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Ethnic and Cultural Pluralism
in the British Caribbean

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The British Caribbean consists of Jamaica, the Leeward Islands (St. Kitts, Nevis, Antigua, Montserrat and the British Virgin Islands), the Windwards Islands (St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Dominica, Grenada), Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, British Honduras in North America and British Guiana in South America. Except for these last two colonies, the remaining British Caribbean possessions are islands of the Antillean archipelago. Jamaica is over a thousand miles from Trinidad, and more than 500 miles East of British Honduras; British Guiana is larger in area than all the remaining colonies put together. Jamaica, with a population of one and a half million, accounts for about 47 per cent of the total British Caribbean population. Despite these differences and distances, these colonies have much in common, historically and at present. They also differ among themselves in various ways.

The islands are over-populated, while the two mainland territories contain large unsettled areas. All these territories depend on agriculture, and their urban ratios are relatively low. Industrialisation is just beginning in Jamaica and Trinidad, nationalism has been slow to develop, and separatism is as pronounced within the colonies as between them. These territories are all depressingly poor, and despite their long histories of capital investment, they are still typical under-developed countries.

These societies are all multi-racial. Except in the mainland territories, they contain no signifiant indiginous elements. Their present populations are descended from immigrants from the Old World, Europeans, Africans, Chinese, Indians, Lebanese and others. Most of Caribbean history consists in the development of these areas by competing European nations through the exploitation of African labour, initially imported

as slaves. Negro–white associations have produced a large hybrid group which is culturally as well as biologically mixed. The approximate racial composition of the various colonial populations in 1946 are given below.

Territory	White %	Black %	Co-loured %	East-Indian %	Amer-Indian %	Chin. %	Other %
Jamaica	1	78	17.5	2	—	1	0.5
Barbados	5	77	18	—	—	—	—
Br. Guiana	3	38.1	10	43.5	4.3	1	—
Br. Honduras	3.9	38.\	31.8	2.3	17	—	7*
Antigua	2	85	13	—	—	—	—
Montserrat	0.5	86.5	6.4	—	—	—	—
St. Kitts	2	75.5	11	—	—	—	—
Virgin Is.	0.5	87.2	12.3	—	—	—	—
Trinidad	2.7	46.8	14.1	35.1	—	1	—
Dominica	0.3	24.9	74.6	—	—	—	—
Grenada	0.9	73.6	20.4	4.8	—	—	—
St. Lucia	0.5	58.1	37.6	3.8	—	—	—
St. Vincent	3.1	73.1	20.5	3	—	—	—

* Black Caribs.

These percentages are based on the West Indian Census of 1946 and reveal some of the ambiguities inherent in racial classification. 74 % of the Dominican population is classified as « Coloured », as is 37 % of the St. Lucia total and 31 % of British Honduras. The reported racial composition of these colonies differs from that in the remaining territories; but to the best of our knowledge these figures do not connote genuine differences in the populations concerned.

On the other hand, the East Indian ratios set out above do refer to genuine and very significant differences. It is commonly believed that East Indians now form over 50 % of the British Guianese population, and that they are rapidly approaching numerical parity with the negroid groups of Trinidad. Some people see the recent political split between Dr. Cheddi Jagan and Mr. Lloyd Burnham of British Guiana as essentially racial in character; both men were Ministers in the short-lived government of the People's Progressive Party, the first government to be returned in British Guiana on a basis of universal suffrage. Mr. Jagan's strength lies with his East Indians, Mr. Burnham's with the black and coloured groups. In Trinidad, also, the East Indian

population has its own political organisation, but the religious split between Hindus and Muslims has deprived it of unanimity. The refusal of British Guiana to join the British Caribbean Federation, and part hesitancy of Trinidad on this issue, together with the restrictions on immigration to Trinidad from the other colonies, have both been interpreted in other colonies as due to East Indian political pressure. The division between East Indians and Negro-Coloured elements in the populations of British Guiana and Trinidad is deeper and sharper than divisions between the Negro, White and Coloured populations elsewhere. This may in part be associated with the lack of Indian-Negro miscegenation and the absence of any interstitial group.

