



WEST INDIAN PARADOXES

JEAN-PAUL REVAUGER

Université Bordeaux III

The point made in this paper is that the dynamics leading to change in the Caribbean had little to do with nationalism or the recognition of national identities, but were inherently social. The demands for decent living standards and basic rights, and in some cases their political construction within the framework of socialism dominated the 1920s and 1930s. After 1945, Britain's desire to leave the region gradually modified the stakes, and social movements assumed a different dimension, since federation and independence offered new opportunities. Three countries are examined: Barbados, Trinidad and Guyana. The first one is usually seen as a success story, the second one as enjoying a rather lively existence, and the third one has just recovered from a disastrous decolonisation, totally dominated by the cold war.

National identity, a problematic concept in the Caribbean

The situation of the English-speaking Caribbean was markedly different from that of other colonies. The population had been imported from different parts of Europe, Africa and India over the centuries in order to service the plantation economy. African slaves had been brought from a variety of regions. Their original languages had been largely forgotten, and replaced by several linguistic combinations, including English, in some islands, French, and African elements. Families had been de-structured, as well as social hierarchies and tribal or regional allegiances. Creeds, religions, cultural practices and customs survived, but in a fragmented form. There was indeed no collective national identity, even among black West Indians, apart from the common consciousness of ruthless exploitation, racial domination, and the denial of basic rights. This was compounded by the fact the population of the West Indies was not limited to Black Africans, but also included a number of whites, in some islands a large number of mulattoes,

and in two of the major territories, a significant Indian population. Some of those whites did not associate with the planters class, but joined the movement for social emancipation, such as Captain Cipriani in Trinidad.

Indians had been brought in the 19th century, as indentured labourers, to replace slave labour in the plantations after the abolition of slavery. In British Guyana they represented over 50% of the population and, in Trinidad, 40%, not including mixed-race Trinidadians, many of whom had a measure of Indian blood [YELVINGTON]. In Jamaica, the Indians were a minority, and there were none in Barbados. Indians had a very different approach to identity than Blacks. They had not been cut off from their linguistic roots, they practiced Hinduism or Islam and soon established extremely strong family structures, buttressed by elaborate matrimonial strategies. Indians, in the interwar years, did not constitute the thriving business community they represent today. Most of them were poor, unqualified, disenfranchised sugar-cane cutters, often living far away from the centers of power in the capital cities. In terms of identity, they might have seen themselves as subjects of the Empire, who happened to live in a corner of the Caribbean, but their sense of Indianness was also very strong.

Mulattoes were to be found mostly in countries where Britain had not been the sole colonising power. In Barbados, which was solely colonised by Britain, there were no intermarriages or informal relationships between blacks and whites, whereas in Trinidad, successively colonised by Spain, France and Britain, 20% of the population was of mixed origins: Spaniards and French colonists had no qualms about crossing the racial divide when it came to sex, and/or love, contrary to the British. The identity of mulattoes is notoriously flexible. In the French West Indies, they were envied by Blacks, and treated as go-betweens by planters, both economically and politically, but they pioneered the movement for equality [NICOLAS : I, 185]. In Trinidad and Jamaica, they were extremely active in politics, and in the movement for social emancipation. Needless to say, race or “national identity” were not central in their commitment, since they could identify to several categories, and did not fit in a single pigeon hole.

The relationship to the “mother country”, as colonial powers were then called was distinct from that to the local planters, who were clearly identified as former slave owners, and as a tightly-knit group of exploiters. Social unrest and protests against exploitation were frequent in the 19th

century, and led Britain to take over directly the administration of the Caribbean colonies, which became Crown colonies, and to abolish the "Charters" which entrusted the islands to a legislative assembly made up of planters. This was the case everywhere except in Barbados. Direct rule by Britain was clearly less oppressive than rule by the local planters' class [DOOKHAN].

