Small farming and radical imaginations in the Caribbean today

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Abstract: Forged and still scarred by slavery, Caribbean agricultural landscapes are now being made redundant in an era of global market integration. The demise of preferential trade agreements is exposing the uncompetitiveness of the plantation sector while small farmers, still largely confined to marginal positions within highly inequitable landscapes, are being pushed into a new vulnerability by market integration, as rising food imports flood local markets. Unfortunately, political attention continues to revolve around the ailing plantation sector. In contrast, it is argued here that the current crisis of Caribbean agriculture contains a historic opportunity for restructuring in the interests of the region's small farmers and that, in the process, the sector could be helped to gain a new vitality.

Keywords: agriculture, Cuba, food, land reform, market integration, plantation sector, trade

The precipice

Small farmers in many parts of the Third World are being squeezed by the global food economy and nowhere are the pressures associated with market integration more acute than in the Caribbean.[1] Caribbean agricultural sectors have been geared towards international markets for hundreds of years, exporting a few key commodities and importing basic foodstuffs. For most of this history, agro-exports have greatly exceeded imports – hence the fabulous wealth of the planter class – but in recent decades, and especially since the early 1990s, the region's large agro-trade surplus has turned dramatically to deficit. The viability of the plantation export base is under threat from the erosion of trade preferences in Europe. The historic struggles of Caribbean small farmers have been magnified by the liberalisation of domestic markets and rising imports from the industrial grain and livestock complexes of the world's three great agro-exporting regions, North America, Europe and the southern cone of South America. The US Department of Agriculture calls the Caribbean the world's most food import-dependent region. In short, global pressures are giving renewed urgency to rethinking the old plantation-peasant model of agricultural development.

Agrarian decline coupled with limited industrialisation poses stark problems for employment and balance of payments deficits, particularly in those nations facing significant levels of debt and persistent payments deficits, namely Jamaica, Guyana, Dominica, Belize, St Lucia and St Vincent. This has been partly offset by growth in tourism and financial services (and in Trinidad, oil) and by very high levels of external migration and remittance. But even with heavy migration, much of the Anglophone Caribbean faces serious and persistent shortages of employment or dignified labour, which ultimately relates to the high levels of crime and violence and the social disintegration in some places.

The reconfiguration of diets by cheap grain and livestock imports has also transformed questions of food security and health in the Anglophone Caribbean. Huge inequalities meant that, historically, malnourishment has been the Caribbean's primary dietary health problem – in spite of its large agro-trade surpluses. However, while food insecurity still haunts many poor households, the dominant epidemiological trend in recent decades has been a shift towards diets heavily laden with saturated fats, and with it dramatic rises in heart disease, hypertension, high blood pressure, strokes and some cancers.[2]

Resting or wrestling with history?

Caribbean landscapes still bear the deep scars of the slave era. On the heels of the Haitian revolution, the British began the process of emancipation as a pre-emptive strike against the social revolution welling up from below.[3] After emancipation, the property rights established in slavery were sanctified by law and various tactics were employed to impede the free village movements and the rise of an independent peasantry. A cheap, consistent labour supply was ensured through debt peonage, laws restricting the survey, partition and sale of land to ex-slaves, a regressive system of land taxation, an exclusionary political system and the absence of almost any infrastructural support. This created an agro-proletariat and limited the autonomy of the emergent peasantry. It is against this backdrop that the radical tradition of Caribbean political economy has long wrestled with plantations – seeking to understand and overcome their political, economic, sociocultural and psychological legacies and to forge more socially just models of agricultural development, while emphasising the resilience of the region's peasantry.[4]

Given agriculture's current precipitous state, there would appear to be fertile ground to reposition small farming in radical imaginations and political practice, most urgently to reinvigorate efforts for land reform, challenge continuing market liberalisation and support local food economies. There is a disjunction, however, between this

apparently fertile ground for restructuring the agricultural landscape and the ways in which present circumstances are magnifying the inertia of the past. The profound dietary shifts of the past few decades have been accompanied by a pervasive lack of consciousness about food. Put bluntly, fewer and fewer citizens of the Anglophone Caribbean seem to give serious thought to where their food comes from, how it was produced and the outcomes of agrarian change. George Lamming describes this incisively:

