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THE LEGACY OF GEORGE L. BECKFORD'S
PLANTATION ECONOMY THESIS IN JAMAICA

Plantation Economy, Land Reform and the Peasantry in a Historical Perspective: Jamaica 1838-1980. CLAUS STOLBERG & SWITHIN WILMOT (eds.). Kingston: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1992. 145 pp. (Paper n.p.)

This interdisciplinary collection focuses on the integration of Jamaica's classical plantation economy with the world economy, and the impact of the plantation economy on the peasantry, land reform, and agrarian modernization in Jamaica from emancipation in 1838 up to 1980. The eight papers comprising the volume were, as a one-page editorial "Introduction" outlines, presented at a symposium at the University of the West Indies, Mona, and are dedicated to the late Professor George Beckford whose work on persistent poverty in plantation economies championed the Jamaican peasantry. As such, the book is a welcome addition to the literature on the Caribbean plantation-peasant interface. However, the chapters are uneven in quality, with some reflecting analytical weaknesses and a lack of historical depth. Typographical errors, grammatical mistakes, and poor documentation are also noticeable. In addition, contrasting perspectives emerge among the contributors and this is not addressed by the editors.

The opening chapter by Michael Witter, "Plantation Economy: Insights for the Twenty-First Century," examines the influential concept of the export-oriented "plantation economy," which was first outlined in the Caribbean and Latin America twenty-two years previously to elucidate underdevelopment. As Witter notes, this concept has recently waned in influence due to laissez-faire development strategies imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the United

States Agency for International Development (USAID). Witter anticipates a return to the plantation economy thesis, which incorporates *multinationally controlled mineral extraction and tourism* as variants of dependent capitalism, as a basis for future development policy. His analysis highlights the emergence of a constrained peasantry and a domestic food marketing system alongside free labor in the post-emancipation transformation of the plantation system. He fails, however, to either locate this peasant formation as a continuation of the pre-emancipation peasantization process, or to acknowledge the earlier consolidation of the domestic food marketing system among "proto-peasant" plantation slaves (Mintz 1989).

Swithin Wilmot's chapter, "Black Space/Room to Manoeuvre; Land and Politics in Trelawny in the Immediate Post-Emancipation Period," is a strength of the book. In a well researched and documented analysis (despite repeated misspelling of my own name), he highlights the role of land acquisition by the ex-slaves as a basis for "dignity, economic autonomy and freedom" (p. 15). Within this context he focuses especially on the role of freehold land in relation to the political process in Trelawny Parish which, at emancipation, had Jamaica's largest slave population and a persisting plantation system (Besson 1984b). Wilmot shows how the ex-slaves used their newly acquired freeholds in Trelawny's Baptist free villages to curtail the power of the planter class and the Established Anglican Church in a by-election for a seat in the Jamaica Assembly in 1852. The case study also adds a new dimension to the analysis of the move to Crown Colony Government following the Morant Bay Rebellion with its demands for land in 1865, highlighting the exclusion of the post-slavery peasantry from the land-based political process and the reassertion of planter power.

Veront Satchell's chapter, "Government Land Policies in Jamaica during [the] Late Nineteenth Century," focuses on the period following the Morant Bay Rebellion. This was typified by disorganized agrarian relations and a paradox of constrained peasant land acquisition coinciding with an abundance of unused land. Satchell shows that government policies from 1866 to 1900 reinforced the plantation system rather than developing the peasantry. He therefore challenges the view that the peasants were the main beneficiaries of these policies. However, the view critiqued is neither identified nor explored, which mars this otherwise well-researched analysis.

In "Plantation Economy, Peasantry and the Land Settlement Schemes of the 1930s and 1940s in Jamaica," Claus Stolberg aims to reconfirm the continuing relevance of the "theory of plantation economy and society"

(p. 39) and to apply it to the land settlement schemes of the 1930s and 1940s. He argues that these freehold schemes maintained the plantation status quo, failing to generate a peasantization process, as redistributed land near plantations reinforced the "occupational multiplicity" of the rural poor who underused their land and were reluctant to become a peasantry. Stolberg fails to recognize either the complex meaning of land to a "reconstituted peasantry" still constrained by plantations, or the fact that "occupational multiplicity" is itself an aspect of the peasant economy (Mintz 1973, 1989; Besson 1984a, 1987b, 1992; and chapters by Wilmot and Augustin). Stolberg also overlooks the marginal nature of the redistributed land (highlighted in McBain's chapter). The historical continuity between the rationale of the land settlements and the imposed location of the post-emancipation "free villages" as reservoirs of plantation labor (see the chapter by Wilmot) is likewise unexplored. Some discrepant documentation between the analysis and its bibliography further detracts from this chapter.