From this situation derives the fact that protest movements and claims, in the inter war period, were not expressed under the form of "national sovereignty" or "home rule" or "local control for domestic affairs". The essential problem was social, and not national. The only movement rooted in identity politics, bearing an indirect relationship with sovereignty and nationalism was Marcus Garvey's pan Africanism in Jamaica. This was based on race, and the myth of a return to "mother Africa" [GRANT]. Apart from this movement, the "mother country" was not the enemy. Political franchise was certainly demanded, but in terms which were not dissimilar to what Britain had known during the Chartists' campaigns a century before. In a similar context, the French Caribbean demanded and obtained in 1946 full citizenship rights, political and social equality. Independence or home rule were not on the agenda of the rather muscular movement for emancipation in 1945¹.

The issue of "home rule" was not central in the British West Indies, and blacks were certainly not prepared to support an increase in the degree of control local whites exerted over the islands. This explains why, in spite of the ministrations of the Anglo American Caribbean Commission, in spite of Britain's support for a "federation", which, rationally was the obvious pathway towards meaningful independence and development the British proposal met with little enthusiasm. The Caribbean today is still struggling to survive and overcome the tragic mistake of 1962, heal its political divisions, and allow micro states to build up their capacity and relate to international forums.

¹ Le combat pour la départementalisation fut mené en particulier par Aimé Césaire, à l'époque élu communiste. Elle fut accordée dans l'élan démocratique de l'après-guerre. Toutefois, les droits sociaux ne furent accordés sur la même base qu'en France que progressivement, ce qui généra beaucoup de frustrations.

Independence comes to Little England

The interwar years were mostly oriented towards social protest, and culminated with the “mother country” at long last keeping its promises, and committing itself to social and political reform – not “decolonisation”. Most of the leaders who became prominent in the 1950s, and to whom Britain entrusted the stewardship of the Caribbean, when it decided to leave the region, were politically trained in the Labour movement, in social protests, or as lawyers servicing the trade unions. They were all part of an emerging middle class, and were all students either in Britain or in the United States at some point in their careers. In Barbados, the two prominent leaders were Errol Barrow and Grantley Adams. Errol Barrow became prominent during the war as an effective young pilot for the RAF, studied law at the LSE, and entered politics as a Labour candidate in 1950 in Barbados, only to leave the party for the slightly more radical Democratic Labour Party. Grantley Adams, a much older man, trained at Oxford, had indeed founded the Labour Party in Barbados in 1938, then chaired the Barbados Workers Union until 1954, the confederation of Trade Unions in Barbados, a quasi replica of the TUC. They were certainly the most prominent politicians and leaders available when the federation and independence befell the island. By no standards could they be seen as nationalists in the ideological sense of the word. Nor did they dabble in “identity politics” like Marcus Garvey.

Indeed, the nickname of Barbados is “Little England”. This is not to say problems were not serious. The gradual decline of the sugar industry, since the 19th century had not been compensated by new activities, Barbados being a flat island with a dry climate, the option of banana plantations, adopted in the French West Indies from the 1930s, could not be contemplated. In spite of new links with Canada, the economy was not buoyant, incomes were extremely modest, and public expenditure was maintained at the lowest possible level. The riots of 1937 left 14 dead in the streets of Bridgetown. The reforms advocated by the Moyne Commission could easily be considered as an agenda for social development – not Home Rule. They included a welfare fund of £1M per year for 20 years, universal suffrage, legalising Trade Union pickets, a wages board, a workmen’s compensation scheme, the clearing of slums, public housing, preventative medicine, economic diversification and a public education program including teacher training. The main step taken during the war was suffrage, which was extended to women, and remained

restricted to rate payers, but with lower requirements. All this had little to do with sovereignty, but owed a lot to the demands of the Labour Movement in Britain.

After the demise of the Federation, Barbados became independent in 1966, and was ruled for ten years by Errol Barrow's Party, until 1976, when Grantley Adams's son, Tom Adams, won the elections and became Premier. Barbados enjoyed democratic procedures and stability. It followed a rather enlightened path, diversified its economy thanks to tourism, and joined Carifta, the first attempt at creating a Common Market among former British colonies, after the demise of the FWI. Barbados embraced liberalism with enthusiasm, and felt at home in the English speaking world. It had no axe to grind vis-à-vis the USA, Britain or Canada. Its emphasis on offshore banking proved rather problematic, since Barbados condoned procedures designed for tax evasion and was threatened with expulsion from the OECD at some point. As a result of this, a measure of regulation was introduced. However, the leap from the status of an impoverished, unprofitable colony which was a burden for its coloniser to that of an acceptable international tax haven and a favourite destination for upper-class tourism is impressive. It is roughly on a par with Martinique in terms of GDP per head.

