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978-0-521-29491-1 - Urbanization and Urban Growth in the Caribbean: An Essay on Social Change in Dependent Societies

Malcolm Cross

Excerpt

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## 1 Introduction

The student of Caribbean societies is inevitably confronted with what at first appears a bewildering array of historical connections, cultural patterns and social forms. Almost every generalization has to be qualified, every feature tied to specific locations and every theory set within the tight constraints of individual circumstance. Inevitably this leads to problems in defining the area, and what usually emerges is a mixture of location and historical experience. In general I will adhere to this conventional solution but I will go further and argue that the area defined in this way does, with inevitable exceptions, possess a unity and consistency at the level of political economy. But first, in what ways does the region pose problems of ready definition and demarcation?

It is a truism to note that the Caribbean is a sea and not a land mass, but it is equally true that insular territories are central to a definition in terms of physical geography. In this case the 'Caribbean' consists of the islands within the Caribbean sea. This minimum definition includes the two great chains comprising the 'bow of Ulysses', as the English nineteenth century historian J. A. Froude called the Greater and Lesser Antilles. They bend, to use Patrick Leigh Fermor's (1950) graphic simile, from the *os coccyx* of Trinidad 'like the dislocated vertebrae of a spinal column' northward and westward to culminate in the massive island of Cuba only seventy miles (110 km) from the Florida Keys. In the south east lie the lava icebergs and coral accretions of the Leeward and Windward Islands; the former rising with unexpected drama from the sea, so that tiny Montserrat has a mountain almost as high as Snowdon, while in Martinique, Mont Pelée towers restlessly above St Pierre ready to repeat its quixotic destruction of 1902. Barbados on the other hand, is a flat, featureless plain comprising marine sediments on a coral base, while Trinidad, less than ten miles off the coast of Venezuela at its nearest point, is properly a part of that enormous land mass, with steaming, verdant hills hiding the flora and fauna of the Amazonian basin.

Beyond the 'Lilliputian' societies of the Leewards and Windwards, the Greater Antilles (Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, Jamaica and Cuba) are also mountain tops, but of a different order. They do not chart a fault line as in the south but comprise the summits of an extension to the great Western Cordillera which continues on the North American and South American mainlands. A few miles north of Puerto Rico the Atlantic plunges to a

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depth of nearly six miles, while, within a sixty mile radius, *Pico Duarte* in the *Cordillera Central* of the Dominican Republic on Hispaniola rises to 10,300 feet, the highest point in the Caribbean. In contrast to British popular imagery, it is these four countries that dominate the islands of the Caribbean sea. They cover 90 per cent of the surface area and shelter 89 per cent of the insular population.

A solution to the problem of definition may be sought by extending the spatial boundary to include the circum-Caribbean countries of Central and South America. By this measure, the area includes the Yucatan province of Mexico, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia and Venezuela. But now the geographical definition gives way under the weight of its own logic. These countries may border the Caribbean but most share little with the islands. Even though, like the Dominican Republic and Cuba, they may have had their indigenous cultures suffocated by the blanketing pressure of Spanish conquest, they are not truly Caribbean; their great land masses have shifted the centre of gravity inland so that few important centres of population lie on the Caribbean coast.

Consideration of historical connections highlights the problem of completely rejecting the wide geographical definition. The tiny population of Belize (formerly British Honduras) on the Caribbean coast of Central America must be an exception. After the exploitation of logwood and mahogany forests by slave owning Spanish and British settlers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Belize became a colony in 1862, having much in common with other British Crown Colonies in the West Indies. Similarly, Guyana (formerly British Guiana) is not only a mainland territory but the sea that washes its 270 miles (440 km) of shoreline is the Atlantic and not the Caribbean. Yet, despite the size of this country (83,000 sq. miles; 215,000 sq. km) it shares much in common with other West Indian territories, as do the other two Guianas – Surinam and French Guiana (Cayenne).

