peak, conditions governing work tasks, wages, and punishments were also at their tightest. The daily tasks, set at the time of apprenticeship, were so unrealistic that scarcely half the work force was able to complete the weekly requirement of five daily tasks (worth a shilling each), and the average number of tasks completed per year was scarcely half the required annual total of 260. Yet since the minima were established by statute, the employer could obtain a judgement in the local courts against their employees "every week or any week in the year." As Alan Adamson (1972:111-12) states, the employer "could also get a conviction for badly done or unfinished work, for neglecting or refusing to perform work, for drunkenness at work, abusive language, carelessness of employer's property, inciting to strike, or desertion." Desertion itself was so loosely defined in the employer's favor – with the muster rolls used in evidence without question – that "by this means a technical offence was every day laid up in store for every immigrant who behaved badly or could not be convicted on other grounds."³¹

Though exceptional liberals such as Chief Justice Beaumont (dismissed by Governor Hincks in 1868) and ex-SM George Des Voeux spoke up for the East Indians against the Guianese plantocracy, magistrates, including the SMs, almost invariably took the planters' side. As Edward Jenkins mem-

orably quoted an East Indian immigrant (speaking for so many British West Indian laborers at that time) in *The Coolie: His Rights and Wrongs* (1871:103-4): "O massa, no good go mahitee [magistrate] – Mahitee know manahee [manager] – go manahee's house – eat um breakfus – come court – no good Coolie go court – mahitee friend manahee: always for manahee, no for Coolie." Not coincidentally, British Guiana was, in Adamson's words, "the most heavily policed in the British West Indies," with its constabulary "organized along military lines" (Adamson 1972:263; see also Ramsarran 1985).³²

Working conditions in British Guiana reached a nadir in 1869 when there were serious strikes and riots centered on plantation Leonora. A Parliamentary Inquiry was held in the following year, but this did not in itself remedy conditions. So well established was the system of indentured labor – and so many East Indians were still willing to migrate and stay in the West Indies – that in 1877, the year that British Guiana harvested the largest sugar crop in its history, the local plantocracy felt strong enough to abolish the system of re-indentures. What this meant was simply that the real problem of a "labor shortage" had now been solved. There was now a sufficient supply of indentured immigrants to provide the necessary permanent force on the plantations, while there were also enough freed East Indians competing with black creoles for seasonal labor that the employers were guaranteed workers when they needed them at wages they considered affordable. Thus, the employers enjoyed the luxury of a competitive labor pool, with the additional bonus (for them) of a competition increasingly tinged with ethnic discord.

Much the same process explains the apparent anomaly that Jamaica (and to an extent the colonies of St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Grenada), a declining plantation economy without a labor shortage strictly defined, nonetheless engaged in the business of importing East Indians. These provided a reliable, tied, and ethnically distinct work force that would both guarantee a small permanent (and generally faithful) labor pool, while forcing the unwilling seasonal laborers to come in to work when needed for minimal wages, through competition. Being such a minority component in the colony's labor force, moreover, they were denied even the limited chances of co-ordinating and operating as an ethnic sub-class enjoyed by the East Indian workers of British Guiana and Trinidad (Sohal 1979).

The immigration of East Indians had its most obvious effects in propping up, and in the cases of Trinidad and British Guiana even extending, a sugar industry threatened with decline. Also, in providing a new work force of bound laborers and enlarging the competitive labor pool, it both reinforced the sociopolitical power of the planters and militated against any attempt by

the wage-earning ex-slaves and liberated Africans (as well as the formerly indentured East Indians themselves) to become an effective proletariat. The interests of those whose ambitions were to be peasants (or at least peasant-proletarians) were compromised even more by the fourth feature of imperial policy designed to aid the old plantocratic regime: the way that the doctrine of dear land (or Crown Land sold only at a "sufficient price") was applied to the British West Indies, despite the fact that in its original formulation by Edward Gibbon Wakefield (1849) it was intended solely for colonies of new white settlers, such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (Marx 1867; Bloomfield 1961).