The heavy concentration of East Indians in British Guiana and Trinidad is an effect of the large-scale importations of indentured Indian labour to these colonies after the abolition of slavery in 1838. This in turn reflected the labour shortage suffered by planters in Trinidad and British Guiana at that time. In its turn, this labour shortage was an effect of the prohibition of the Atlantic slave trade and of intra-Caribbean slave movements by Britain shortly after she had acquired these fertile territories with their great sugar-producing capacities. Older colonies with played-out land and less profitable sugar production and larger populations, were neither able to afford nor needed such large-scale labour imports as British Guiana and Trinidad; but the net effect is that the contemporary social structures of the British West Indian colonies differ significantly according to their East Indian components as an effect of differing historical situations. Indian-organized schools now receive Government aid in Trinidad, and the Hindu and Mohammedan religions are being increasingly recognised, for example in matters of marriage. Little work has yet been done on these substantial East Indian populations, but it is known that Hindustani is spoken among them, and that the majority of these East Indians remain loyal to Indian culture and Indian nationalism. These loyalties are related to the slow growth of a Caribbean national sentiment.

The colonial ruling classes and traditions are also diverse. Trinidad, St. Lucia, Grenada and Dominica have Catholic affiliations as evidence of past association with France and Spain. In these four colonies a French dialect, known as *patois*, is commonly used among the folk. In areas of continous British rule, the dialect is based on English. The Roman-Dutch law of British Guiana is a relic of that country's Dutch connection; in Trinidad, the European cultural section contains Spanish, French and British elements, and the dominant White culture is a composite of these three traditions. Where Protestantism has been

historically dominant, as in Jamaica, Barbados, St. Kitts, St. Vincent and Antigua, aesthetically rich religious syncretisms such as Shango are absent, and Revivalism or Shakerism (Shouting Baptists) are characteristic folk ritual forms.

Small groups of Chinese, Portuguese, Syrians and Jews are to be found in several of these territories, where they act as specialised occupational groups. Generally, they compete with one another for different sections of the retail and wholesale trade, and in Jamaica Jews have long been prominent in the legal profession. Where East Indians are found in small numbers, they are assimilated to the black lower class and do not form a separate ethnic group. The Amerindians of British Guiana, British Honduras, and Dominica are not yet significant parts of these colonial populations, but are mainly administered on reservations.

In Trinidad and British Guiana, the East Indian segment is clearly differentiated from the remaining population. In the remaining colonies the Whites, Negroes and Coloured form a standard combination. This association of White, Negro and Coloured groups is the historically primary and structurally dominant grouping in the British Caribbean. Despite the racial and cultural polarities within this Negro-White amalgam, miscegenation, acculturation and assimilation have established a single continuum in racial, cultural and social terms. The work of Professor Melville Herskovits and his colleagues in the study of Afro-American acculturation provides ample evidence of this cultural continuity; the racial distributions reported by the 1946 West Indian census indicate the extent of racial mixture; and the absence of any race or caste regulations indicates the permissive local attitude towards assimilation.

None the less, there are significant cultural and social differences within this Negro-White combination. Jurors tend to be drawn from the propertied groups, and these tend to be of lighter pigmentation. Primary schools cater for the labouring classes, and these in turn tend to be mainly black. Family forms and mating patterns of the lower class differ remarkably from those of the white or coloured elites, and so does lower class religion, property forms, material culture, occupations and economic organisation.

People born within the West Indies are called "creoles"; but East Indians are usually excluded from this reference. Thus Creoles are really persons of Negro, White or mixed Negro-White ancestry, who are natives of the Caribbean. Persons of Indian descent are described as "East Indian" (*sic*) or "coolies". Minorities such as the Chinese,

and Europeans in the West Indies as an instance of symbiosis, but between West Indians or African or mixed stock and those of Indian ancestry, competition rather than symbiosis has hitherto prevailed.