These mainland territories complete the most satisfactory definition of the Caribbean: the Greater and Lesser Antilles with the addition of the mainland territories of Central and South America which share more economic and historical features with the islands than they do with their Latin neighbours. This still leaves the problem of the 700 islands and 200 cays comprising the Bahamas archipelago. Although only twenty-nine of these are inhabited, the total land area at 5,300 square miles is greater than Jamaica and the largest island, Andros, is bigger than Trinidad and Tobago. However, the islands are spread over 700,000 square miles of sea and stretch 600 miles from a point just off the Florida coast to almost reach the northern shores of Hispaniola. Moreover, Andros only contains 9,000 people and, what is more important, the Bahamas have not really

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experienced the consequences of a similar economic structure to the rest of the Caribbean. Export agriculture has never been dominant because of the poor soil. Physical, historical and demographic considerations place the Bahamas in a marginal role as far as the Caribbean is concerned and, although occasional mention will be made of these islands, they will not constitute a central focus of this essay.

**Three levels of diversity**

Within the area defined there is astonishing diversity, that may be partially appreciated by considering it at three different levels. In the first place, there can be few regions on earth that have been so subject to the vagaries and vicissitudes of European fortunes, conflicts and ambitions. The societies of the present day intimately mirror this history. Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic are often omitted from surveys of the region yet they reflect more accurately than anywhere else the early period of Spanish hegemony which lasted from the closing years of the fifteenth century for more than 150 years.

The depopulation of the remaining Caribbean islands, as the Spanish scoured the area for indigenous Indians to enslave in the gold mines and sugar fields of Cuba and Hispaniola, permitted the relatively easy intrusion of French, English and Dutch colonizers in the seventeenth century. The British took Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655 although by then Barbados had been settled for thirty years. A number of Leeward Islands followed (St Kitts, Antigua, Nevis and Montserrat) while the French became established in Martinique and Guadeloupe as well as in Cayenne or French Guiana and other islands, such as Grenada and St Lucia, that were later to change hands at frequent intervals. The high point of French ambitions was confirmed by the occupation of Western Hispaniola in 1697 to become the famous colony of Saint-Domingue (Haiti). Meanwhile the Dutch had acquired Surinam in 1667 in return for New Amsterdam (New York) and Dutch traders were rapidly settling in the adjacent territories of Demerara and Berbice.

The eighteenth century was the period of greatest European interest occasioned by the wealth that flowed to France and Britain to provide such an important capital contribution to the Industrial Revolution. Sugar was by far the largest British import at the middle of the century and the slave trade one of the most profitable industries. The need to placate and encourage the West Indian plantocracy ensured that few, if any, voices were raised in opposition. The settlement following the Seven Years War in 1763 gave the Caribbean a relatively modern appearance with Cuba returned to Spain and Guadeloupe to France (in exchange for Canada). By the end of the American War of Independence twenty years

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later Britain had added Grenada, St Vincent and Dominica while France retained St Lucia and, much more important, still had control over Saint-Domingue, although the latter was to be lost as a direct result of France's approaching internal convulsions.

It is not simply that European struggles embroiled Caribbean societies in conflicts that provided them with so many unique and ready made histories. The islands themselves were hardly untouched by this process and even today demonstrate patterns of linguistic and cultural diversity that are astonishing. Moreover, the imposition of alien control on a people who are not themselves indigenes, must produce acculturation on both sides so that new forms of speech and communication spring from the coalescing of unrelated precursors. Thus the area does not only rely on the main languages of Europe, but has developed many new forms of uniquely creole communication, often rendering near neighbours incomprehensible to each other when they claim to be speaking the same language. The French occupation of St Lucia and Dominica has provided the vast majority of the population with a French patois, even though the official language is English. The Haitian élite still speak French, but the urban working class speak one variety of patois and the rural folk another. Dutch is the official language of Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles, but the rural population of the Dutch Windward islands speak English, while in Curacao they speak a tongue called Papiamentu, which has Spanish roots, and in Surinam the working class of African descent communicate in English based Sranan.

On top of this, a third obvious and compelling level of diversity is provided by the origins of the populations themselves. These are immigrant societies often established for strategic advantage or to consolidate the quest for booty. In time they developed capitalist oriented agriculture on a massive scale, demanding in the process a continuous supply of quiescent labour. Slavery is the leitmotif of that history, but even that momentous series of events does not exhaust the Caribbean's experience as a recipient of non-indigenous peoples. The poor white servants, whose arrival predates African slavery, the Spanish speaking mestizos who paralleled it, and the Indians, Indonesians, Portugese, Chinese and others who followed have all left their indelible mark. Internal migration within the region, particularly during this century, has added Jamaicans to Cuba, Haitians to the Dominican Republic and Grenadians to Trinidad. The result is an area with wide disparities in the size and composition of constituent populations. Table 1.1 shows the degree to which size variations obtain, ranging from Cuba's population of more than 8,000,000 to the Turks and Caicos islands which together add only 5,000 souls to the total. In fact 77 per cent, or over 20,000,000 people, live in the four largest countries and in none of these is English the official language.