Trinidad: red flag over the oil fields

A somewhat similar story would apply to Trinidad [WILLIAMS]. The 1930s were dominated by an emerging socialist movement led by Captain Cipriani. He was one of the organisers of the dockers' strike in 1919, and founded a political organisation which soon became the local branch of the Labour Party. Of Corsican descent, he devoted his life to Labour politics, became a councillor in Port of Spain, and remained in office for twenty years. One of his followers, Uriah Butler, was a forceful speaker who concentrated on the emerging multicultural Labour movement in the oil fields of San Fernando, south of the capital city. His audiences were carried away to such an extent that a policeman who attempted to arrest him, during a public meeting was killed on the spot by the crowd. Butler went into hiding, and became even more of a hero. The Oil Workers Union became one of the most radical and militant Trade Unions in the region, and joined the World Federation of Trade Unions, dominated by the Communists. Butler created his own party after the war, called the British

Empire Workers, Peasants and Rate Payers' Union, a far cry from identity politics or nationalist approaches. Eric Williams, who belonged to a much younger generation, had more of an academic and administrative career. He defended a PhD in history at Oxford, focusing on the economic determinisms which led to the abolition of slavery. Although he made no official allegiance to Marxism, he was clearly influenced by the idea that ideological superstructures are derived from the economic infrastructure and class relationships. He was involved in the Anglo-Caribbean Commission which, during and after the war, drafted blueprints for the future of the Caribbean, and prepared the 1948 Montego Bay conference which aired the idea of a federation. Indeed, Williams seized the opportunity offered by Britain's desire to pull out of the region in order to appear in the limelight. He withdrew from the commission and embarked in an exercise in informal lecturing in a public park, just in front of Trinidad's legislature, and formed his own party. The idea of independence was certainly not on the agenda, but the British proposal for a federation was not met with enthusiasm by the larger islands, which feared the cost of maintaining the smaller, poorer islands. They certainly did not want to shoulder the administrative costs of the Empire which Britain shunned. If the white man no longer wanted to carry his burden, why should the black man succeed him? Besides, the federations which had been envisaged in Eastern Africa and around Rhodesia were designed to perpetuate white rule, and had been resisted by Africans. The lack of support for the federation in Jamaica only created an opportunity for Trinidad to refuse it as well, and the country became independent as a matter of course in 1962. However, labeling Williams "the father of the nation" is an overstatement. Independence was more of a windfall than the outcome of a struggle. Among the Pantheon of decolonisation a famous diasporic figure from Trinidad is also to be found. CLR James, the writer, journalist and life-long militant socialist, was probably one the least patriotic or nationalist characters one could imagine. He was prominent in the international Trotskyist movement, one of the least nationalist currents of the socialist family [WORCESTER; DHONDY]. He even created his own faction, the "Johnson Forrest tendency" with a few friends, and focused on the need to address the plight of American Blacks in a specific manner, since they were largely isolated and disenfranchised. He carried his internationalism to the point of refusing to support the American and British involvement in World War II, on the grounds that class barriers were more important than national oppositions. After a period of collaboration with Williams, he fell foul with

him, and became a fierce critic of post-independence policies. Trinidad was therefore a hotbed of social radicalism and socialist agitation, not a spring board for nationalist currents. The existence of a racial divide between Blacks and Indians, which is still a feature of the island, certainly made the assertion of a specific national identity problematic, although this became the official line.

