Race and labour, forced and free,
in the formation and evolution of
Caribbean social structures

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Most colonial Caribbean territories after 1650 had slaves, but African slavery was not the whole of the forced labour regime, since it was replaced by Indian indentured labour in the British West Indies after slave emancipation in 1838, when a new sugar frontier was opened in the Southeastern Caribbean, notably in Trinidad and British and Dutch Guiana. Independent Cuba received huge imports of free Spanish labour after 1902, as US capital was applied to virgin sugar land in the east of the island. The cultural history of the Caribbean is bound up with forced labour imports from Africa, India (and China) and free labour imports from Europe – and the cultures (or remnants of the cultures) they brought with them centuries ago – all under the aegis of white planter regimes.

Colour-class, cultural pluralism and differential incorporation

Caribbean social science since World War II has been dominated by two indigenous models (developed by Caribbean-born sociologists and anthropologists) that identify and explain the complexities of the social structure. The first, colour-class, was originally developed by Fernando Henriques for Jamaica (1953) and Lloyd Braithwaite (1953) for the Creole segment in Trinidad and Tobago (but omitting the East Indian component) and, by extrapolation, was also applied to the British Windward and Leeward Islands (Lowenthal 1972).

These analyses had the advantage of linking Caribbean stratification to occupational/class systems in the US and Europe, while pointing to a colonial history of colour differentiation which shadowed class and reinforced it. So, the upper class was white or pass-as-white, the middle class brown with some black, and the lower class black with some brown. A number of racially or ethnically distinct groups fell originally outside this colour-class stratification, but had, over time, been accommodated within it: Jews were absorbed into the upper class, as were the Syrian professionals; Chinese, the remaining Syrians and a few East Indians were middle class; and the majority of East Indians were lower class (Lowenthal 1972).

Ideas about cultural difference were, in the 1950s, woven by M.G. Smith (like Henriques, a Jamaican-born, British-trained anthropologist) into the theory of cultural pluralism and the plural society (Smith 1955, 1960). Drawing on the ideas of Furnivall (1948), a British administrator in South-East Asia, Smith’s summary volume on pluralism in the British West Indies (1965)
concluded that the colonies were characterized by many cultures, assembled and ranked by colonial design. Standing at the apex of this system was European culture, with the culture of the black, formerly enslaved, population, who had lost most, but not all, of their African heritage, as the polar opposite. Between these cultural complexes was the culture of the middle-class browns and upwardly mobile blacks, who drew on elements of each of the other two cultures (Smith 1965).

What were the ingredients of these cultures? Smith argued that the basis of culture resided in the institutions that all groups needed to perform socially, and that pluralism occurs where ‘there is formal diversity in the basic system of compulsory institutions’ – kinship, education, religion, property, economy and recreation (Smith 1965: 85). According to his view, lower-class Jamaican culture is different (but not deviant – as the middle class often sees it) from that of the middle and upper classes. However, Smith failed to explore the extent to which education, property and economy could be seen as dimensions of class, and, in the Caribbean context, preferred to interpret property and economy as plantation and peasantry (namely, different modes of production).

Approaching culture in a relativistic way, Smith assumed that those whose institutional practices were most different would interact least well; he therefore associated pluralism with the distinction between, say, Christianity and Islam, or, in the case of Jamaica, between Christianity and Afro-Christianity – the latter comprising a creolized and syncretic set of religious sects and cults. However, recent research, drawing on evidence from Northern Ireland (Doherty and Poole 1997), for example, emphasizes that differences between branches of the same religion (in this instance Catholicism and Protestantism) may be socially constructed to be intensely divisive in terms of citizens’ rights (Kymlicka 1997).

During slavery in the British Caribbean three social sections were framed by socio-legal boundaries, depicting citizens, freemen and slaves – modally white, brown and black (Smith 1974). After slavery, and prior to adult suffrage in 1944, franchise distinctions based on income and property (class) – not race nor culture – framed three categories that resembled the legal estates of slavery: those who could be voted for (white and brown), those who could vote (white, brown and a black minority) and those who could not vote (the black majority, but including some who were brown). So, legal and political capacity turned cultural pluralism into structural pluralism, involving differentially incorporated and ranked cultures – the plural society par excellence according to Smith (1984, 1991, 1998). In this quintessential colonial polity, the white minority dominated the majority by non-democratic means, and relied heavily on force – or the threat of force – to maintain the unstable status quo.

Nonetheless, in my fieldwork on Kingston in 1961, at the end of 16 years of Jamaican constitutional decolonization, predicated on adult suffrage, I realized that class, colour and culture were closely correlated in the city, and together produced three social strata associated with different geographical locations, anchored by competitive bidding for real estate (Clarke 1975). I also showed that cultural difference based on education, religion and family/household composition, while crucially important and derived from differences originally created during the slave period, was insufficient to displace colour-class as an analytical framework, provided that cultural and structural pluralism were taken into account.

