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In: New West Indian Guide/ Nieuwe West-Indische Gids 73 (1999), no: 3/4, Leiden, 93-99

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KEVIN A. YELVINGTON

TRINIDADIAN CAPITALISM

Capitalism: An Ethnographic Approach. DANIEL MILLER. Oxford: Berg, 1997. x + 357 pp. (Cloth £39.00, Paper £17.99)

Women, Labour and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A History. RHODA E. REDDOCK. London: Zed, 1994. vi + 346 pp. (Cloth £39.95, Paper £15.95)

Despite the underdeveloped state of the scholarship on its admittedly short sugar plantation slavery period, we now have a corpus of studies on various aspects of capitalism in Trinidad – from its historical advent (Sebastien 1978) to its twentieth-century manifestation in the petroleum sector (Seers 1964; Sandoval 1983), and from the ethnic structure of labor markets (Camejo 1971; Harewood 1971) and the role of capitalism in racial/ethnic inequality (Henry 1993; Coppin & Olsen 1998) to the way ethnicity affects business, big (Button 1981; Parris 1985; Centre for Ethnic Studies 1993) and small (Ryan & Barclay 1992; Griffith 1997), and the way ethnicity and gender are used in class recruitment (Yelvington 1995). There are also a number of fine working-class histories (e.g., Rennie 1973; Ramdin 1982; Basdeo 1983) and important works on the labor riots and strikes and the nature of the colonial state during the crises of the 1930s (e.g., Thomas 1987; Singh 1994). The two books under review here complement the works mentioned above, and they complement each other as well: Reddock's deals with the way capitalism up to the mid-century was buttressed by colonial politics, and explores how this formation engendered certain kinds of political responses, while Miller approaches capitalism through the assumption that fundamental changes in the post-Oil Boom period (ca.1973-80) brought about considerable autonomy between production and consumption that can and should now be read through an analysis of the cultural circulation of images and commodities in the soci-

ety. These books are both noteworthy because they engage in explicit theorizing on what capitalism was and is, and what it did and does.

Reddock's book marshals an impressive amount of evidence to support her "housewifization" thesis, an explanation for the progressive expulsion of women from paid formal employment and their consequent definition as "non-workers" during the colonial period of the twentieth century, up to independence in 1962. This argument is twinned with her idea of the "naturalization" of women's work – that is, the (re)defining of certain occupations as "women's work" based on women's supposed natural abilities and proclivities, which allows their work to be constructed as the extension of their (often idealized) domestic roles. Under patriarchy, a devaluing of such work is the logical result. Housewifization is an ideology sustained by and sustaining of a sexual division of labor, incorporative of a domestic model of a working male breadwinner and his dependent wife and children. This ideology was congruent with the need, under colonialism, to justify certain changing labor arrangements attendant to industrialization, concomitant with a strategy of creating a female reserve army of labor, and the goal of projecting onto the subject society the colonial power's own image. Reddock notes the irony in attempts to assign this designation to a post-emancipation society where women had always worked under slavery and indenture.

Reddock shows how housewifization was elaborated and embedded in a number of societal institutions – the state, education, religion, business – and, through historical evidence, how these institutions articulated with each other. And she shows how working-class women resisted ruling-class initiatives by actively participating in a number of formal groups, such as trade unions, feminist and nationalist movements, and social work organizations. The argument is based on a close consideration of an array of primary and secondary sources, the former including memoirs, Colonial Office documents, official labor force reports, newspaper articles, and oral history interviews, although it is maddening when turning to the bibliography to follow these up to discover that "For reasons of space, the publishers were regrettably unable to reproduce the complete bibliography of this work" (p. 341). Women were active in the strikes of 1919, in the labor agitation of the 1930s, in the reform movements as capital and state consolidated its position after World War II, and in the incipient anti-colonial bodies culminating in the establishment of the People's National Movement under Eric Williams. Reddock's treatment of the various heretofore largely unknown women and major and minor organizations is comprehensive, the kind of "retrieval" history that is worthwhile.

Class formation is the central dynamic, but it is nuanced in Reddock's hands. She demonstrates how the decreasing numbers of women workers

not only indicate the exclusion of those who wanted work, but show that some women withdrew from the labor force because they found themselves in positions to attain the valorized European conjugal models. Rather than feeding us the “sisterhood is universal” pap, she shows how women of different classes and ethnic identities were often at odds in their political position-taking. And rather than giving us pro-union hagiography, Reddock demonstrates how women despite their role as leaders and as footsoldiers were confined by their male comrades to women’s auxiliaries. Only the short-lived Negro Welfare Cultural and Social Association (ca. 1934-ca. 1946) genuinely included women in leadership roles; Reddock has already published a biography of its leader and chief ideologue, Elma François. Likewise, rather than presenting a gloss of a unified anti-colonial stance, Reddock exposes Trinidad’s historical difficulties in putting together multi-ethnic class alliances. This book’s value is the lesson that capitalism cannot be understood without what some would call a relatively autonomous ideological sphere, nor can it be understood without struggles to define its nature and outcome.