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Another author, using earlier data but including some tiny islands omitted from this table, noted 'more than one half of all West Indians live in a society larger than 3,000,000, but the mean population per society is 366,000, while the mode is a society of only 7,000 persons' (Lowenthal, 1960: 788).

In the face of this complexity it is possible to identify any similarities, without which comparisons become meaningless and generalizations impossible? At the level of political economy the answer can be in the affirmative. Political debates today cover a wide range of unrelated issues, and economies reveal divergent structures, but all have had to, or still have to, come to terms with the uniquely New World experience of being dependent suppliers of tropical primary products for Western European or North American markets.

**Plantation societies**

The plantations of the New World were established in response to needs expressed in the Old. In this sense the plantations of the Caribbean soon became integrated into the burgeoning economies of Europe. As a result plantations must be seen as part of a capitalist system. However, they operated in circumstances that were, initially at least, highly unusual and as a result they acquired a number of pre-capitalist features – the most outstanding of which was slavery itself. Unlike the emerging factories of Europe in the eighteenth century, Caribbean planters could not call upon a reserve pool of labour power. Labour had to be imported, and that was expensive. Moreover, since the products of the plantations were destined for metropolitan markets there was no need to generate a local demand for goods or services and therefore no need to stimulate domestic consumption by paying wages. Again, sugar cultivation was highly profitable, and for most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it must have seemed as if demand for the product would never fall. There was no need for a very flexible labour force; what was needed was a constant supply of labour power, not an elaborate labour market that could respond to a declining demand. Slavery was a system that met all these needs. It was a source of new labour which could be coerced rather than encouraged through remuneration. All the while demand for sugar remained strong, the inflexibility of the system did not matter and neither was it relevant that no local market was generated. If supplies were maintained then slaves could simply be worked until they dropped and little expenditure had to be undertaken for food, housing or medical care.

Conditions changed in the nineteenth century and sometimes, as in Haiti, the plantation system did not survive. More commonly it adapted from its essentially pre-capitalist form, based on slavery, to become much

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[More information](#)6 *Urbanization and urban growth in the Caribbean*TABLE 1.1 *Population of the Caribbean, 1970*

<i>Commonwealth Caribbean (1970)</i>	
Jamaica	1,848,512
Trinidad and Tobago	938,506
Guyana	701,718
Barbados	236,891
Belize	120,670
Leeward Islands	
Antigua	64,794
Montserrat	11,498
St Kitts/Nevis	45,327
Virgin Islands (British)	9,765
Windward Islands	
Dominica	70,214
Grenada	93,622
St Lucia	100,583
St Vincent	86,944
Bahamas	169,000
Cayman Islands	10,087
Turks and Caicos Islands	5,584
<i>US Virgin Islands</i>	71,000
<i>Cuba</i>	8,663,000
<i>Dominican Republic (1970)</i>	4,011,589
<i>Haiti</i>	4,856,000
<i>Puerto Rico (1970)</i>	2,712,033
<i>French Antilles</i>	
Martinique	352,000
Guadeloupe	339,000
<i>Netherlands Antilles</i>	220,000
<i>Surinam</i>	403,000
<i>French Guiana</i>	41,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>26,182,337</b>

*Source:* Commonwealth Caribbean, 1970; Dominican Republic, 1970; Puerto Rico, 1970; other estimates for 1970 from Davis, 1969.

more like a network of rural factories dependent upon wage labour. This new corporate style had implications for investment from overseas, which greatly increased, and with it the demand from metropolitan governments for a greater say in colonial issues. In 1865, for example, Crown Colony government was instituted in Jamaica after a bloody uprising, and in 1928 the old Dutch constitution was replaced in Guyana by indirect rule. The changed conditions that led first to the abolition of the slave trade and then slavery itself were three in number. Falling demand for sugar products in Europe after the Napoleonic Wars, together with alternative sources of supply, marked the end of the halcyon days for the West Indies. Plantations were abandoned and it was no