**A typology of Caribbean societies**

Combining my knowledge of the social history of the region with the various competing models that seek to explain society, I conceive of Caribbean societies as divisible into four broad types (Clarke1991; Lowenthal 1972): (1) plural stratified, where colour-class and cultural
distinctions have largely coincided; (2) plural segmented, where (white, brown and black) Creole and non-Creole segments are contraposed; (3) class stratified, where occupational class predominates and other differentiators are recessive; and (4) folk, which lack stratification. Plural-stratified societies were formed during plantation slavery; plural-segmented societies were originally plural stratified, but received masses of Indian indentured labourers or Mexican immigrants from the Yucatan in the nineteenth century; class-stratified societies were a creation of the twentieth century (after weak development with slavery on the small scale), and developed with free plantation labour, most of it white; folk societies were tiny insular appendages of larger colonies during slavery, and were often marginal for sugar production.

I argue that Braithwaite and Henriques’ colour-class model and Smith’s ideas about pluralism and differential incorporation provide crucial insights into the first two societal types; notions of class – whether following Parsons (1952) or Weber (1947) – in the absence of colour-class stratifications, are central to the third; and social consensus (Parsons 1952) fits the fourth – although their social histories are usually closely aligned to the lower stratum of the plural-stratified societies. These are, however, only best-fit solutions, and to be comprehensive it is important to point out that cultural pluralism may have a residual part to play in explaining Afro-Christian santería in class-stratified societies once influenced by slavery; and that class structures are usually crucial frameworks, especially where the colour dimension of colonial colour-class may have worn thin – as it has in Jamaica.

Each category in the typology is divisible into two sub-types (Clarke 1991; Lowenthal 1972): those societies listed under (a) are the commonest variant, while those listed under (b) are racial or colour variants on the class or cultural structures that appear in (a). Plural-stratified societies (1) include those within the full stratificational range – (a) Jamaica, Barbados, the Commonwealth Leeward Islands and the French and Netherlands Antilles; and those that have had that social range truncated by the loss of white elites, for example (b) Haiti, French Guiana and the Windward Islands. Plural-segmented societies (2) encompass those with Creole-Indian contrasts, (a) Trinidad, Guyana (formerly British Guiana) and Suriname (formerly Dutch Guiana), or (b) Creole-Mestizo differences as in Belize.

Class-stratified societies include those that are essentially white, but with a partial colour-class correlation – (a) (Cuba and Puerto Rico); and a society that has a miscegenated class stratification but with white-black polarization at the apex and base of the social pyramid, respectively, namely (b) (Dominican Republic). Finally, folk societies are tiny non-stratified communities with a weak resource base; either they have no major colour differences (a) Barbuda, black, and Saba, white, or they are colour differentiated (b) – Desirade, white-black, and Anguilla, brown-black (Clarke 1991).

Historically, the plural-stratified society has been key to the evolution of Caribbean social structures. Jamaica during slavery, for example, represented a classic plural society that in its origins involved ranked cultural sections, legally enshrined and largely correlated with colour and class. Haiti, Barbados and the British and French Lesser Antilles were replicas. Slave emancipation, through slave revolt, took place in Haiti in the mid-1790s, in the British Caribbean in 1838, in the French Antilles in 1848 and in the Dutch colonies over the period 1862–73, in each of the last three cases by legislative act of the imperial regime. Most other types of Caribbean society may be related to the plural-stratified Jamaican type, either as truncations or as demographic expansions of the social pyramid.

Plural-segmented societies were weakly developed as slave societies because they were neither British nor French in the eighteenth century, compared to the two great slave societies of the Western Hemisphere – Saint Domingue/Haiti (independent 1804) and Jamaica, with the
Figure 14.1 A typology of Caribbean societies

1a Plural stratified with whites
1b Plural stratified without whites
2a Plural segmented: Creole-Indian
2b Plural segmented: Creole-Mestizo
3a Class stratified: white, but with colour-class correlation
3b Class stratified: miscegenated
4 Folk societies with or without colour differences
greatest output in the world of sugar and coffee before and after 1800, respectively. Moreover, plural-segmented societies had an abundance of potential plantation land when the slave trade in the British Empire was abolished in 1808. So, once Trinidad and British Guiana were transferred to the UK in 1815, a late phase of sugar cultivation was entered using East Indian indentured labour exported through Calcutta.

