METROPOLITAN INFLUENCES* IN THE CARIBBEAN: 
THE WEST INDIES

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Despite decades of intraregional political and economic isolation and the vast expanse of sea separating them from each other, a group of ten British colonial units in the Caribbean has federated, under the suzerainty of Great Britain, into a new nation. The West Indies, as this federation calls itself, forms a thousand-mile chain that curves northward from Trinidad, at the northeastern tip of South America, to Jamaica in the Greater Antilles. Linking these two are Grenada, Barbados, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Dominica, Montserrat, Antigua, and St. Kitts-Nevis. These ten small units and their even smaller dependencies are inhabited by about three million people, five sixths of them found in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados. The density of population is high everywhere, averaging 375 persons per square mile for the entire region, but billowing to an almost incredible 1400 for Barbados. Racially, the area is populated primarily by the Negro descendants of former slaves, by a much smaller white group that has lost some of its formal political power but that still retains social and economic dominance, and by a numerically intermediate colored group that is a physical and cultural amalgam of the Negro and white. In Trinidad there is a large, fast-growing minority of East Indians, and throughout the federation, small but usually important clusters of Chinese, East Indians, Syrians, and Portuguese are to be found.

Except for Barbados, the cultural inventories of each island have been modified, disrupted, and changed by the all-too-frequent substitution of one European ruling power for another during a period of ferment that lasted well into the Nineteenth Century. Each island society has had its own unique historical development and, consequently, a differing political and economic relationship with Great Britain. Jamaica, for instance, is on the verge of complete self-government; Barbados has a new constitution that has not yet clarified the role of the governor but, like Trinidad, it is fast approaching self-government. The smaller units, especially the recipients of grants-in-aid from Great Britain, remain on the crown colony level, with concomitant metropolitan restraints. It is evident from even a short description such as this that there are differentiae operating on the various levels of this new but not quite independent nation. Notwithstanding these discordances, the British West Indies hold numerous social and cultural characteristics in common. We turn now to these similarities and to the influences that created them.

* The word “influence” is used within the context of this paper in a special sense. Webster defines influence as “the act or the power of producing an effect without apparent force or direct authority: as, influence by suggestion.” If this definition is taken literally, it follows that we are permitted to deal only with the unpressured or unforced effects of the metropole on its colonies and not with the obvious sociocultural results of the domination of Great Britain. However, except for institutions and cultural elements that have readily identifiable derivations, it is extremely difficult to distinguish between imposed effects (those accomplished through the use of authority) and unpressured effects (those accomplished without such use). As a practical operational necessity, it becomes essential, therefore, that we interpret the word “influence” quite broadly and subsume under it all those effects produced by the metropole in the colony with or without the use of authority.
The development of the British West Indies is mirrored in the changing colonial policies of the métropole through the past three centuries. These policies, a reflection of the economic theories of their times, had varying degrees of impact on the region. The first and most important, having created the conditions that produced the original social structure of the area, was that doctrine called mercantilism, a system aptly described as the economic counterpart of nationalism. The nation state of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries "acting in the economic sphere sought by methods of control to secure its own unity and power" and pursued strength in the conquest and exploitation of colonies. Ideally, the colony was to be an appendage of the métropole, founded to produce goods and markets necessary to the mother country. Consistent with this theory, the West Indies, after a short, unsuccessful experiment with small-plot agriculture, turned to the intensive cultivation of sugar cane. A crystallization of factors, including the man power demands of this particular crop, the rigors of a subtropical climate, and mercantilist aims in general, demonstrated the desirability of a large, strong, but manageable work force. This growing need found an ideal solution in African slave labor and led directly to the great slave importations to the New World, the middle leg of the nefarious triangular trade. Amassed from various West African tribes with differing cultures and languages, these slaves were forced into a new and difficult way of life that included the abandonment of their native tongues for English or dialects of it. The law regarded them as property. This legal dehumanization denied the slaves even the potentially ameliorative benefits of education and Christianity.

In contrast, the few whites who migrated from the métropole to the West Indies were more similar in cultural background to one another than were the Africans, and they entered a social milieu in which they were dominant. With the exception of a number of indentured white laborers found especially in presugar Barbados, the whites arrived as owners, managerial personnel, or free men seeking their fortunes, but each endowed with those personal rights guaranteed all English-born subjects. Structurally, this situation permitted the introduction of many of the traditional social forms of the métropole, especially in the domain of law and government, but these elements were modified where necessary to fit the unique West Indian conditions. For example, dominance, a prerequisite of any slave system, generated privileges, so that the new Caribbean societies developed patterns not found in the métropole. Among these newly acquired privileges were seigneurial rights to slave women and concubinage, patterns that contributed heavily to the growth of a mixed, colored population. Thus the economic and political motivations of the metropolitan power were responsible for a West Indian social structure composed of two sharply differentiated units, whites and blacks, masters and slaves, and straddling both could be found the budding of a third or colored population.