Land, Peasantization, and the Morant Bay Crisis

The privileged access to freehold land had always been one of the chief defining characteristics of British West Indian plantocracies,³³ and the British imperial government's attitude to Crown Land after emancipation entrenched rather than challenged this traditional dominance. Private land that was not protected from would-be peasant owners by high competitive prices as well as the united determination of planters not to split large estates into affordable small parcels, often reverted to the Crown for the non-payment of nominal quit rents. But this, despite the huge number of new freedmen eager for land, merely led to a steady increase in the amount of Crown Land rather than its redistribution to smallholders. The Colonial Office did authorize the sale of Crown Lands for as little as £1 an acre in the later 1830s, but local provisions (as in the Bahamas) first decreed that the land be auctioned with an "upset" (and thus minimum) price of £1, and then laid such a high lower limit on the size of parcels sold as to place it out of the reach of ordinary blacks – even when the price was nominally reduced as low as 12 shillings an acre. This trend had the effect of encouraging planters or penkeepers who had sufficient capital to buy large tracts at low prices per acre, while effectively excluding impecunious freedmen (Craton 1987:88-114).

Freehold possession for would-be peasants was further restricted by the laws relating to squatters, by the attitudes of the authorities and planters towards the squatters, and by the tendency among Afro-Caribbean people to develop informal systems of customary tenure called family or generational land. The English tradition that uninterrupted possession for twenty-one years gave squatters the right to claim freehold tenure was adopted in the British West Indies, but the provision was extended to require sixty years' uninterrupted possession in the case of Crown Land. Needless to say, the requisite court procedures dealing with proving title and eviction were

complex, protracted, and expensive, and thus heavily slanted against the poor and often illiterate squatters. Obtaining land by squatters' rights over private land was therefore extremely difficult, and in the case of Crown Land virtually impossible.

As already mentioned, those planters with secure title (unable to obtain rents for houses and lands, formal labor tenancies, or free part-time labor in lieu of rents) were often quite content to allow ex-slaves to squat on their lands on the tacit assumption that they would offer their labor for wages when it was needed, only making sure that the squatters' possession was technically "interrupted" from time to time, and that the threat of eviction was always held over the squatters' heads. Some canny planters, as in Jamaica, even went so far as to go through a form of sale of land to those squatting on their lands, ensuring that the sale and title were not formally registered, and having the additional assurance that custom would decree that the land would soon devolve to such a swathe of family members that it would be impossible to prove formal tenure in the courts, even by squatters' rights (Otterbein 1964; Clarke 1966; Besson 1987:13-45; Craton 1987).

That it was imperial policy as much as planter obstructionism which kept the would-be peasants from freehold ownership is borne out by the example of what happened in Jamaica after the plantocratic Assembly was disbanded and Crown Colony rule came into effect in 1866. The planters' virtual mortmain over the land had been one of the primary causes of the peasants' revolt around Morant Bay in 1865. Two years previously a recommendation by the Baptist missionary Edward Underhill and petitions from poor farmers in St. Anne's parish to provide relief in the form of cheap lands in small parcels had met with a cynical response called the Queen's Advice, enjoining hard work and thrift instead; that is, in effect, a proletarian rather than peasant means of subsistence.³⁴

The most obvious and immediate effect of the Morant Bay Rebellion was the assumption of direct rule by the Colonial Office, but, as Veront Satchell (1991) has recently demonstrated, this was soon followed by a systematic tightening of the controls over Crown as well as privately owned lands that contributed to the progressive proletarianization of the Jamaican rural population. Satchell singles out the District Courts Law and Quit Rent Forfeiture Laws of 1867 and the Registration of Titles Law of 1888 (all of which could be paralleled in most other British West Indian colonies) as ostensibly liberal reforms that had quite opposite effects. The first represented a general demand – backed up by extremely active Surveyor General's and Registrar General's departments – that all lands be surveyed and all holdings registered. The second, though initially aimed at those holdings on which quit rents were in arrears, represented a more forceful policy of evictions for

non-existent or dubious tenure. The final law, in due course, facilitated the redeployment of lands to those who, it was thought, could most efficiently develop them – which meant not smallholding peasants but new wage-paying plantation investors, particularly banana exporters.

