Laurette S.M. Bristol


In *Plantation Pedagogy*, Laurette Bristol presents two major agendas with regard to primary school education in the twin-island republic of Trinidad and Tobago. She provides a stinging and unapologetic critique of educational practices carried over from the days of British colonial rule into the post-independence era. And she offers hope for the adoption of a redemptive educational alternative capable of emancipating the citizenry from the shackles of colonial rule and slavery.

An overarching feature of Trinidad and Tobago’s educational system that spilled over into the present from the pre-independence era (of which Bristol is severely critical) is the organization of human resources in the teaching service. Bristol objects to the supervisory and, by extension, domineering roles assigned to the minister of Education and his or her supervisors. She frowns on the junior/senior dynamics existing between primary and secondary school teachers. And she finds fault in the insistence on individualistic as opposed to collaborative operations by teachers in the classroom. Within this structure, Bristol perceives unmistakable parallels with the old colonial plantation system. Massa is the minister of Education, the overseer is the school supervisor, and the laborers are the teachers who merely implement without question the curriculum that massa has imposed from above.

Bristol is strong in identifying weaknesses in teaching strategies that continue to strangle education and true independence in Trinidad and Tobago. She laments the fact that the country inherited an unreflective post-colonial teaching methodology that emphasizes mastery in various teaching techniques, which Bristol calls “techne.” This approach, she points out, kills critical and creative thinking and emphasizes specific skill acquisition. The end product, as in the days of slavery, is a populace that can hardly function independently and which is fit merely for providing low-level skills. Bristol points out that such a state of affairs is not accidental and admits that the economic limitations of a fledgling nation in 1962 explain in part the backwardness of the system currently in operation. The old colonial masters, donning the modern disguises of international lending agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, wield their relative financial power over the new and struggling nation to control the teaching and learning activities that unfold in the nation’s classrooms. There is no argument with Bristol’s observation that the postcolonial pedagogy prevailing in modern day Trinidad and Tobago promotes economic dependence, external frames of references, a sharp
divide between teachers and educational administrators, and the presence of
the overseer. Its hidden objective is to ensure continued survival of the planta-
tion system.

Bristol believes that while the colonial chains imprisoning education in
Trinidad and Tobago are strong, they can be broken by redefining education
and reeducating the nation’s educators. Instead of teaching by blindly follow-
ing established techniques, for example, she advocates teaching by praxis, an
approach involving practical experiences which in turn encourages conscious
reflection and meaningful teaching and learning. Central to this alternative
pedagogy, Bristol insists that the nation’s teachers and students must become
attuned to the indigenous culture as an effective mechanism in dismantling
the fixation on the plantation pedagogy. She places so much weight on culture
in education that in her redefinition of an educated person, she depicts the
learner as one “who can act as a cultural critic of his society” (p. 80). Because
she appreciates the fact that the reconstruction of the plantation pedagogy
is an uphill task, she aptly refers to it as an act of resistance or subversive
activity. She also takes the bold step of restating the purpose of education, dis-
missing the self-defeating notion that the purpose of education is to create a
populace fit for the global workforce and declaring that “Teaching is an inten-
tional human activity, the sole purpose of which is to bring about learning”
(p. 83).

The solid dialectic within which the two major themes of Plantation Ped-
agogy are framed rests on extensive research. Bristol is conversant with lead-
ers in educational scholarship such as Henry Giroux, Andy Hargreaves, Paul
Hirst, and John Passmore. She has also drawn on relevant volumes of secondary
sources by such historians as Barry Higman, Carl Campbell, and Eric Williams,
as well as primary documents on education in Trinidad and Tobago, the United
Kingdom, and the United States, which contribute to the book’s global perspec-
tive. And she has taken relevant insights from the literary criticism of writers
such as Derek Walcott and Kenneth Ramchand and conducted interviews with
ten primary school teachers of different ethnic orientations.

One minor flaw in this otherwise well-researched and well-written treatise
is the organization of the material. Themes, such as the subversive activity of
teaching and researching and the need to appreciate local culture, are repeated
in both early and later chapters. Or again, in the first chapter Bristol suggests
some solutions for counteracting plantation pedagogy and then in Chapter 3
goes on to describe its nature and manifestations. These flaws, however, do
not lead to a confusing text. Bristol succeeds in exposing the negative impact
of plantation pedagogy on the educational initiatives to which Trinidad and
Tobago has aspired in its quest for meaningful independence. More impor-
tantly, she points the way forward by offering an alternative pedagogy that is steeped in the local culture of the country.

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