



## Hierarchy and Heterodoxy in a Maze of Color

Slavery has gone. But capitalism remains.

*Gordon K. Lewis, The Growth of the Modern West Indies*

### Precocious Modernity and the Caribbean as Alter-Native

The Caribbean is a region of great and deeply poignant cultural and historical dynamism from which most of the original inhabitants were expelled or exterminated, to be replaced by peoples from what are today Sub-Saharan Africa, India, China, Indonesia, the Near East, and Europe. Compacted into social forms established by the economic enterprises of an expanding European capitalist system based on commerce, these peoples multiplied their social and cultural resources through complex, interactive, polyethnic processes of adaptation, accommodation, and resistance. The region has therefore stood in an awkward relation to anthropology because it has no classically indigenous peoples to study (Horowitz 1971)—ruling out engagement with “native” or “pure” cultures—and because it has been considered neither center nor periphery. Based on “nothing but contact” (Mintz 1974a:ix–xxi), Caribbean societies are inescapably heterogeneous and colonial or postcolonial to their core.<sup>1</sup>

The first colonies were established three centuries before Europeans conquered Africa. Sidney Mintz argues that the “precocious modernity” of the region, as the oldest sphere of European colonialism, must be seen as the most Westernized part of the so-called First World: the First World’s first world (1971a,

1974a, 1977, 1987, 1996a, 1996b, 1998), a line of argumentation inaugurated by the late Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James (1963). The growth of colonial economies based on African slavery, the plantation system, and sugarcane was integral to the rise of European capitalism, introduced into the region within twenty years of its “discovery” in 1492. Mintz observes: “The peoples of the Caribbean are the descendants of those ancestors dragged into European experiments, and of the Europeans who dragged them, at an early point in Western history. Indeed, those peoples and this region mark the moment when the ‘West’ became a conceptual entity—for these were the West’s first genuine overseas colonies” (1974a:xxi). As Édouard Glissant puts it, “the West is not in the West; it is a project, not a place” (1989:2). Trouillot (2003) argues that the place projected as the West is better understood as the North Atlantic, not only because it is more precise but also because it encourages us to remember that the “West” is always a fiction.

Several points regarding the history and development of regional patterns of social organization in relation to political economy are important for my analysis. The swift extirpation of native populations and the early definition of the islands, and bits of the mainland, as a sphere of overseas agricultural capitalism based primarily on sugarcane, African slaves, and the plantation system spurred—and then continued to frame—the development of insular social structures in which local community organization was slight in relative terms, as well as managed by the state. Class stratification was paramount from the beginning. Overseas domination, sharply differentiated access to land, wealth, and political power, and the use of racial differences as status markers and mechanisms of social control sustained these structural arrangements. Massive new foreign populations of diverse origins were successively introduced into the lower sectors of these insular societies under conditions of restricted opportunities for upward mobility. Moreover, the region has generally been characterized by the persistence of colonialism, and of the colonial ambiance, longer than any other area outside Western Europe, and by the relative absence of compelling ideologies of nationalism mediating mass acculturation.

Mintz (1974a:xix) emphasizes that this shared conglomeration of experience did *not* generate cultural homogeneity: “Because Europe itself was not a monolith, consisting instead of contending states, contending churches, contending cultures, contending peoples and classes, the resulting uniformity in the colonial societies of the Caribbean was of a sort that arose more out of the intentions of the conquerors, than out of the content of their cultures” (also see Mintz and Price 1992). By striving to fulfill those intentions, the colonists achieved a uniformity that was more sociological and technological than cultural. Forms

of governance, political and legal order, and commerce resembled one another from society to society because those in power had similar objectives.

The development of plantations to produce commodities for European markets was a vital first step in the history of overseas capitalism. Indeed, the growth of slave-based economies in the New World not only was an integral part of the rise of European commerce and industry, but also was connected with the evolving political economy of labor in Europe (Mintz 1971a, 1974a, 1985b, 1987, 1992, 1996, 1998; Segal 1988, 1989; Solow 1991; Segal and Handler 1992; Handler and Segal 1993). Joseph Inikori (1998) highlights the critical contribution of slavery to the growth of large-scale industrial production in England through the growth of Atlantic commerce. The role of slavery in fueling the development of capitalism itself cannot be underappreciated: unfathomable “surplus value” was violently conjured into being and put magically into circulation.