As Satchell shows, between 1869 and 1900, 1,381 Jamaican squatters were evicted by the Government from 33,208 acres of land (86 percent of them between 1869 and 1879), the overwhelming majority of whom claimed less than ten acres apiece. Evictions by private owners – sometimes without recourse to the courts or the aid of the police – at least doubled these figures. Besides this, the Jamaican Government between 1887 and 1902 alone repossessed no less than 240,368 acres of land for the non-payment of quit rents. Contrary to the argument of Gisela Eisner (1961) that this process was paralleled by a willingness of the Government to distribute lands to the peasants in leaseholds, Satchell points out that the seemingly impressive total of 63,500 acres leased by the Government between 1869 and 1900 went to a mere 195 lessees, an average of 325 acres per person – scarcely peasant-sized holdings. Over the same period, the Jamaican Government sold 53,400 acres in 817 lots, but to a mere 81 persons – an average of 659 acres per purchaser. As Satchell (1990:7-8, 125-27) states, the majority of lessees and purchasers were “merchants, professionals and business companies, who were actively acquiring land to help them take advantage of the lucrative banana, fruit and cinchona trades.” Only in the late 1890s did the Jamaican Government make a calculated effort to sell Crown Lands to small settlers, and then only on a small scale with limited success, while at the same time making extravagant concessions to private companies, such as the 76,800 acres granted to the West Indian Improvement Company alone.³⁵

Thus, far from speeding the process of peasantization, during the period when the Jamaican population rose from 450,000 to 750,000, Crown Colony government policy, endorsing the will of the ruling class, ensured that the land formally owned by peasant farmers actually decreased, and that those denied formal tenure would be more than ever before constrained to offer themselves as wage laborers to more fortunate landowners or employers, either at home or abroad (Bryan 1991:266-77).

THE BRITISH WEST INDIES AND THE GLOBAL ECONOMY, 1865-1938

Jamaica and its people were the most obvious victims of the regional and global changes following the triumph of free trade and *laissez faire* principles and capitalistic intensification. The number of Jamaican sugar plantations fell from 646 at emancipation to 162 in 1890 (to fall further to 74 by

1910), while Cuban sugar production over the same period multiplied ten times and eventually represented three quarters of the world's cane sugar total – with the largest *centrales* each producing as much sugar as the whole of Jamaica. With only slight exaggeration it can be said that while in the 1790s Jamaica was the world's foremost sugar producer and Cuba was predominantly a ranching economy, by the 1890s the positions had been almost reversed – with Jamaica desperately searching for an alternative plantation export crop and its people forced by declining wage opportunities at home into seasonal or short-term migration elsewhere in the region (Moreno Fragonals 1978, 1985; Stubbs 1985; Zanetti & García 1987).

However, the transformation of world markets and the patterns of finance, transportation, refining, and distribution (analyzed most cogently, perhaps, by the Cuban scholar Manuel Moreno Fragonals) had parallel effects throughout the British West Indies, differing substantially according to local economic variations and varying more subtly through differences in the local class structure, but having the depression and exploitation of the labor force in common, and sharing, if unequally, its gradual transformation into an international class of migrant workers.

Hitherto, scholarship has concentrated on the most obvious areas: the new sugar colonies of British Guiana and Trinidad which remained competitive longest, and the oldest British sugar colony of all, Barbados, which retained its sugar monoculture, and even reached an all-time peak of production after Jamaica had entered its period of most rapid decline. There has also been some solid analytical study of the fast-fading sugar colonies and more diversified (and slightly more flexible) small plantation and peasant economies of the Leeward and Windward Islands.³⁶ More recently, though, studies of even more marginal colonies, of the timber colony of Belize and the maritime-based failed plantation colony of the Bahamas, have enabled Nigel Bolland (1981, 1989, 1990, 1991, and 1993) and Howard Johnson (1991) to shed oblique new light on the British West Indies as a whole, particularly on the ways that the local black peasants and proletarians became subject not just to global trends and forces, but, more directly, to the ways in which the local oligarchies transformed themselves into agro-commercial bourgeoisies. Under such systems, the descendants of slaves sank into a disorganized torpor, mitigated only, as in the Bahamian case, by some emigration.