Later shifts in metropolitan economic policy modified this basic formula. At the end of the Eighteenth Century mercantilism was displaced by laisser faire, which extolled the economic utility of free competition and assumed non-interference of government in economic matters. Adam Smith and his disciples proved to their satisfaction that colonies were not profitable and, with the gradual acceptance of this hypothesis, the metropolitan government shed itself of the responsibility for the development of its colonies. Within this framework, the pleas and arguments of humanitarians such as William Wilberforce found more receptive audiences. Their initial objective, the abolition of the slave trade, was gained in 1807 and the second, emancipation, was enacted in 1833. These legislative acts of the British Parliament affected each island of the West Indies differently. In islands such as Antigua and Barbados, where most of the arable land was already in sugar, the change from slave to wage labor was essentially a legal one only; social conditions remained close to those existing before emancipation. In islands such as Jamaica, which still had unsettled areas in their mountainous interiors, the newly freed slaves left the plantations and sought refuge inland. Where this occurred, a major structural modification ensued; the movement to the hills led to the formation of a quasi-independent peasantry. Partially due to this depletion of the organized work force, the introduction of indentured East Indian labor seemed necessary for the plantocracy, especially in Trinidad. Despite these changes, with slavery legally abolished, the rudiments of a peasantry developing, and the growing colored population becoming socially and culturally defined, political and social inequality remained the characteristic leitmotif of the British Caribbean.

Early Twentieth Century reaction to laissez faire took the form of a modern or new imperialism combining tariff protection at home with the acquisition of new colonies. The expansion and welding of the empire as well as the reforging of the old, neglected colonial links were accomplished under the slogans of imperial preference, defense, and conference. Metropolitan obligation to the more backward colonies distinguished this new imperialism from the old; overseas possessions, to be useful, could not be allowed to remain ignorant of the innumerable benefits of Victorian and Edwardian civilization. Materially and socially, this latest shift was of negligible importance to the West Indies, which had become the backwater of the empire. Its major value lay in that it provided a more permissive atmosphere for the events leading to the West Indian present.

By the turn of the century the rate of population growth was soaring, especially in Barbados and Jamaica. Opportunities for work were fast diminishing, a low standard of wages prevailed, and the level of housing as well as other necessities of life was deplorable. Safety valves such as migrations to Panama for work on the canal, to the United States, and to Cuba were insufficient to curb a growing popular discontent that culminated in the late 1930s in riots and disturbances throughout the region. The West India Royal Commission of 1938–1939, which investigated these disturbances, recognized the qualitative difference of these from past unrest: "...the discontent that underlies the disturbances of recent years is a phenomenon of a different character, representing no longer a blind protest against worsening of conditions, but a positive demand for the creation of new conditions that will render possible a less restricted life." As a result of this social upheaval, limited political rights were finally gained by the masses.

As we can see, West Indian social structure, formed in response to metropolitan objectives, in no way recreated the structural configuration of the home country. Nevertheless, much in the West Indies appears British: the schools,
legal and political forms, styles in clothing, sports, allegiance to the Crown and royal family and, as is commonly held for Barbados, some traits of character and outlook. Certainly, we must agree that many social institutions and cultural elements are clearly derived from the métropole. However, it is not the retention of mere form that is important here, but how the total institution or element, originally developed in Great Britain, actually operates when in a completely different social context, such as in societies having at least three culturally differentiated sections, the white, colored, and black, as they have been defined by Smith. For instance, the legal code of the region, St. Lucia excepted, is patterned after that of the United Kingdom. However, unlike Great Britain, law in the West Indies tends to widen the differences between sections rather than to act as an agent of unification. This situation has developed because law has a different function in the West Indies than in Britain. In the Caribbean it promoted the control of the métropole and its representatives, the resident whites. One example of how this control was maintained is found in the judiciary. Positions on high courts such as the West Indian Court of Appeal until recently were allotted to the Colonial Judicial Service, which recruited primarily from metropolitan and not West Indian sources. Judges and magistrates for the lower courts came predominantly from the white section and the upper levels of the colored section, the appointees from both categories being trained in the métropole. This combination could scarcely envisage change in the social order. Consequently, law and the judiciary were, and to some degree still are, relied upon by the white or dominant section to preserve the status quo.