To recapitulate, all these British Caribbean territories have a common Negro-White racial and cultural basis. In Trinidad and British Guiana an Indian segment is also present, and in some of the colonies there are also minorities of Jews, Syrians or Chinese. Comparative treatment of these different social and cultural amalgams directs attention to the differences between ethnic and cultural pluralism. Ethnicity has a number of overlapping but different references, namely, racial origin, nationality, language and culture. These references invest such terms as ethnic pluralism with an initial ambiguity. In contrast, the idea of cultural pluralism is quite clear. I shall therefore discuss the idea of cultural plurality, before returning to the concept of ethnicity as such.

By cultural plurality I understand a condition in which two or more different cultural traditions characterise the population of a given society. To discover whether or not this heterogeneity obtains, we must make a detailed study of the institutions of the population in which we are interested to discover their form, variety, and distribution. In a culturally homogenous society, such institutions as marriage, the family, religion, property, and the like are common to the total population. Where cultural plurality obtains, different sections of the total population practise different forms of these common institutions; and, because institutions involve patterned activities, social relations, and idea-systems, in a condition of cultural plurality, the culturally differentiated sections will differ in their internal social organisation, their institutional activities, and their system of belief and value. Where this condition of cultural plurality is found the societies are plural societies. Where cultural homogeneity obtains, the societies are homogenous units.

By virtue of their cultural and social constitution, plural societies are only units in a political sense. Each is a political unit simply because it has a single government. But the task of government can only be discharged consistently within culturally diverse populations if one or other of these sections dominates the political structure, or some form of federalism is adopted. In either case, the political structure of plural societies consists largely of the relations between their component cultural sections, and changes in this system of intersectional relations occurs together with changes in the political constitution of the unit

as a whole. Democratic governmental forms appropriate to plural societies are usually federal. Autocratic governmental forms reserve the ultimate political functions for one or other of the constituent cultural sections, even where other sections are separated territorially, for instance on reservations, and are allowed some internal autonomy. But some uniformity of laws and government is essential, if the society is to remain a political unit at all. Excluding government and law, the institutional differences which indicate cultural plurality relate to marriage, family, education, property, religion, economic institutions, language, and folklore. In all these particulars, there are differences within the Negro-White Caribbean community which indicate a condition of cultural plurality. Between the East Indian and Negro-White Creole segment, the cultural difference is still greater.

The idea of ethnic difference is less precise than that of cultural plurality. In some usages of the term, ethnicity refers to race, in others to culture, and in yet others to nationality. The first thing to note is that persons or groups of different race may share a common culture, as in Muhammadan Hausa-Fulani societies of Northern Nigeria. Conversely, people of the same race may practise different cultures, as in the London of Disraeli, Dickens, and Mayhew, or many villages of India. Another important point is that as a rule, the social definition of race differs from the biological definition; moreover different societies may define the same racial groups differently. Thus the population of Guatemala distinguishes between its Spanish, mixed (Ladino), and Indian elements; but to some students these Ladino and Indian groups are racially similar. Similarly, the elite of Haiti reserve the term *Negre* for the subordinate population; but to the Americans, Haitians are Negro by race.

In the U.S.A. for instance, ethnicity connotes cultural differences which are quite compatible with the inclusive social order, either because they are differences within a common idiom or a permitted range, or because the groups which practise these variant cultures are numerically weak, and are dependent portions of the larger society. Insofar as nationality is the criterion of ethnicity, some cultural or linguistic difference is often implicit; but once again these differences may be minor variations on general cultural patterns, as for instance family organisation, marriage rituals, language and food habits among the Irish or Italians of New York. Bilingualism and acculturation of these groups is indicated by such terms as Irish-American, Italian-American, etc. These cultural variations are thus neither inconsistent with one another nor with the wider American society and culture.