The migration of Bahamian laborers was, of course, only a minor stream of a complex flow. New forms of industrial capital entered the region: the industrialized Cuban sugar *centrales*, the railways and new railway and steamship-served plantations of Mexico and other parts of Central America, and, most attractive of all, the extravagant but premature attempt of a

French company to build a Panama Canal. In this process, international capital tapped into the growing reservoir of workers, distressed by the shortage of subsistence land and the insufficiency of local wages as well as the oppression of their colonial masters. It drew mostly from destitute colonies like the Bahamas, decaying but overpopulated colonies like Jamaica or Grenada, or the ambitious, relatively well-educated and restless black populace of Barbados; and least from those colonies like British Guiana and Trinidad where wage opportunities still existed, however limited. It was an expanding flow (involving migration within as well as outside the British West Indies), the full story of which, from first trickle in the 1840s to flood in the 1920s, traumatic cutback in the 1930s, and renewal in and after World War II, still awaits its definitive historian.³⁷

Doubtless the British West Indian labor migrants of the last third of the nineteenth century were victims of blind and indifferent supernational forces (the first awareness of which, along with the germs of a matching proletarian consciousness, were to emerge only with World War I and the Great Depression), but they were voluntarily taking up options that in prospect and initially at least were preferable to conditions in their home islands. Emigration in most cases was a sociopolitical safety valve, and the money brought back or sent back by settled migrants was an important contribution to the economies of impoverished homelands. As Bonham Richardson (1985), Woodville Marshall (1987), and Cecilia Karch (1980, 1982, 1983) have shown in the case of remittances of "Panama money" to Barbados, these financed the first substantial wave of smallholding and houselot purchases by Barbadian blacks, and helped to keep afloat and even expand the regional mini-capitalism of the white Barbadian agrocommercial bourgeoisie. The latter operated through banks and insurance companies and the control of the local wholesale trade as well as the ownership of virtually all agricultural land (Chamberlain 1991).

Elsewhere too the meagre flow of outside wages may have helped to loosen somewhat the stranglehold of local capitalism by providing an injection of cash into the popular and folk systems of saving and banking. Even in the Bahamas, there seem to have been the first gains by the blacks in the perennial struggle with the government and the Bay Street legislators over the control of the people's friendly and savings societies. For the first time blacks also gained a precarious toehold on the lower end of the capitalist economy; through craftsmen's shops, retail stores, specialist services (such as livery stables, boat carriage, and undertaking), renting houses, subdividing landlots, and managing technically illicit forms of saving and gambling.

These token advances (or subdivision of the underclass), the anodyne of a

marginally increased cash flow, and the often illusory prospects of gains from migrant labor, as much as the increased efficiency of the forces of law and order and the other features of liberal hegemonic legerdemain already discussed, account for the success of the British West Indian ruling class, as measured by the general decline in the incidence of popular unrest towards the end of the nineteenth century. The British Caribbean was certainly not as quiescent after slavery as the emancipationists wished to believe, and recent scholarship has rightly emphasized the popular explosions that punctuated each colony's history. But these uprisings were most numerous in the earlier years, more or less climaxed in the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865, and can be broadly classified as the British West Indian equivalents of peasants' revolts – bearing, indeed, more similarities in common with the “proto-peasant” late slave rebellions of 1816, 1823, and 1831-32 than true proletarian upheavals (Craton 1988).

The earliest of such localized uprisings was probably the “Guerre Nègre” of 1844 in Dominica, recently analyzed by Russell Chace (1988). This seems to have exhibited most of the characteristics of later turmoils, such as in St. Lucia in 1849 (which still await their historian), and of the “Vox Populi” riots in St. Vincent of 1862, studied by Woodville Marshall (1983), and the much better known and well-studied Jamaican Rebellion of 1865.³⁶ All of these upheavals were triggered by short-term hardships and antipathy towards unpopular government measures, particularly taxation, and brutal behavior by the colonial police. In all there was some element of anti-white racialism. In the Jamaican case at least there was the additional complication of religious revivalism. But all manifestations were basically fuelled by deep-seated grievances predictable among a predominantly peasant population. In all cases, there was animosity over the shortage of land and its retention or monopolization by an unfriendly government and absentee landlords, over the terms imposed upon sharecropping metayers and labor tenants, and by the difficulties experienced among peasant farmers to obtain either a fair return for their produce or equitable treatment in the local courts.