Trinidad became independent in 1962 immediately after the collapse of the federation, but also in the year Britain modified the rules for immigrants [ROBINSON]. The ties were becoming much looser. Industrial relations and the social question remained problematic for another twenty years. In spite of the nationalisation of Shell (1968), economic power remained in the hands of international companies. Tate & Lyle, of sugar fame, was by far the largest landowner. Wages in the oil sector remained very low until the 1970s. CLR James created his own party, and was arrested. In 1968, US Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael, who had left Trinidad at age 11, was not allowed to land to give a lecture. Eventually, an attempted coup, in 1970, failed, in spite of the combined discontents of young army officers, black power militants, radical trade unionists and oil workers. The rise in oil prices gave the government some leeway, but relations remained difficult and distrust widespread, in spite of the glossy brochures on the carnival and the speeches in praise of multiculturalism.

In the throes of the Cold War: British Guiana

British Guiana, subsequently known as Guyana, is usually considered as part of the Caribbean, as is the case of former Dutch Guyana, now Surinam, and French Guyane. However, it stands apart in more respects than one: the size of its territory, its rich mineral resources including bauxite, and the fact that the majority of the population was not black, but Indian. The decolonisation of Guiana is one of the least successful ones: the rule of law was flouted by the "mother country" in the name of the global struggle against Communism, communitarian violence was encouraged, and the leader supported by Britain, Forbes Burnham, turned in fact into an extremely controversial figure, who imposed a dictatorship on the country and a disastrous policy of economic autarky. Living standards fell to a level well below that of the rest of the Anglophone Caribbean. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that Burnham, who was deemed less of a liability

than the majority leader Chedi Jagan, whose wife had been a member of the CPUSA, came to adopt Marxist language and dogmas. Britain prevented a suspected socialist, in the English sense of the word, from leading the country into independence, only to entrust Guyana to a weird regime, using Marxist slogans and closed to the rest of the world.

Guiana's march to independence was completely determined by the cold war. Cheddi Jagan, whose training had been essentially political in the context of Black radical academia in the USA, was the unopposed leader of the People's Progressive Party. The PPP won 18 seats out of 24 during the general elections of 1953, and Jagan became the Prime Minister – for 4 months. Guiana had been granted a more advanced constitution than other countries of the Caribbean, after a report, published under the Attlee government by the Waddington Commission. All English-speaking adults were given the right to vote, but the governor would retain extensive rights, including the suspension of the constitution. The commission had acknowledged the racial divide between Blacks, who controlled the administration, and Indians, most of whom lived in rural areas, and had at the time an inferior status, but it encouraged participation of Indians to politics. The Churchill government became gradually more worried about Jagan's alleged links with the Soviets. The British governor on the ground, Savage, did not recommend action, but intensive lobbying by the local sugar industry took place at the Colonial Office, which favoured a muscular approach. On October 9th, 1953, British troops took control of Georgetown, the governor suspended the constitution and demoted Jagan, after 133 days as premier. The United States had not been directly involved in the operation, or indeed informed by Churchill, although the AFL CIO had, for a few years, supported a "company union" in the sugar industry, which the PPP considered as a bosses' union. This indirect role, familiar to Europeans, remained the main mode of operation. This direct and rather brutal approach certainly testifies to the persistence of old ideas and methods within the British Government, as became clear in 1956 with the intervention in Egypt [ST PIERRE].

Until 1956, British military presence was not controversial within the British government. The authorities were actively engaged in splitting the PPP on ethnic lines, and succeeded in 1958. Forbes Burnham created his own group, mostly on ethnic black African lines, but Cheddi Jagan remained popular, and increased his international standing. He was invited by N'Krumah to

celebrate the independence of Ghana. In the wake of the Suez debacle, Britain's position changed. The heavy-handed approach was seen as a mistake, and new elections were organised in 1957. Jagan won 9 seats, out of 14, Forbes Burham 3. Jagan became Chief Minister and remained so for three years.

However, the US Administration became increasingly concerned about the influence of suspected Communists in Guiana. Concern about Soviet advance in the conquest of space after the launching of the Sputnik in 1957 was compounded by Cuba's gradual appeals to Soviet support, after the 1960 Soviet trade fair in Havana. In 1960 a constitutional conference chaired by Ian Macleod concluded that elections would be held in 1961, on the basis of the first-past-the-post system, and the government resulting from them would run internal affairs, and probably lead Guiana to independence.