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longer possible to retain profitability with large amounts of fixed or overhead capital invested.<sup>1</sup> Wage labour was a much more adaptable and flexible system – especially if grants of land could be made to ensure that labourers did not move too far from the estates. Second, by this time there was no shortage of free labour, except in one or two places, such as Guyana or Trinidad, where large tracts of unused land were available far from the estates. Third, the emergence of a ‘coloured’ group, largely the offspring of white planters and slave mistresses and variously termed ‘free coloureds’, ‘*affranchis*’, or ‘*gens de couleur*’, brought a qualitative change to Caribbean communities. It had already been apparent that ports would grow to become cities of some size and substance and this new intermediate group acted as a catalyst for this process. But trading and services require customers and although many coloureds actually kept slaves, it became apparent that wages for some were income for others. Moreover, the surplus generated by slaves from subsistence lands allocated to them by plantations had, in societies like Jamaica, already established an island wide marketing system that spurred on mobility and initiated an invisible pressure towards a monetary system and cash economy (Mintz, 1974).

Although other considerations played their part, particularly opposition to the plantocracy by the newly powerful bourgeoisie of Europe and, of course, the agitation of liberal reformers and working class organizations, it was the tensions of a changed international economic system that brought the greatest pressure on the plantations to transform themselves. They did so in most parts of the region to become part of a modern capitalist system more centralized, more efficient and with greater separation between ownership and control. That is, they reflected changes occurring in other parts of the Western economic system in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

None of this is to say that wide variations did not occur in the plantations of the New World; indeed many have tried, with some success, to suggest typologies of plantation forms (cf. Pan American Union, 1959; Wolf and Mintz, 1957). However, even those parts of the region where influence was minimal owe aspects of their dependence to the same forces that brought the plantations into existence in the first place. For most, even where a peasantry evolved, the social relations of production were uniquely affected by the development of large-scale ‘agri-businesses’, based on a monoculture, with a small, often racially separate, minority controlling the lives and fortunes of a large mass. It is this fact that renders it possible to speak of ‘plantation societies’ and thus to impose some coherence of form on a region which otherwise denies categorization. Sidney Mintz has recently written with clarity on this theme. After noting that even common processes occurred at different times, that metropolitan powers differed greatly in culture and commitment to the area,

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that the islands and territories differed in ecology and physical structure and that the populations were often ethnically complex, he writes that the effects of plantation dominance ‘were felt throughout the region, wherever men were brought together in large numbers, with more coercion or less, to plant, harvest, and process; such “factories in the field” go back to the sixteenth century in the islands, and have continuously affected not only the economy of the region, but also the character of its communities and the people in them’ (Mintz, 1974: 257).

**Urbanization and urban growth**

‘Urbanization’ is a term used in many different senses and in widely varied contexts. It may be used to describe the greater emphasis on service industries within an emerging economy, or the prior change to mercantilism. It may be employed with a sociological focus to refer to the development of ‘urban’ social networks, or peculiar patterns of social interaction that are said to exist in urban life. Again, some will prefer a normative view and characterize urbanization as a set of values, attitudes and beliefs that comprise a ‘modern’ Western perspective on the world, while others will opt for stressing, in the manner of Herbert Spencer, that urbanization is a process characterized by increasing heterogeneity through increased structural complexity and concomitant differentiation of function. Demographers tend to prefer more prosaic definitions and are, for the most part, satisfied with defining the term as the process whereby the balance of a population shifts from residence in rural to urban locations. At its simplest, this says nothing about the increased complexity of life, the patterns of social relationships or changed attitudes and beliefs. Such transformations may *give rise* to these developments but the term ‘urbanization’ is not defined so as to entail them.

It is this latter definition that will be employed here, not out of any disregard for the other processes, but precisely to recognize their importance. The working definition of urbanization as a process producing a greater proportion of total population living in centres defined as ‘urban’ allows complete freedom in the exploration of causation and the monitoring of effect. It may well be, as we will actually argue, that a series of economic, political and social forces produce this change, and that in turn it affects the nature of life and culture in important ways. However, Charles Tilly is right to insist that we would ‘be better off with a consistently demographic view of the process, treating changes in norms, social relations and economic activity as possible causes and effects of migration, natural increase and urban growth rather than parts of the package’ (Tilly, 1967: 104). In this way the causal links and attributable



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effects are left open and subject to empirical investigation. Nothing that is related to this complex process is defined out as being beyond the limits of our interest, which encompasses both growth of the relative size of the urban sector through differentials in fertility and mortality rates, as well as patterns of migration.