Though even the Dominican, St. Lucian, Vincentian, and Jamaican outbreaks included grievances over wage labor conditions, it were the Angel Gabriel Riots in Demerara in 1856 and the Barbadian Federation Riots of 1876 which first exhibited (for those who wish to find them) some of the necessary elements of proletarian rather than peasant uprisings. Though they were set off by seemingly irrelevant occurrences or issues (which have tended to distract most subsequent commentators), both outbreaks occurred in colonies in which plantations and plantocracies remained dominant, and they spread with almost spontaneous combustion among planta-

tion populations suffering cruel hardships and oppression by the master class. They also (like all slave revolts and most nineteenth-century popular uprisings) were suppressed with exemplary rigor by the united forces of government and the local white militias.

In the Demerara case, John Sayers Orr, a revivalist radical preacher returning from abroad – nicknamed the Angel Gabriel for his habit of announcing a sermon at street corners by blowing on a trumpet – retailed a heady mixture of populist rhetoric and anti-Catholic millenarianism. But he could scarcely have had an inkling of the way his demagoguery was to ignite the smouldering grievances of poor urban wage-earners, plantation laborers, and part-peasant seasonal workers alike. The ensuing riots focused on the retail shops owned by Catholic Portuguese immigrants, who had themselves graduated from plantation labor but were now, as petty bourgeois middlemen, surrogate targets for the white wholesale merchants. Thus, it might be argued, the nascent Guianese proletariat was striking out at both elements of its oppressive ruling class: the plantation landowners and the commercial bourgeoisie (Craton 1988:146-50).

The Barbadian explosion of 1876 was even more obviously the spontaneous collective action of a subject labor force against its oppressive employers. As the subsequent official inquiry disclosed (without formally acknowledging it) the lack of land and alternative employment and the system of labor tenancies were so absolute that with declining profits in the sugar monoculture, wages were everywhere below the subsistence level, and deaths from starvation not uncommon. Coupled with this were an inequitable justice system, a harsh police regime, disgraceful conditions in prisons and workhouses, and almost no social services save a rudimentary education system, not to mention a complete lack of political representation for the working class in a colony that prided itself on having the second oldest self-legislating system in the British Empire. The ostensible or original cause of the uprising was the opposition by the plantocrats to an imperial scheme to include Barbados within a federation of the Windward Islands. Rather optimistically placing confidence in the wishy-washy liberal Governor Pope Hennessey sent by London to promote the federation scheme, the Bridgetown blacks initiated riots in favor of federation and other reforms, that quickly led to a conflagration throughout the island.

No doubt most black Barbadians took up the Federation issue on the simple principle that if it was opposed by the white plantocracy and supported by a liberal-sounding Governor, it must be good. The real issues, of course, went far deeper. Nonetheless, there were at least two aspects of the Federation proposal which were basically attractive to Barbadian blacks (and equally unattractive to their masters): almost certainly it would lead to

a general dilution of the power of the white plantocracy and more specifically, it would facilitate emigration of Barbadians to greener pastures which hitherto had been resolutely denied them by their legislative masters (Craton 1988:155-61; Hamilton 1956; Levy 1980; Belle 1984).

Yet this is almost special pleading. Over the entire area and period, only in those colonies or areas where plantations continued to be dominant and relatively successful and in the small craftsmen and wharfinger sections of the few port towns can we look for true proto-proletarian activism, the necessary leadership, and the first faint emergence of a proletarian consciousness, in the form of strikes, formal combinations, and the first tentative ventures into polemic writing and speaking. Before his assassination, Walter Rodney made what he could of the evidence for such activity in his brilliant study of workers in British Guiana from the 1880s to 1905. But only if he had been spared to carry his story forward at least another three decades might he have been able to entitle his book "The Making of the Guyanese Working Class," rather than simply *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905* (1981).³⁹