Slaves demographically dominated the populations of all export-producing regions of tropical America. African slaves and their descendants produced about 75 percent of the total value of American products traded in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Atlantic world, all under the sign of Europe’s Age of Enlightenment. In turn, the growth of England’s reexport trade from 1650 to 1750 laid the foundation for the growth of industrial production in the metropole from the mid-eighteenth century onward. Indeed, the rapidly growing export of local manufactures to the slave-based societies of the Americas was central for accelerating manufacturing in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century England. These processes accompanied the proletarianization of remaining peasant institutions at “home” in the metropole, sustaining considerable population expansion and thus building a domestic market for the products of English industry. Today, countries and territories throughout the region continue to forge a precarious survival dependent upon the export of commodities—sugar, coffee, bauxite, oil—and services—tourism, sex, and tax-free banking. The region is also known for its part in the transshipment of illicit substances (Hagelberg 1985; Stone 1985; Richardson 1992; Fernández 1994; Pattullo 1996; Levitt and Witter 1996; Maurer 1997; Maingot 1998; Sheller 2003; Padilla 2007).

Approximately 12 million Africans were forcibly brought to the New World as chattel slaves (Eltis 1998). The British alone transferred at least 3.1 million slaves across the Atlantic to labor on tropical American plantations (Inikori 1992; Eltis 1995; Richardson and Behrendt 1995; Eltis and Richardson 1997). Based on techniques pioneered by the Dutch in northeastern Brazil, the British West Indian sugar venture began in Barbados in the 1640s and quickly spread throughout the region, especially in competition with French colonial

expansion (Dunn 1972; Sheridan 1974; Higman 2000). Overall, “King Sugar” absorbed 90 percent of all African slaves from the seventeenth century to the 1820s (Eltis and Richardson 1997).

Mintz, viewing slaves as proletarians in disguise, frames the plantation experience as *agro-industrial* in character, which compels us not to be fooled by any misleading rural-urban or temporal distinctions (1953, 1974a, 1974b, 1977, 1985, 1996a, 1996b, 1998). The features of this plantation system—which include monocrop production for export, strong monopolistic tendencies, a rigid and oppressive system of social stratification characterized by a correlation between racial and class hierarchies, and relatively weak community structure—contributed to the shared contours of Caribbean societies and cultures (also see Knight and Palmer 1989; Bolland 1992a; Trouillot 1992a, 1992b; Brereton 1993; Levitt and Witter 1996; R. T. Smith 1996). This system also gave rise to a range of reconstituted peasantries situated on and across the margins of the system, a mode of socioeconomic organization that has existed—even thrived—in tension with plantation domination (see Besson 1992, 1995). Mintz observed, “The relatively highly developed industrial character of the plantation system meant a curious sort of ‘Modernization’ or ‘Westernization’ for the slaves—an aspect of their acculturation in the New World that has too often been missed because of the deceptively rural, agrarian, and pseudo-manorial quality of slave-based plantation production” (1974a:9). That Caribbean peoples have developed the habits and skills required of labor and capital in industrial and postindustrial societies has made them desirable as immigrant workers, undergirding a long tradition of transnational migration and return. They have always been modern, a “modernity that predated the modern” (Mintz 1985b, 1996b, 1998; Richardson 1983, 1989, 1992; Mintz and S. Price 1985; Miller 1994, 1996; R. Smith 1996; Maingot 1998; Trouillot 2003; Scott 2004).

Just as Caribbean peoples experienced slavery from a range of positions, so too did they experience the transition to emancipation and freedom. Though emancipation brought legal freedom to the great majority of Caribbean peoples, it did *not* fundamentally change the grossly unequal distribution of socioeconomic resources and political power (Brereton 1989; Scarano 1989; R. Smith 1992, 1996; Olwig 1995). No longer “protected” as chattel in a paternalistic slave system offering limited customary rights to subsistence and medical care, the newly emancipated were “left to fend for themselves” (Olwig 1995:4) and, therefore, left to be blamed for their “own” future failures. As Olwig observes, “The ability to absorb the contradictions of freedom may well be one of the most important legacies of emancipation for Caribbean societies” (1995:7). Ideologies of liberalism in the postemancipation Caribbean incorporated racist elements,

enabling elites and the socially mobile to maintain recontextualized positions in the postemancipation hierarchy through Anglicization of concepts of achievement, for example (R. Smith 1982).