British and American views therefore diverged significantly after 1960, since Britain was markedly less worried than the United States about Jagan, who visited Cuba in April 1960, 3 months after the Soviet trade fair, not aware of this. By mid-August 1960, the United States was intervening directly and financing anti-communist groupings in Guiana. According to Ian Macleod's biographer, the following exchange took place between Macleod and Kennedy: "Mr President", asked Macleod, "Do I understand that you want us to go as quickly as possible towards independence everywhere else in the world, but not on your doorstep in British Guiana?" According to Macleod, Kennedy laughed and he responded "That's 's just about it" [SHEPHERD : 239].

The 1961 elections gave the PPP 20 out of 35 seats. Forbes Burham's group won 11 and a Catholic conservative organisation obtained 4. In spite of Jagan's visit to Washington DC in October 1961, the decision to destabilise him was taken. Bombs went off in February 1962, Georgetown was set ablaze and black gangs terrorised Indians while the police, mostly black Africans, stood by. 5 were killed. Dean Rusk, US Secretary of State, intervened directly with Douglas Home "writing that "the US would not put up with an independent British Guiana under Jagan" [GABE : 93]. Relations between the United States and Britain were strained on this particular issue. Macleod was probably much closer to the truth than the Americans when he described Jagan as a "naïve London School of Economics Marxist, filled with charm, personal honesty and juvenile nationalism" [GABE : 94]. This was

months after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, a few months ahead of the Cuban missiles crisis, and the United States were not amused. They were prepared to resort to any extremes rather than risk another Cuba in the Caribbean. They reacted exactly in the same way in 1983, with the invasion of Grenada. In May 1962, Macmillan wrote to Kennedy, accepting to postpone independence, against the best advice of British officials on the ground. Britain committed itself to hold new elections on the basis of proportional representation, allegedly in order to acknowledge the ethnic division of the country between blacks and Indians. This met a demand of Forbes Burnham's, party but only reinforced ethnic strife. Strikes and race riots broke out in 1963. The riots claimed 200 lives and made thousand homeless. One author claims this was the case for 13,000 individuals [GABE : 126].

In December 1964, the elections gave Jagan's PPP the largest group, but no absolute majority². A coalition was formed, excluding the PPP. This was not technically inconceivable from a constitutional point of view. Even though the PPP was the largest party, its electoral support had been eroded, and the goals of the US services had been reached. British observers conclude that the 1964 election abided by democratic procedures.

Guyana became an independent country in 1966, the regime became increasingly authoritarian. The 1968 elections allowed the marginalisation of Burnham's conservative Christian allies. Accounts amount to clear indictments of the regime, and Burnham's critics allege the vote was clearly rigged [GABE : 159], much to the embarrassment of the United States. Burnham ruled the country until his death in 1985, and his regime survived until 1992. Intimidation and oppression of Indians became the rule. Gangs of black youths were allowed to rob, rape and murder Indians without any interference from the police or paramilitary militias. A black historian who challenged Burnham, Walter Rodney, was murdered in 1980. 80% of the economy was nationalised, and it collapsed in the 1970s, bringing about a serious fall in living standards and a flow of emigration. A system of import substitutions was put in place, since the country could no longer afford imports. By the mid 1970s Burnham had established good relations with

² The PPP obtained 45.8% of the vote, or 24 seats out of 53. 40.54% of the vote and 22 seats went to Forbes Burnham's party, and 12.4% of votes, and 7 seats to the conservative group.

Cuba and the USSR. The only reason why the United States did not intervene against him was the fact that Jagan, the official opposition, had become critical of the West and was also openly aligned on the Soviet Union.

By 1990, at the end of the cold war, the production of bauxite and electricity was down to 50% of its level in 1970 and poverty was widespread. Emotional accounts of survival in such dire circumstances, and of the resilience of ordinary Guyanese people are very moving. There are some similarities between the fate of Guyana and that of Haiti, whose status as two of the poorest countries in the Northern hemisphere is largely due to incompetent management. Both countries, in spite of their poverty, have produced a stream of extremely articulate intellectuals and artists, most of them part of the diaspora. Sir Shridath Ramphal, Secretary of the Commonwealth in the 1970s and 1980s, and Trevor Philips, head of the British Equality and Human Rights Commission, are both Guyanese.