Sugar workers were rarely quiescent and always resisted the employers' attempts to lower wages and raise workloads. In British Guiana they often struck and were even more often disorderly, and on sugar plantations everywhere similar manifestations sometimes occurred. But the sugar workers were nearly always divided and disorganized. The system, as in slavery days, cleverly divided the elite from the ordinary workers, the factory workers from the field laborers. Now the divisions were exacerbated by differences between permanent and seasonal workers, between the indentured contract workers and wage laborers, and between East Indians and Creole blacks. Beyond this, plantation workers almost never found common cause with peasant farmers or townsfolk even of their own ethnicity. Consequently, what industrial action occurred was almost bound to be defeated, even without the overwhelming control by the masters of the law, the courts, and the police.

There were no truly successful strikes anywhere in the British West Indies in the nineteenth century, and it was only in the 1890s that the first faltering steps were made towards forming trade unions, beginning with the carpenter E.A. Trotz's Guianese Patriotic Club and Mechanics Union of 1890, the Trinidad Working Men's Association of 1894, and the Jamaican Carpenters, Bricklayers & Painters Union of 1898 (Lewis 1939; Hart 1973). Thus, it is possible to argue that even in the nearest equivalents to a true proletarian sector in the British West Indies, resistance was always inchoate throughout the nineteenth century; while among the remainder of the people, except for occasional spontaneous small-scale eruptions equivalent to peasant

revolts for the first few decades after slavery ended, quiescence and acceptance rather than organized resistance was the rule.

As the Norman Commission was to notice in 1897, it was certainly not any advance in economic, health, and educational conditions (which were almost uniformly disgraceful) that accounted for the placidity of the ordinary British West Indian – though the commissioners opted for the torpor of hopelessness rather than any more subtle cause. That there were more likely reasons – the division between peasant and proletarian elements, competition and division within the workforce itself, an inability to organize, and above all the lack of a class consciousness – remained masked. This accounted for the fact that the Commission was able once more to concentrate on only one section of the people, recommending improvements in the peasant rather than wage sector (and trifling improvements at that), while almost ignoring the faults of the system of wage-employment and the continued dominance of the land-owning class, and resolutely refusing to recommend any political changes at all. Those who are not purblind admirers of Sydney Olivier, allegedly the most progressive member of the Norman Commission, might even argue that his advocacy of the West Indian peasantry was merely one more hegemonic tactic; dividing in order to continue to rule, or even stave off revolution, by favoring the least against the most dangerous elements in the populace.⁴⁰

More radical and fundamental change was to await the Caribbean-wide ferment of the 1930s, and the catalysts of World War II and Britain's related decline in the will and ability to sustain a formal empire. Whether this, however, really represented the final emergence of a dialectic between classes, let alone a triumph of the underclass over the capitalist bourgeoisie, remains, to say the least, open to debate.

NOTES

1. This paper complements a rather more bibliographic study of the transition throughout the entire Caribbean given at the LASA annual meeting in Washington, April 1991; see Craton 1992b (and 1992a for a translation into Portuguese). Unfortunately, both the bibliography and this paper were prepared before the contributions to the major conference "From Chattel to Wage Slavery" held at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, May 1991 became available. These were scheduled for publication in 1993.

2. Ligon 1657; Leslie 1740; Belgrove 1755; Martin 1756; Long 1774; Luffman 1788; Dickson 1789; Beckford 1790; Moreton 1790; Edwards 1793; Pinckard 1806; Roughley 1823; Barclay 1826; M'Mahon 1839; Abrahams & Szwed 1983; Turner 1988 and 1991; and Morgan 1991.