Miller, an accomplished theorist, has been widely cited over the last decade for his work on material culture and consumption (1987), and most recently has developed “a theory of shopping” (1998). His *Capitalism* book, the second in his oeuvre to focus on Trinidad, evinces his hallmark unrelenting dialectical approach. In *Capitalism*, there are overlapping dialectical movements. A principal one is the antimony between what Miller calls “organic capitalism” and “pure capitalism” – that is, historical, culturally-particular capitalism, as seen in his case studies of Trinidad, and abstract, ahistorical, and theoretical “capitalism,” as prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in its recipe of structural adjustment for the country. Another is the competition between “local ‘global’ companies” and “global ‘local’ companies” – that is, between transnational firms, some with a long history in Trinidad and enjoying considerable local-level autonomy, and those firms originating in Trinidad but expanding their production, distribution, and sales branches abroad. These and other theses and antitheses meet in syntheses in Trinidad and, indeed, *produce* and *transform* Trinidad. Miller is less interested in how capitalism becomes Trinidadian, in terms of a cultural style, than in how capitalism creates “Trinidad” through consumption patterns and the conduct of commerce through globalized linkages.

Miller’s book is based on a comprehensive, multi-sited ethnography. He interviewed advertising agency executives and creative workers, shopkeepers, and the directors of large firms; he did surveys among consumers and mall-goers; he recorded television commercials and showed them to informants, gauging their reactions and interpretations individually and in

discussion groups; he was permitted to accompany distribution managers on their rounds, and to be present at high-level board meetings; and he hung around offices picking up gossip and observing business practice, among other fieldwork strategies. These are perhaps non-traditional methods, but certainly called for given the nature of the project, and in more traditional anthropological terms his ethnography is based in four communities, basically representative of Trinidad's ethnic and class diversity. His main ethnographic evidence is of the sweet drink (soft drink) industry, of the production and consumption of advertising, and on retail and shopping strategies and practices.

There exist disjunctures and ruptures everywhere. Nowhere is intentionalism an explanation of behavioral outcomes. Appearances do not readily disclose the nature of their underlying social relations. Miller argues that "the Trinidadian context can only be understood by a refusal to project ideological constraints derived from different historical legacies" (p. 273) and even "entirely explicit in Marx's own writing" was the idea that "theory should be changing at least as fast as history" (p. 332). Miller finds that the factory and the plantation have given way to the distributive and service sectors, and (perhaps contentiously) he forgoes a look at the relations of production, thereby casting aside the conventional categories of analysis. This allows him to explore how local "global" companies might *not* favor trade liberalization because they have built up a local following and want to protect themselves from competition, and how global "local" companies might indeed favor liberalization because their foreign exchange reserves might allow them to import the inputs necessary for local assembly or pursue strategies for the markup and retail of imported finished goods. In a hyper-competitive business climate, hyperreal images of, say, sweet drink advertising, resonate with and through culture. And the ways they do is not entirely predictable – thus the necessity of the ethnographic approach. As Miller shows, image-producers move in a cosmopolitan world apart from the consumers of these images, but taste and class are not necessarily coincident or as closely associated as they are in other societies. Sex sells in Trinidad, but not in ways the producers of the ads think: certain products represented by the ads obtain sexual connotations when none were intended, while others sold with a rather overt (according to their producers and Miller) sexual message derive other kinds of meanings and uses entirely. Ad creators try in multi-ethnic Trinidad to use "mixed" individuals as models, but this falls flat among East Indians, who see it as part of a creole plot at forced miscegenation, or "*douglarization*," while blacks see the same models as epitomizing a "high brown" political aesthetic that has traditionally oppressed them. Local products are derided, while Coca-Cola evokes nostalgia and a sense of Trinidadianess. And taken for granted activities

acquire new meaning. Shopping is not just a mindless activity or gender stereotype, but it has “become integrated as a sphere of possibility throughout the gamut of Trinidadian social relationships and cosmological imagination; it is used in exchange, in ‘dressing’ the self, in objectifying the sense of ‘bright’, in the competitive skills of housewifery, in mobilizing youth against their parents, in establishing taste as class, as well as in many other modes of interaction” (p. 301). For Miller, consumption is what allows historical and cultural “projects” to proceed, such as ethnicity, sexuality, kinship, and religious knowledge. Corporate-sponsored competitions are definitive of the national image. Trinidadians *qua* Trinidadians claim the right to purchase high quality goods and in so doing, “their being Trinidadian is increasingly linked to a sense of their being global, with similar rights and expectations to those of any metropolitan country” (p. 335). Miller is an unsentimental (but sympathetic) critic of consumer(istic) choices and their likely effects. More Caribbean ethnographies should be so attuned to the cultural contradictions of the local and globalizing forces in the present context, rather than defining the region through paradigmatic foci, such as religion, kinship, and popular culture taken as Carnival and crafts.

Reddock’s and Miller’s visions meet at several junctures. Although Reddock does not define the opposition as such, it is clear that both she and Miller incorporate the notion of organic capitalism, indicated by historical, local struggles over the direction of the state and economy, and the notion of pure capitalism, as housewifization no less than the models imposed by the IMF are violent abstractions with an ahistorical and inappropriate bearing on the Trinidad case. The two books represent a sequence. They must be read together to understand where Trinidadian capitalism has been and where it’s going.

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KEVIN A. YELVINGTON
Department of Anthropology
University of South Florida
Tampa FL 33620-8100, U.S.A.
<yelvingt@chumal.cas.usf.edu>