In "Land Reform and the Family Land Debate: Reflections on Jamaica," Peter Espeut presents a "considered opinion," based on his MPhil project in St. Thomas, that the Caribbean peasant institution of "family land is a hindrance to rural development in general and to agricultural development in particular", arguing that "[I]f development planners do not take steps to deal with the problem of family land, then the scandal of land scarcity in the midst of idle land will remain a feature of rural Jamaica" (p. 80). This contributor therefore reverses Beckford's thesis of plantation economy, to which the book is dedicated, by attributing underdevelopment to the peasantry. Espeut's perspective critiques my own argument (which supports Beckford's thesis) that family land represents dynamic culture-building by Jamaican and Caribbean peasantries in response and resistance to plantation society, rather than passive survivals from colonial or ancestral cultures (Besson 1979, 1984a, 1987a, 1987b). Yet Espeut's overview of the regional institution of family land, its controversial interpretations, implications for land use and role for those in need (pp. 70-71, 73-78) reflects heavy and unacknowledged dependence on the very synthesizing sources that he disputes (Besson 1979, 1984a:60-63, 1987a:16-21, 30-32; 1987b:104-5), evoking a sense of *déjà vu* in this reviewer. In addition, much of the remainder of the chapter is comprised of extensive quotations. The bibliography is not consistently presented and one of the references to my own work backdates it to the nineteenth century.

Espeut's argument is filled with inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and untenable contentions. These include a critique (taken unacknowledged

from Besson 1984a:60-63 and 1987a:17-18) of cultural survival theses of family land, while nevertheless concluding, like Edith Clarke (1953, 1966) and Charles Carnegie (1987), that the institution is an African retention, especially of Ashanti derivation. Espeut attributes an Africanist survival thesis to M.G. Smith (1956), who in fact provides a demographic and social structural explanation, and fails to address the discrepancy between Ashanti matrilineal landholding and Caribbean cognatic family land, with its similarity to Pacific land transmission. In his discussion of traditional African land allocation, he confuses chiefly redistribution with kin-based reciprocity (Dalton 1967). Espeut argues, like Carnegie (1987), that I (along with M.G. Smith and Clarke and in contrast to Carnegie) advance a plural society approach to Caribbean land tenure systems. Yet, as noted in my reply to Carnegie (Besson 1987b), my intersystem critique of the pluralist perspective on land tenure both predates and extends Carnegie's analysis (Besson 1974, II:1-113, 1984a:76 n7, 1987a:38 n3; cf. Besson 1988). Thus a reviewer of the Carnegie-Besson dialogue concluded that "the only issue on which Carnegie and Besson really differ, in my view, is that of African retentions; my own position on this is closer to that of Besson" (Trouillot 1989:325 n2).¹

Espeut contends, in his critique of my plantation economy thesis of Caribbean family land, that "the Bahamas never had plantations, and Haiti broke with French colonialism in the 1790s" (p. 71). The Bahamas had cotton plantations (Craton 1987, Johnson 1991); and Haitian family land was not only forged through revolution against the French colonial slave plantation system, but persists in Léogane, a "sugar-plain" penetrated by American neo-colonial plantations (Larose 1975:486-88). Espeut's related argument that "whereas land for peasant activity was scarce in Barbados it was fairly common in Jamaica" (p. 71) similarly neglects the constraints of land acquisition facing the Jamaican peasantry, underlined not only in my own work but also by Beckford and in the chapters by Wilmot, Satchell, Augustin, and McBain. Espeut's further question of why no other response than family land evolved among the peasantries in Caribbean plantation societies likewise overlooks my thesis that family land and common land emerged as variants of customary tenure, created in resistant response to plantation society and colonial agrarian legal codes (Besson 1987a:38-40 n5, 1992:204-8; Besson & Momsen 1987:4-5). Despite Espeut's African-retention argument, he concludes that "family land is indeed a response to the battle with the plantation over land and labour" (p. 71), thus supporting my perspective.

Espeut disputes my thesis that family land is unrestricted; and he argues that "voluntary non-use of family land, and crab antics" (p. 74), which as

he points out are both discussed by me, restrict the system. Espeut, a sociologist, fails to draw the anthropological distinction between exclusive restriction on the one hand and, on the other, the pragmatic but non-exclusive limitation of "voluntary non-use" and the negatively sanctioned "crab antics" of unrestricted cognation (Fox 1967). His conclusion that a normatively unrestricted system, providing especially for those who "don't mek it," is perpetuated (pp. 78-79) reiterates my thesis of an unrestricted system providing particularly for those in need. Espeut's contention that family land results in uneconomic land use further underlines this point, since such land use is generated by unrestricted descent (Besson 1987a). Espeut's inconsistent claim that a reputedly restricted family land system is hampering development therefore begs the question of why such restriction is not enabling economic land use. Espeut dismisses as "project bias" Blustain's (1981) conclusions on the positive role of family land in rural development, without considering similar findings on the advantages of unrestricted family land elsewhere in the island and the region (Rubenstein 1987; Besson 1988). In addition, he overlooks the adaptive role of family land in circulatory migration, which integrates Jamaican plantation economy with the world economy (Beckford 1972; Besson 1984a, 1987a; Thomas-Hope 1992:5).