The Indian communities that stayed in Trinidad, British Guiana and Dutch Guiana were so large in number that they stood outside the pre-existing social stratifications, and did not penetrate them as did their demographically smaller equivalents in Jamaica. Belize is a special case: it developed as a logwood (dyewood)-cutting enclave in Central America, and its black slaves were urban-based lumbermen, not rural cane cutters. Segmentation was reflected in urban-based, English-creole-speaking blacks and rural Spanish-speaking Mestizos and Amerindians, though some East Indians were imported later (Lowenthal 1972).

The white class-stratified Spanish colonies with their port-havens, Havana and San Juan, played a supportive role to Spanish commercial activity on the mainland until Spanish decolonization of mainland Latin America in the 1820s. Sugar plantations, based on slave and free labour, had been re-introduced to Cuba during the brief British occupation in the late eighteenth century, and were expanded by the Spanish in the early 1800s, but the proportion of the labour force that was enslaved declined from 43 to 28 per cent between 1841 and 1860, and slavery was abolished in 1886 (almost 50 years after the British Caribbean) (Knight 1970). In Puerto Rico, where tobacco and subsistence farming dominated the rural scene, slaves accounted for fewer than 12 per cent of the population in 1846, when they were most numerous, and the proportion had shrunk to well under 10 per cent before emancipation in 1873. The Dominican Republic remained detached from these circumstances, though free-labour plantations were created by US capital, using mostly local (including Haitian) labour, after 1875 (Moreno Fraginals et al. 1985).

Consequently, Cuba was a plural-stratified society in 1840, with free whites and enslaved blacks in almost equal proportions, separated by free coloureds. Yet by 1920, the modest increase of blacks and browns in contrast to the enormous influx of white labourers (750,000 arrived from Spain between 1900 and 1920 when the total population barely exceeded 2 million) had transformed Cuba into a class-based society in which browns and blacks were accorded middle- and lower-class status, respectively, but were outnumbered by whites in each class – and especially so in the elite (Clarke 1991). Similar shifts towards a white majority were recorded in Puerto Rico, where miscegenation and the gradual social incorporation of light mulattoes into the white population (as pass-as whites), as in Cuba, have played a part in the reduction of the black presence (Hoetink 1985). In the Dominican Republic, however, whites and blacks (though fortified by black immigration from Haiti) form only small minorities, and race mixing has produced a mulatto majority (Howard 2001).

**Race, colour, legal estate and culture during slavery**

To understand the origins and development of the plural-stratified societies, which I have argued are key to the evolution of all Caribbean societies, it is necessary to examine social conditions during the foundation period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Caribbean developed as a colonial appendage of Europe after Columbus’ first voyage of discovery in 1492. Decimation of the Amerindians under Spanish control in the sixteenth century created a green-field site for sugar cultivation on plantations in the seventeenth, but without an indigenous labour force to call upon. The islands of the Caribbean were ideal environments for the control of potentially rebellious black slave labourers recruited
from Africa by European planters, who themselves originated in Britain, France and the Netherlands.

From the 1650s plantation slavery spread through the central belt of the Caribbean from Barbados, as each colony in turn took up sugar as its staple crop for export to Europe (Richardson 1992). There was no history of a class structure without an accompanying racial hierarchy of white over black, and with miscegenation between white planters and female black slaves – there were few white women in the region – a new category of coloured people started to emerge. During the first half of the eighteenth century they began to form a class of themselves, and those who were the children of men who could afford to free their offspring became the core of an emancipated group known as the free people of colour (Clarke 1975; Lowenthal 1972).

The free people of colour were not the product of the mode of production, but of the mode of reproduction. The social structure was thus composed of three legal estates: whites with full civil rights, black slaves with virtually no rights in law, and fewer in practice, and an interstitial group of coloured people, of various phenotypes ranging from light brown to black, who were not slaves, but had only limited civil rights – they could neither hold public office nor vote (Clarke 1975). Out of this socio-legal colour system evolved the colour-class structures that seized the attention of Henriques and Braithwaite, the first social scientists to study them in the Caribbean post World War II.

The three legal estates also displayed distinctive sets of cultural characteristics in family and religion. Upper-class whites usually wed, provided white women were available, and formed nuclear, male-dominated authoritarian households. The slave household was likely to be female headed, since the slave owners had no compunction about breaking up domestic units imported from Africa or formed in the Caribbean. Among the free people of colour there were few examples of endogamy, since young women were rapidly made appendages of upper-class white men, and free men of colour engaged the favours of black or brown slave women as mistresses (Clarke 1975).