In fact this simple definition commends itself in another important way for, in the sense that 'urbanization' connotes an intrusion of modern, Western values through the medium of the urban form, it may be said to be of little relevance for the Caribbean. This is not because of a lack of Western influence but rather because of its *total* dominance which has been felt in rural areas as much as urban. This point deserves some amplification for it directs our attention to one facet of Caribbean social and economic structure that is, perhaps, unique. The emergence of cities elsewhere obviously predates Western expansion. The sudden growth of Japanese cities following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the earlier establishment of Indian cities or those of the western Sudanese kingdoms, had nothing to do with modern imperialism and in that sense they suggest an evolutionary linkage between rural and urban structures. Colonial expansion, on the other hand, tended to capture rural economies in a web whose centre was the mercantilist city oriented to Western economic needs. For example, it was markets and minerals that motivated West African colonialism and even in the nineteenth century, when political ambitions added an increased fervour to the demand for economic incorporation, land was largely symbolic of boundaries and not a crucial factor in active production (McNulty, 1976). Even the settler societies of the south and east never produced crops of comparable significance to sugar for Western economies and the colonial system was imposed on a complex pattern of dispersed homesteads. True in Kenya and the White Highlands area of East Africa colonial settlements dominated and distorted rural economies by channelling infrastructure developments into white owned areas, but nevertheless an indigenous rural economy did exist. The colonial presence, while not wholly urban, was superimposed on a traditional, native form (Soja and Weaver, 1976).

Caribbean societies, after the obliteration of their indigenous peoples, clearly fall into the second category, except for the critical difference that the web was first spun in the rural context. The result was that rural and urban life styles share the affinity with pre-colonial examples but do so in a form which is quintessentially colonial. Even though Caribbean cities were later to develop the characteristic features of colonial ports, it was the rural areas that were first enmeshed in European economies. The cities were not the spearheads of this intrusion even though they were later to become the bulwarks of the system it created. The fact is that there are no 'traditional' sectors to Caribbean societies. All are, or none

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are; a fact which throws into high relief the economic rather than the cultural causes and consequences of urban growth.

One result is that there is no equivalent to the integrative function performed by voluntary associations as we know to exist in West Africa (Little, 1965). These do, of course, have a role but the function of helping to overcome the disruptive consequences of wage labour, or of providing the new avenues of mobility in a world hitherto dominated by autocratic elders, is less critical when the transition is only between one wage system and another and when age in rural society confers no more authority than it does in the city. As the next chapter will argue, there are powerful theoretical arguments in favour of preferring an approach to colonial and postcolonial urbanization in terms of political economy rather than preserving the focus on patterns of acculturation and the diffusion of Western values. The Caribbean adds a peculiar fillip to this approach for the other must lose explanatory power when urban and rural areas are not divided by significant cultural difference. In one sense, therefore, a book on urban transformations in the Caribbean cannot be a book on 'urbanization' as it is commonly defined.

However, adhering to a simple demographic definition, the processes we observe are similar to elsewhere in the 'Third World'. Two summary tables, using data that will be explored in far more detail in later chapters, may help to make this clear. Table 1.2 shows the proportions of total population within the Caribbean (excluding Guyana, Belize, Surinam and French Guiana) who reside in rural areas and urban locations of varying sizes over three time periods. It is apparent from this crude aggregate estimate that the proportion who live in rural areas is still high but falling quite quickly. It is not surprising to find, in an area with so few cities approaching one million, that most of the growth in city dwellers appears to be taking place in medium sized cities of more than 500,000 but less than 1,000,000 people. By comparison, during the same period the rural population of West Africa fell from 89 per cent to 80 per cent of the total, while in tropical South America it plunged by twice as large a proportion to 47 per cent in 1970. A greater proportion of the population in South East Asia live in rural areas, but over the same period this fell by a slightly smaller amount than the Caribbean, from 86 per cent in 1950 to 80 per cent in 1970. Thus, in contrast to Western Europe where only a minority of the people live in country districts, the Caribbean still has over one half living outside towns and cities. When compared with poorer parts of the 'Third World', however, the population is more balanced between the country and the city.

In Table 1.3 the same basic estimates are examined in terms of rates of change of populations living in units of a given size at specified dates. For this purpose 'town' is defined as an 'urban' area of under 100,000 people