3. See Beckles & Downes (1987); Beckles & Watson (1987); Beckles (1989 a and b, and 1990).

4. British Sessional Papers (hereafter B.S.P.) 1832, XX (721) 385 and 261.

5. As Sidney Mintz (1979:225, 240-41) has generously pointed out, credit for the recognition of the phenomena associated with the "peasant breach" should perhaps go to George Cumper, for an article published in 1959.
6. This, of course, was the reality behind the myth of intentional slave breeding, the stuff of sensational novelists such as Kyle Onstott, afforded near respectability by Richard Sutch (1975), but deflated in one alleged Caribbean case by David Lowenthal & Colin Clarke (1977).
7. In her recent study of Vere parish, Jamaica, Mary Turner (1991:102-3) has argued that the jobbing gang system increased in reverse correlation to declining planters' fortunes, following the "debt crisis" initiated in the 1760s; that it involved opportunistic upwardly mobile whites (who later tended to be pen-keepers rather than planters); and that the interest of owners of jobbing slaves to fulfill seasonal labor shortages neatly coincided with the interests of established plantation slaves to perform less work and "negotiate" the terms of their labor by different forms of "resistance."
8. Laws of Antigua 1757, Act No. 212, November 25, 1757, clause 9; quoted in Gaspar (1985:160-62).
9. Hamilton College, New York, Beinecke Collection, Antigua Plantation Papers n.d.
10. B.S.P. 1831-32, pp. 18-21.
11. Like the Bahamian slaves, those of Belize were allowed to carry guns, and the lumber cutting crews had much the same practical freedom as black Bahamian mariners. Though timber extraction left little spare time for provision ground cultivation throughout the year, those Belizean slaves who could market their surplus produce. As reported by Henderson in 1809, not only were timber crews allocated work by tasks, but when employed by their owners on their Saturday off-day, were paid "the established rate" of three shillings and fourpence a day, either in cash or kind (Bolland 1991:13).
12. An Official letter from the Commissioners of Correspondence of the Bahama Islands, Nassau, 1823; quoted in Higman (1984:179) Craton & Saunders (1992:258-59).
13. Colonial Office (hereafter C.O.) 23/87, Smyth to Goderich, August 9, 1832, pp. 302, 377-78. See also Craton & Saunders (1992:377-78) and Johnson (1991:5).
14. C.O. 23/82, Smyth to Murray, March 8, 1830, p. 6; see also Johnson (1991:6). The practice of slaves earning a share as mariners on privateering ships dated at least from 1748, when it was noted by Governor Tinker. At that time, he complained, no one wished to till the soil, "especially in these times when a Common Seaman, nay a Negro Slave, shall step on board a Privateer and in a Six Week Cruise return often with a Booty of a hundred pound sterling to his share" (Craton & Saunders 1992:147).
15. B.S.P. 1816, p. 32 and Higman (1984:245).
16. C.O. 23/86, Smyth to Goderich, August 2, 1832; see also Johnson (1991:10).
17. *Bahama Gazette*, June 23, 1799; Craton & Saunders (1992:378-84).
18. Smith 1776; Williams 1944; Craton 1974; Drescher 1977 and 1987; Davis 1984; Blackburn 1988; Ward 1988; Carrington 1988.
19. Green 1976 and 1984; Bolland 1981, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991; Riviere 1972; Levy 1980; Moore 1987; Holt 1992.
20. The problems and possible value of Christianizing slaves were both neatly encapsulated in a proclamation by Sir John Heydon, Governor of Bermuda, as early as 1669: "Masters and Servants are hereby advised, and in the kings name required to live in peace, mutuall love and

respect to each other. Servants submitting to the condition wherein God hath placed them. And such Negroes as formerlie, or lately bin baptized by severall Ministers, should not thereby think themselves free from their Masters and Owners, but rather, by the means of their Christian profession, obliged to a more strict bond of fidelity and service" (Lefroy 1877-79, II:293-94).

21. Though founded in 1799, the Anglican Church Missionary Society did little active proselytizing until the 1820s. The most energetic baptizer of slaves (at two shillings and sixpence a head) was Rev. G.W. Bridges, notorious as founder of the Colonial Church Union, under the auspices of which while Jamaican Anglicans persecuted black Jamaican sectarians, especially Baptists (Craton 1982; Turner 1982).

22. The spirit of missionary teaching was captured by Rev. John Wray, of the London Missionary Society in Demerara in 1827: "A religious education only can prepare the negroes for a state of freedom and the general diffusion of true Christianity and good laws to encouraging Industry." Wray also utilized a socializing catechism for his charges which included the following questions and answers: "Q. 5: Suppose a servant or slave meets with an unfeeling master, does this lessen the duty of respect? A: By no means, for it is the command of God. I Peter 2: 18-19, 'Servants shall be subject to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the forward...' Q. 8: What is the duty of servants as to the property of their masters? A: To keep from and watch against the sin of theft, waste and negligence, and to be as careful of their master's property as if it were their own." Council for World Missions Archives (formerly L.M.S. Papers), School of Oriental and African Studies, London. Rev. John Wray, Demerara, to London 1827, Incoming Letters, Boxes 1-11, 1807-1894, 5.