Dominant Christian religions were imported into the Caribbean from metropolitan societies – Catholicism in the case of the Spanish and French colonies and Protestantism in the case of the British and Dutch. In the Catholic societies slaves were treated as beings with souls, and the plantation regime was theoretically less burdensome than in the Protestant colonies, where slaves were beyond the human pale. In reality, however, all plantation regimes at their economic peak, whether French or British, were equally inhumane, and the religions of the three social estates were distinct (Goveia 1970). Whites were nominal members of the established metropolitan religions (Catholicism and Protestantism), but led a brutalized and debauched life in keeping with their ownership of human lives. In the British islands free people of colour were abandoned by Anglicanism, and by the early 1800s were ripe for conversion to metropolitan Methodism and other non-conformist churches.

However, wherever there were slaves, syncretized Afro-Caribbean religions were created among those blacks who were deemed non-humans or, at best, lowly humans. These non-orthodox, creolized religious forms had many names – vodun (Haiti), santería (Cuba, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico) (Moret 2008; Nicholls 1996; Palmié 2002; Scott 1985), but their core characteristics were similar to those of the Afro-Christian cults of the Protestant Caribbean (Simpson 1956). All cults syncretized African and Christian beliefs and amalgamated every-day life and the afterlife, and rituals involved ecstatic behaviour in which the spirit world was accessed by the participants. Once non-conformist missionaries entered the British West Indies after 1800, the slaves and their freed descendants began to be proselytized, only for them to turn away from orthodox Christianity and to re-embrace Afro-Christianity (Clarke 1975).
Ethnicity and religion in the post-emancipation period

After slave emancipation in the British Caribbean between 1834 and 1838, new ethnic groups were introduced to the region, at first to make good the shortage of labour – especially, but not solely, in the sugar frontier areas of the South-East Caribbean (Trinidad, British Guiana and Dutch Guiana). The first indentured labourers were Chinese, but they rapidly gravitated into the grocery trade, and Indians, known in the Caribbean as East Indians, soon became the staple of indentured immigration. Many Chinese quickly converted to Christianity, but most East Indians, where they formed large demographic components, retained ancestral commitments to Hinduism and Islam, though some Hindus converted to Catholicism or Canadian (Mission) Presbyterianism (Clarke 1986). In British Guiana, East Indians eventually became the majority of the population, but in both Trinidad and Dutch Guiana they formed large minority segments standing outside the Creole colour-class stratification of whites, browns and blacks (Richardson 1992).

In the late nineteenth century, Syrians entered the Caribbean as traders, emulating the Jews of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In Jamaica in the 1950s, for example, three ethnic minorities – Jews, Syrians and Chinese – all using various branches of trade, occupied status gap positions between the two upper social strata, and had converted to the elite religions of Roman Catholicism or Anglicanism. Their upward mobility over time was contrasted with the lowly position of the ethnic groups descended from runaway slaves (such as the Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana and the Maroons of Jamaica); the Javanese ex-indentured labourers in Dutch Guiana; and the Amerindians (where they survived in Guiana and as a miscegenated group in Dominica). The descendants of the runaways and the Amerindians, despite their long histories in the Caribbean stretching back to slavery or beyond, could be thought of, with the newer Javanese, as outcast groups (Lowenthal 1972).

Conclusion

The way in which Caribbean societies were associated (or not) historically with slavery, indenture and free labour creates the significance of the cultural difference in social stratification/segmentation. Smith’s notion of differential incorporation is crucial, because where strata or segments were distinguished into white citizens, free people of colour and black slaves, as they were in the English and French-speaking colonies (and, in the case of Trinidad, British Guiana and Dutch Guiana, into an Indian indentured segment), the cultural differences that accompanied the politico-legal framework were totally different from situations where African plantation slavery played no part in the evolution of the colony/country and miscegenation was the norm (exemplified by the Dominican Republic), or where African forced labour was superseded by white, free plantation labour (as in Cuba and Puerto Rico). Hence the focus of this chapter on the Commonwealth Caribbean, which exemplifies the extreme inequalities associated with plural-stratified and plural-segmented societies.

Smith saw plural societies, where a minority (white) ruled the majority (black, or black and Indian) undemocratically, as inherently unstable and controllable only by force (as in Jamaica and Guyana from slavery to the beginning of decolonization after the containment of the labour rebellion of 1938). The constitutional evolution of Commonwealth Caribbean colonies to independence since 1960 has removed this condition de jure through citizens’ universal incorporation in sovereign states. Yet Guyana’s post-independence history of black Creole hegemony (1964–92), based on electoral gerrymandering by the minority segment, shows that this condition is not settled for all time. Vigilance is required to sustain the elimination of differential
incorporation de facto in the Caribbean, and especially so where Creole-Indian contraposition is endemic, and Hinduism provides an outstanding example of religious pluralism – and ethnicity.

References