Antillean society in the postslavery era was dominated by poverty and underdevelopment. Elites dominated the good agricultural land, controlled business enterprise and financial institutions, and populated the professions and top ranks of colonial administration (Williams 1970; Mintz 1974a; Brereton 1989; Turner 1995). Many former slaves continued working on plantations as wage laborers, as full-time resident workers or temporary laborers during busy seasons, supplementing meager earnings from autonomous cultivation (Hall 1978). Some were able to become independent farmers, though underemployment was the norm for the majority. Some former slaves migrated to towns in order to escape low wages and seasonal employment on the plantations and impoverished existence on small peasant plots (Hall 1978; G. Lewis 1985; Stone 1985; Brereton 1989; Knight and Palmer 1989; Scarano 1989). This urbanization became increasingly significant, creating serious problems by the 1930s: towns had fewer jobs than arrivants, and health and housing conditions frequently deteriorated as people crowded into slums and other poor areas.

To mitigate and manipulate difficulties precipitated by emancipation of the slaves, the region's planters and the colonial government resorted to the importation of nominally free laborers from India, China, Indonesia, and Africa under contracts of indenture. Apart from the condition that they had a legally defined term of service and were guaranteed a set wage, indentured servants often were treated similarly to the former slaves they replaced (Brereton 1974, 1989; Knight and Palmer 1989; Look Lai 1993; Khan 1996; Galenson 1998). Between 1838 and 1917, over half a million "East" Indians—from South Asia, that is—came to work on the British West Indian sugar plantations, the majority going to the new sugar producers with fertile lands such as Trinidad, which received about 144,000 indentured migrants. Between 1853 and 1879, more than 14,000 Chinese workers reached the shores of some of the very same territories; Cuba also imported more than 100,000 Chinese between 1847 and 1873 in order to facilitate the transition to free labor. South Asians also went to work on plantations in French Martinique and Guadeloupe as well as Dutch Suriname, with an equivalent number of Javanese joining them in the latter. And between 1841 and 1867, some 32,000 indentured or newly freed Africans also arrived throughout the British West Indies, the greatest number going to Jamaica, British Guiana, and Trinidad.<sup>2</sup>

Indentured labor servitude did not resolve intractable problems of economy and governance, but it did enable plantations to weather the transition from slave labor. Successive migrant streams continued to contribute to regional

dynamism in social, economic, cultural, and ethnic terms in ways partly dependent on the relative numbers and configurations that ended up in each colony and partly on the sociohistorical idiosyncrasies of the local geocultural environment (Elder 1970; Brereton 1974; Trotman 1976, 1986; Brereton and Dookeran 1982; Birbalsingh 1989; Look Lai 1993; Dabydeen and Samaroo 1996).

This labyrinthine dialectic of power and differentiation manifests in relation to the challenges and contradictions of postcolonialism throughout the region as well. Anthony Maingot (1998) characterizes Caribbean societies as “modern-conservative” ones because of their peculiar mixture of political conservatism and radical individualism and skepticism. The Caribbean modern-conservative society is not only capable of social change, but it is also prone to calls or movements for it. Racial ideologies and other legacies of colonialism inhibit universalist approaches to politics in the region, simultaneously producing intense processes of continuity and change (Maingot 1998:443–44). The region is home to the largest global concentration of territories that have voluntarily retained colonial status, reaping the benefits of imperial paternalism while postponing the burdens and responsibilities of independence. As Jamaican political scientist Carl Stone observes, “This compromise between the impulse for sovereignty and a pragmatic sense of economic realism represents an interesting aspect of the complex patterns of ambivalence that underlie the colonial connections in the Caribbean” (1985:14).

The Caribbean, then, is a region in which “tradition” grew directly out of the colonial order (Olwig 1993; Miller 1994) and “modernity predated the modern” (Mintz 1985b, 1996b, 1998; Mintz and S. Price 1985; Scott 2004). Scholars have paid insufficient attention to the Caribbean as “alter-native,” the West’s hidden underbelly and, perhaps, even a crystal ball for the global future (Glissant 1989; Mintz 1996b, 1998; R. Smith 1996; Trouillot 2003).

### From Colonial Backwater to Slave Society in the Southern Caribbean

Trinidad and Tobago did not become an official, twin-island, political entity within the colonial British Empire until 1889, when Tobago first became a ward of Trinidad. This development accelerated the eclipse of Franco-creole power and language, which was more or less complete by World War I. Though Trinidad was never officially French, French West Indian planters, free Coloreds, and patois-speaking Africans and Afro-creoles were central agents in the development of nineteenth-century society in the southern Caribbean, in spite of the fact that Britain had taken the island from Spain without a fight between 1797 and 1802.

Trinidad was a colonial Spanish backwater before the end of the eighteenth