Under strong pressure from US President Jimmy Carter, free elections were held in 1992 [SEECOOMAR]. The PPP won by a wide margin, and Jagan became President until his death in 1997. Political democracy has become the rule. Similarities could be drawn here with South Africa, where Communist leader Nelson Mandela was only liberated after the fall of the Soviet Union, when he no longer represented a geopolitical liability.

Since 1992, Guyanese leaders have tried to attract foreign investment, especially in the mining sector. Access to financial resources, new technologies and markets made this quite natural. Guyana has privatised a lot of its economy. Ironically, the return to the market economy took place under the stewardship of Jagan and his successor, also of Indian descent. Attitudes towards the relative efficiency of the market and State-driven policies in the region vary according to ethnicity more than ideology. Even in Trinidad, the Indian coalition, although it was much more radical and in tune with the international socialist movement, proved a keen supporter of the private sector, when the black PNM favoured State-driven policies. In Guyana as in Trinidad, there seems to be a love story between Indians and capitalism, in spite of the radical ideological background of leaders. The marriage of Marxism-Leninism and Rio Tinto/Alcan Inc. might be incestuous, but this seems to be condoned by Indian gods. At any rate, business acumen and the ability to make a profit seem to be one of the legacies of the British Empire to its Indian subjects, alongside cricket.

Conclusion

Benedict Anderson's work on Imagined Communities has taught us a lot about the way identities are created [ANDERSON]. E.P. Thompson had adopted the same view towards class: social identities do not fall from heaven, are not due to any mysterious "essence", but are the result of historical processes [THOMPSON]. Nations only exist when they say so, and enough people identify with them. This is compounded by the fact there is no agreement on what a nation is, and on what is really crucial in identity, and on whether nationhood can be obtained, or lost. The West Indies were not made up of nations in the 1920s and 1930s, they were just god-forsaken parts of the old British Empire, but the decolonisation process was providential, and enabled some islands to construe a specific identity.

The Federation could have provided the framework for a Caribbean identity based on the common historical experience of the plantation economy and slavery, on shared natural problems such as hurricanes and earthquakes, on the need for efficient and cheap transport, on the challenge of development, but this was not to happen. The Caribbean Sea was treated as a natural border, when it is no more a border than mountains or large rivers, where similar populations share the same livelihoods and food, trade with each other, engage in smuggling, and seduce each other's women. The opportunity lost in 1962 now presents itself under a different shape, that of Caricom, the Caribbean Common Market, a historical chance which the region might be able to seize. Britain pointed in the right direction, but did not insist very firmly when the locals proved unenthusiastic.

The three countries' history diverged considerably after independence, whereas their life under British rule had been largely uneventful and even dreary. Decolonisation presented new opportunities, and tough challenges. Development has now displaced decolonisation as the key issue, and there is no direct relationship with any "mother country" any more.

Independent countries have all attempted to create or buttress national identities. In some cases, where language and ethnicity are broadly similar, this is only challenged by the considerable migrations going on in the region, because of economic imbalance. Tens of thousands of Guyanese tend

the homes and hotels of Barbados. In countries where the ethnic mix is complex and moving, a political definition of identity is being promoted, which the French and the United States feel very much at home with³. This is the case in officially multicultural Trinidad.

Decolonisation is old hat, by now. Today, the question of national identity in the region is in a sense similar to the situation in Europe. To what extent can the recent "imagined communities", independent nations, co-exist with a regional identity, that of the regional common market? The ability to combine several levels of identity is one of the current challenges. This is not just a matter of expediency or a purely socio-economic issue: other approaches, based on ethnic, religious or cultural identity compete with the political and historical definition of nationhood. They have proved to be a recipe for disaster, essentialism and strife.

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³Traditionally, French or American identities can be acquired by people who share the desire to build the nation, participate, integrate. Learning the language is part of the process, but not a precondition. Becoming a German was impossible until the law was changed under G. Schröder.

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