If compatibility of institutional norms characterises ethnic pluralism, their incompatibility may be taken to distinguish cultural pluralism.

Societies depend for integration primarily on the consistency and interdependence of their institutional systems. Hence special problems face a society which contains groups with incompatible institutional allegiances. These problems are most acute when a small ruling group has one cultural tradition and the mass of the population has another. This is the type-situation of British Caribbean history.

In discussing population composition I think race and nationality are appropriate terms. In discussing the cultural homogeneity or plurality of a given population, I think culture is the appropriate term. Where linguistic differences are under study, we can speak of linguistic groups. By isolating these variables and by referring to them directly, we avoid the need for ambiguous concepts, such as ethnicity, and can study the processes and forms of acculturation and assimilation as they occur.

In societies such as these of the British Caribbean with long histories of acculturation, assimilation and miscegenation, the concept of ethnicity has doubtful utility, even with regard to such minorities as Jews, Syrians, Portuguese, or Chinese. These are national minorities, and their further classification in terms of race or culture depends unambiguously on our definition of these terms. In analysing the Negro-White Creole amalgam, we must deal directly with race, culture and social relations, and seek to determine their covariation or independence. Relations between the East Indian and Creole segments of Trinidad and British Guiana can also be analysed in these terms. Essentially we are concerned to understand the cultural character and social structure of multi-racial populations, which may or may not contain national minorities also. It is difficult to conduct precise studies of these problems with such ambiguous concepts as ethnicity.

Government and the economic system are the two principal sources of social order in the Caribbean. Government acts to limit the chances of conflict, and to maintain or increase the opportunities for acculturation; the economic system embraces the entire population, although in different degrees and ways. In the first place the peasantry practise a mixed economy of subsistence and exchange; the townsfolk are mainly involved in the exchange system. In the second place there is division of labour by race and cultural group. By and large East Indians form the bulk of the field labour force on sugar plantations in Trinidad and British Guiana, Negroes in other colonies. Coloured folk are heavily represented in clerical occupations, whites in management

and executive roles. The professions and the higher ranks of the local Civil Service now contain members of all racial groups. In occupational distributions, it is the fact of cultural performance and skills that is decisive rather than racial status; and the historic and continuing inequality of opportunities primarily attaches to cultural sections rather than to racial groups as such. Although most field hands are black, many are brown, and some are white. Although most executives are white, many are brown, and some are pure Negro. For analytic purposes the occupational ratios of different racial groups in different occupations does not tell the whole story, since none of these racial segments is culturally homogenous

One major preoccupation of plural societies is with the choice between eliminating or maintaining their internal difference; and the social and cultural integration of such units is often mooted in terms of this choice. In the history of the British Caribbean possessions, drastic attempts to solve this riddle of integration have been made on three occasions.

In 1838, the abolition of slavery "freed a race, but failed to create a society". The numerically minute but politically dominant White planter class which then opposed abolition, despite its experience that slave production of sugar was no longer economic, feared that social chaos would follow emancipation. With the aid of restrictive property franchises, this White cultural section retained control of the colonial governments for another 30 years, until the sense of their own weakness influenced them to surrender the reins of authority to the Crown and its officers. In Jamaica, this abrogation of the ancient representative constitution took place in 1865, and was openly heralded as the only alternative to a breakdown in the social structure.

Since 1945, this system of Crown Colony rule has been replaced by responsible government based on adult suffrage and operating through ministerial systems. Political parties and trade unions are now recognised institutions, and have flourished under the new regime. At the same time, the idea of a British Caribbean Federation has been actively publicised, and, with the exception of British Guiana, British Honduras, and the British Virgin Islands, these colonies are now firmly committed to federation. Yet the chances are that such a federal structure will slow down the rate of exchange within each of its constituent territories, rather than accelerate it.

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