> This is not only a matter of agriculture or economics. There is a crisis of the cultural sovereignty of a people when patterns of consumption bear no relation to basic needs and cannot be supported by the productive base of the society. It may sound very strange but a Minister of Agriculture in our region, whether he knows it or not is engaged in what is essentially a cultural problem: how do you de-colonise the eating habits of a people who have surrendered their very palates to foreign control . . . Unfortunately for us, there is this enormous separation, between the head and the belly of this society.[5]

This is a significant factor in why rising food imports and the decline of small farming are assumed, both popularly and politically, to be inevitable, and why small farmers are perceived as an outmoded class in the age of globalisation, with a fate beyond the reach of 'realistic' policy interventions. Most discussions of post-preferences agricultural restructuring continue to centre around reviving the ailing plantation sector and increasing the competitiveness of traditional exports, with the plantation landscape and concomitant spatial marginality of the small farmer continuing as more or less given.

There is cause to question whether land is an issue around which small farmers will mobilise, given the ageing demographics and the apparent reality that few rural youth appear to want to farm anymore. This negative view of farming includes but runs deeper than rising import competition and dietary shifts. It also relates to a number of other factors such as the region's intense migratory culture and the tendency of many young people now to conceive of opportunities in terms of 'going foreign', praedial larceny (farm theft) and, most of all, the matter on which the struggles of small farmers have always hinged: the uneven landscape. While it is beyond the scope of this commentary to assess how struggles for land have recurred and been suppressed since emancipation, over time this has added an aura of immutability to existing property relations that has acted as a considerable barrier to small farm organising. But to sense the future possibilities that can radiate from contemporary action on the land issue, small farmers in the Anglophone Caribbean have only to observe neighbouring Cuba.

An alternative agricultural model in the region

Cuba's recent agricultural transformation is instructive in that it demonstrates how an extremely sugar-dependent agricultural system can be rapidly re-oriented to enhance domestic food self-sufficiency and a vibrant small farm economy.[6] Though Cuba undertook two major agrarian reforms after the revolution, its agricultural sector remained tightly bound in a neocolonial relationship, with the re-organised state farms seduced into continuing to focus on providing sugar within the Soviet sphere. Favourable terms of trade did help to further Cuba's broader social and industrial development goals but these were paid for by an ultimately unsustainable system of agro-industrial production. Dependence on imported food grew because sugar production consumed three times as much land as did domestic food crops and large-scale, export-oriented state farms became increasingly reliant on imported agro-chemicals, machinery and petroleum.

The model collapsed with the introduction of 'perestroika' in 1989 and this, together with the strict US embargo, produced dire food and import shortages. In the ensuing 'Special Period', Cuba was forced to confront its perilous food insecurity and embark on the radical restructuring of its agricultural production, as almost overnight imports of basic foodstuffs and oil fell by more than half and fertilisers and pesticides dropped by 80 per cent. Daily per capita caloric intake declined precipitously. However, following the initial shock, a dramatic improvement in food security was made, despite severe shortages of foreign exchange, machinery, chemical inputs and fuel. This was accomplished in far more daunting circumstances than the Anglophone Caribbean, which is not subject to a US embargo, would face.

The transformation of Cuban agriculture was accomplished by a turn towards innovative, lower-input agro-ecological practices, coupled with support for small farm marketing and a massive divestment of state lands into smallholdings in 1993. The development of new practices drew heavily on Cuba's highly trained scientific community, which substituted biological pest controls and fertilisers for expensive chemical ones and devised better crop rotations and multi-cropping patterns. Land reform was based on a recognition that the small farm sector was already more efficient than the state sector, in part owing to the alienating work conditions of the latter, and would be more dynamic and adaptable to the lower-input techniques needed. The leading role of Cuba's small farmers in dramatically improving food security highlights the need to challenge dominant narratives of what agricultural restructuring is 'realistic' and possible.

The possibility of radical change

Small farm livelihoods are becoming less viable in the Anglophone Caribbean at the same time as the colonially-forged plantation sector is faced with the erosion of preferential markets for traditional exports. As I have argued here and elsewhere, there is cause to see opportunity in crisis and to see it as a new fault line for confronting the region's inequitable and now exhausted agricultural model.