23. The general study of liberated Africans in the British West Indies is a great work yet to be accomplished (Schuler 1986; Wood 1981).

24. C.O. 23/94, *Bahama Argus*, November 11, 1835. See also Craton & Saunders (forthcoming).

25. C.O. 23/76, Grant to Goderich, No. 9, September 26, 1827; 23/107, Cockburn to Russell, No. 20, April 6, 1840. See also Johnson 1991:84-109.

26. Burn 1937; Hall 1953; Green 1969; Marshall 1971, 1985; Wilmot 1984a, 1984b.

27. Another index, of course, was the relative availability of land, normally measured by its price. This varied from £1 per acre in parts of British Guiana, to maxima of £13 in Trinidad, £25 in Jamaica, and £200 in Barbados. Craton & Walvin 1970; Higman (1988:286); Beckles (1990:108-16); Marshall, Marshall & Gibbs (1975:88-104); Levy 1980; Gibbs 1987; Chamberlain 1991.

28. *Royal Gazette*, April 6, 1835, Colebrooke to Sms Donald McLean and Hector Murro.

29. Weller 1968; Adamson 1972; Mandle 1973; Tinker 1974; Sohal 1979; Haraksingh 1981; Rodney 1981.

30. B.S.P. 1851, 39(624), pp. 559-60; Adamson 1972:52-54.

31. See also B.S.P. 1859, 20(31), p. 93 and 1871, 20(393), p. 118.

32. One of Adamson's (1972:263) underlying themes is well expressed in his statement, "A fear of the masses ... lies at the heart of Victorian liberalism and of Victorian colonial policy."

33. This access stemmed largely from the planters' manipulation of the head right and quit rent system to their own advantage, and led to the establishment of land title registries long in advance of Britain.

34. *Morning Journal* (Jamaica) September 15, 1865, Letter to Her Majesty from the Poor People of St. Ann, Jamaica; C.O. 137/222, 1865 The Queen's Advice, Dispatch from Cardwell to Eyre, Printed in Underhill 1866.
35. Eisner (1961:220); Satchell (1990:7-8, 125-27); Satchell 1991; Holt (1992:403-6).
36. Lewis 1936; Hall 1971; Marshall 1965; Marshall, Marshall & Gibbs 1975; Chace 1988; Lewis 1990.
37. Newton 1973, 1977, 1984, 1987; History Task Force 1979; Petras 1988; Richardson 1983, 1985, 1989.
38. B.S.P. Reports 1866, XXX, Report of the Jamaican Royal Commission. Olivier 1933; Hall 1959; Semmel 1962; Dutton 1967; Campbell 1976; Schuler 1980; Heuman 1981; Simmonds 1982; Chace 1984, 1986, 1989; Brereton 1984.
39. The book, however, is as Walter Rodney planned it. The manuscript was delivered to Johns Hopkins University Press a few months, and revised in prison a few weeks, before Rodney was blown up in his car in June 1980. Published in 1981, it received the triennial Elsa Goveia Memorial Prize of the Association of Caribbean Historians (A.C.H.) in April 1983.
40. Lobdell 1988; Hart 1988; Rich 1988; Trouillot 1989. As readers will doubtless have noted, this paper (unlike the general article referred to in Note 1) does not adequately discuss the relationship between changing technology and labor systems. A useful range of papers on this topic, derived from the panel "Changing Technology and the Labour Nexus" at the Americanists' Congress in Amsterdam in July 1988, has already been published in a special edition of the *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* (Spring 1990). Of these, particularly valuable for present purposes are the position paper by the convenors, Peter Boomgaard and Gert Oostindie, and the contribution by Richard B. Sheridan.

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MICHAEL J. CRATON
Department of History
University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario
Canada N2L 3G1