For the colored or intermediate section, law traditionally has been an avenue for mobility. A large portion of the professionals produced by this group has been trained in its prestigious practice, which guarantees a respectable position in society and opens opportunities for material and political success. While this section has sought some amelioration of the inequities in legal administration, it nevertheless uses the prevailing system for its own purposes. The black section sees law basically as an instrument of coercion. The small minority of this section that lives in the isolated, closed, peasant communities avoids contact with this alien institution, preferring the application of customary sanctions and the use of local “peacemakers.” However, the great majority lives in open villages, in plantation towns, and in the growing urban areas. In these places the courts are used extensively to redress wrongs or to gain prestige within the group itself and are visited by many for entertainment. Only rarely, however, are they employed by members of socially inferior sections to seek redress against members of superior sections.

The constabulary is also very similar to the British model. Organized along metropolitan lines, the police forces have been led by professionally trained metropolitan and by local white and colored, while they are manned by the lower section. As befits a colonial relationship, connections between police and métropole have been close and, significantly, the former is one of the last departments of the Crown to be relinquished by the Colonial Office to local authorities. The dominant sections benefit from the police. Many of the minor, as well as a number of the major, legal transgressions of the upper two sections are disregarded, and protection of their interests takes precedence over those of the large majority of the population. In contrast, the subordinate sections attempt to avoid contact as far as possible unless provoked. A Jamaican newspaperman commented recently on the widespread feeling that there is an almost institutionalized abuse of authority by the police of that island and claimed that this situation “stems from the identification of the policeman as an instrument manipulated by foreigners for punishing people, much as ‘government’ was once a vague, foreign entity that could annoy people. In short this concept of the role of the policeman stems from our colonial era, and accurately reflects the historical reality of that age. The policeman was not ours, responsible to us and meant to help us, just as ‘government’ was not ours, responsible to us and meant to help us. But the government is now ours, responsible to us and meant to meet our needs and desires. Unfortunately, this political fact, as is so often the case, has not changed a social attitude. The policeman is still liable to act as if John Citizen were a rebellious native and Morant Bay [a revolt in 1865] occurred last week.” If we accept the hypothesis of pluralism in the British West Indies, then an explanation of this situation is relatively simple: to maintain a plural society, the dominant section must control the regulative institutions. Law and police are just such institutions. Their outward forms, due to the historical connection, are British, but their functions and content are reworked to meet the different needs of a very different system. The subordinate sections are not altogether wrong when they identify the policeman as an agent of a “foreign” or alien group.

There are other institutions where structure and function in the colonial versions appear quite similar to their metropolitan parent: education in the West Indies, for example, follows the form found in Great Britain now and in the past. Current policy in both places is very similar: primary schooling is to be provided for all, secondary education of high standard for a small fraction of the population, and university training for exceptionally few. Reminiscent of an earlier, sharply class-conscious England are the curricula of West Indian primary schools. These schools, largely the result of missionary activity in the Nineteenth Century, evolved from the teaching of catechism and the Bible to a more secularly oriented emphasis on conventional subjects, principally, the three Rs. The content of these subjects has remained predominantly British rather than West Indian. Little attempt has been made to emphasize subjects with more pertinent and immediate local relevance, a neglect that gives basic education in this region an unrealistic quality. Furthermore, teaching is usually conducted in standard English, although most islanders employ a creolized version of English, and St. Lucians and Dominicans speak a French patois. For the overwhelming majority, schooling stops at the primary level and, in general, this group enters the adult world with precious little preparation.

Although recently they have put some emphasis on science, West Indian secondary schools remain committed to the classics, thus betraying their origins as schools for the sons of colored imitators of the white aristocracy. In the matter of system of external examinations from Great Britain determines their standards and subject matter, and their general organization imitates that of the British public schools. Lack of school places and high cost effectively prevent most West Indians from seeking this advanced education. Conse-
metropolitan pressures that affect West Indian society. Local configurations differ from their British models functionally. Discrete social and cultural elements derived from the métropole are modified and changed to fit the prevailing colonial societies. This modification is not arbitrary, since consistent regularities can be found in each island society. However, their differing colonial histories have produced some range of modification that gives to individual islands and each local section a somewhat distinct quality.

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References


To sum up, then, an attempt has been made to present some of the major

* Rediffusion is a wire broadcasting system by which programs are carried by wire into the subscriber's home and heard through a speaker.