Radical land reform backed by appropriate supports – extension, subsidised inputs and/or credit and marketing services – remains the key to unleashing the region's small farmers from their productive constraints and securing the agricultural sector's ability to provide dignified livelihoods into the future. It could also improve the access of all Caribbean people to healthy, diverse local food, which could help to reverse the region's diet-related epidemiological trends. To make land reform work in the uneven terrain of the global food economy, maintaining flexible borders will be critical. This will entail resisting, on the grounds of food sovereignty, bi- or multi-lateral demands for continued market liberalisation and, in many cases, closing or eliminating the gap between bound tariffs (the upper limit committed to under the WTO) and those currently applied.[7] Additionally, wherever possible, food sovereignty must also be pursued with a view to regional integration; for example, Jamaica's decision in 2000 to import subsidised US rice at the expense of Guyana's was a particularly egregious case of short-term, narrow-minded planning.

In addition to the empirical evidence from Cuba and elsewhere of the benefits of land reform and protecting domestic markets against the distorted competitive pressures of the agro-industrial complexes of the temperate world, building momentum for progressive agricultural restructuring also ultimately demands 'a strong vision of what food means to our society', in the words of Oscar Allen, a St Vicentian farmer and organiser. Small farmers and their organisations, and concerned educators, politicians, civil servants and scholars need to cultivate such a vision. If debates about land, food and small farming can be advanced, and restructuring initiated, it could go a long way towards nurturing radical imaginations in the region more broadly. How a society feeds itself bears heavily not only on landscapes and livelihoods but also on culture. Food is something through which people encounter productive relations very intimately, multiple times each day, and an increased understanding of the problems and prospects of small farmers could play a role in shaking historical inertia, catalysing opposition to neoliberal economic prescriptions and re-invigorating transformative politics.

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References

1 Various ideas and arguments presented here are developed elsewhere. See Tony Weis, 'The rise, fall and future of the Jamaican peasantry', *Journal of Peasant Studies* (Vol. 33, no. 1, 2006), pp. 61–88; Tony Weis, 'Restructuring and redundancy: the impact and illogic of neoliberal agricultural reforms in Jamaica', *Journal of Agrarian Change* (Vol. 4, no. 4, 2004), pp. 461–91; Tony Weis, '(Re-)making the case for land reform in Jamaica', *Social and Economic Studies* (Vol. 53, no. 1, 2004), pp. 35–72; Tony Weis, 'Agrarian decline and breadbasket dependence in the Caribbean: confronting illusions of inevitability', *Labour, Capital and Society* (Vol. 36, no. 2, 2003), pp. 174–99.

2 These trends have been well documented by the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute, the Caribbean Commission on Health and Development and the Pan-American Health Organisation

3 Richard Hart, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery, Vol. II: blacks in rebellion* (Mona, Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1985), p. 336. Hart likens any European moral awakening to 'pin pricks' against the pressures from slaves, in stark contrast to the liberal historiography surrounding Emancipation.

4 See especially Kari Levitt and Michael Witter (eds), *The Critical Tradition of Caribbean Political Economy: the legacy of George Beckford* (Kingston, Ian Randle, 1996); George L. Beckford, *Persistent Poverty: underdevelopment in plantation economies of the Third World* (New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972); Lloyd Best, 'Outlines of a model of pure plantation economy', *Social and Economic Studies* (Vol. 17, no. 3, 1968), pp. 283–324. More recently, attention has also been drawn to the environmental implications of the plantation landscape, both on- and off-farm; see Tony Weis, 'Contradictions and change in Jamaica: theorizing ecosocial resistance amidst ecological crisis', *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* (Vol. 12, no. 2, 2001), pp. 85–131.

5 George Lamming, 'Beckford and the predicaments of Caribbean culture', in Levitt and Witter, op. cit., pp. 26–7.

6 Fernando Funes, Luis García, Martin Bourque, Nilda Pérez and Peter Rosset, *Sustainable Agriculture and Resistance: transforming food production in Cuba* (San Francisco, Food First Books, 2002) and Peter M. Rosset, 'Cuba: a successful case study of alternative agriculture', in Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster and Frederick H. Buttel (eds), *Hungry for Profit: the agribusiness threat to farmers, food and the environment* (New York, Monthly Review, 2000), pp. 203–13.

7 This stems from the interplay of a number of factors, including the powerful lobby of the tourism industry and merchant elites, the conditionalities of structural adjustment and the food security demands of the urban poor.