In "The Sugar Co-operatives in Jamaica: 1974-80," Carl Stone gives a coherent and convincing re-assessment, also marked by the reflexivity typifying Beckford's work, of the establishment and performance of the sugar co-operative project. This entailed the transfer of three sugar plantations, including the island's two largest sugar estates of Monymusk in Clarendon and Frome in Westmoreland, from the state to the sugar workers by the Peoples National Party (PNP) in 1974. The workers became disillusioned long before the project was terminated by the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) in 1981. Stone identifies the paradox which resulted in this outcome: while middle-class reformers had a political agenda for rewriting the historical legacy of the plantation and empowering the workers, the sugar proletariat was concerned with material improvement. Such improvement was inhibited by factors which included the heritage of unviable plantations, run down by multinationals, and constraints imposed by the IMF; and so the real income of the sugar proletariat declined. The result has been a reversion to state ownership of the plantations and to trade unionism by the workers. Grievances among the sugar proletariat have become entrenched, as both political parties (the JLP in the 1980s and the PNP in the 1990s) have tended to put the concerns of capital before labor in the sugar industry. The persistent poverty of the plantation economy has therefore been perpetuated.

Gerulf Augustin's chapter, "Project Land Lease 1972-1980," explores a parallel theme of the PNP government's land reform program whereby 70,000 acres of state-owned land were redistributed to 36,000 tenants through "Project Land Lease" from 1973 to 1980. The project was initially favored by the peasantry but, like the sugar co-operatives, soon lost support among the target group. Like Stone's insightful analysis of the co-operatives, Augustin provides a perceptive account of the collapse of the leasehold scheme. The problems included political patronage, overwhelming administration, insufficient finance, failure of the state-owned Agricultural Marketing Corporation to meet its obligations, land fragmentation, poor soil quality, and the absence of freehold tenure and land titles.

Augustin, like Wilmot, and in contrast to Stolberg and Espeut, acknowledges the social and economic significance of land to the Jamaican peasantry and the related importance of freehold land – a factor which he highlights as central to the peasantry's dissatisfaction with "Project Land Lease." Augustin shows that the leasehold scheme reinforced the plantation economy: "[T]he Government still respected the property rights of large landholders, because 'Project Land Lease' was never intended to give the small farmers the political and collective power needed to challenge the old rural structure" (p. 115). Rather than advancing dogmatic recommendations, Augustin suggests several alternative land reform strategies for discussion. Along with the chapters by Wilmot and Stone, Augustin's analysis is a strength of the book. However, both Augustin's and Stone's chapters would have benefited from more rigorous documentation. There is also a discrepancy in the research periods referred to by Augustin.

The concluding chapter by Helen McBain, "Constraints on the Development of Jamaican Agriculture," focuses on the Jamaican government's agricultural development policies in the 1980s. Against the historical background of unsatisfactory colonial land settlement schemes and "Project Land Lease" in the 1970s, which all entailed marginal land and insufficient funding for small farmers, McBain assesses the "Agro 21" agricultural development program introduced by government in 1983 in a context of economic crisis. This program was designed in relation to the Reagan Administration's Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI) and assisted by USAID. Its goal was to transform Jamaican agriculture by increasing and diversifying exports away from inefficient sugar production – for example, through the cultivation of non-traditional crops such as "winter" vegetables – and entailed leasing four of the six government-owned sugar plantations.

Like the land settlement schemes and sugar co-operatives, "Agro 21" did not meet many of its objectives and McBain shows that the program "failed to transform the agricultural sector and improve the living standards of the rural farming communities" (p. 132). This was due to serious constraints, which included "inadequate access to good agricultural land, the uneconomical size of many farms, the low level of technology used by the majority of farmers, inadequate rural infrastructure, the advanced age of most farmers and their lack of militancy in advocating changes, inappropriate government policy and overcentralised and weak institutional structures" (p. 138). Notable was the fact that external funders and investors were more influential than the Ministry of Agriculture, the peasantry, and the traditional farmers, and that the Ministry of Agriculture was marginalized by the prime minister. McBain identifies a number of dimensions to be addressed in order to transform the agricultural sector, including the strengthening of the Ministry of Agriculture. She does not, however, indicate which political party and prime minister were in power. Cross-referencing throughout the chapter is also unclear.

This book represents a serious attempt by the University of the West Indies at Mona and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung to evaluate central themes in Jamaican post-emancipation plantation economy, and to advance rural development solutions for the future. However, while some papers make significant contributions and all the contributors demonstrate laudable concerns, some chapters would have benefited from more attention to rigorous analysis and other dimensions of scholarship to perpetuate and advance Beckford's legacy. As some contributors demonstrate, but others overlook, the cultural history and social institutions of the Jamaican peasantry, championed by Beckford, should be respected when forging paths of sustainable development for the twenty-first century.

NOTE

1. For a reiteration of my position on the African heritage and Caribbean culture-building, in relation to the institution of family land and in response to Carnegie's (1987) Africanist critique, see Besson (1987b:106-8). My position draws support from the theoretical perspectives on creolization advanced by Mintz (1989) and Mintz & Price (1992).

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