Agrarian processes within 'plantation economies': cases from Guyana and coastal Ecuador

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'L'économie de plantation' en tant que modèle de dépendance pour l'analyse de la société Antillaise, présente des problèmes théoriques et pratiques quand le modèle est appliqué à des situations actuelles agraires. Ces problèmes sont créés par la dichotomie entre la plantation et le paysan, et à cause de la supposition que ce sont des structures homogènes et empiriques. En comparaison, les études ethnographiques ont démontrées la compléxité des formes agraires contemporaines. Cependant, un effort continuel pour raffiner ces modèles a obscuré les processus variables de différenciations économiques dans les systèmes agraires locaux dans lesquels la production a été, et est encore, basée sur l'exportation. Afin de contribuer à une meilleure compréhension générale de ces processus, cet article fournit deux études des changements agraires locaux dans les 'économies de plantation' et essait d'isoler les facteurs qui contribuent aux variations observées dans ces histoires agraires.

'Plantation economy,' as a dependency model for analysing West Indian society, has theoretical and practical problems when applied to actual agrarian situations. These problems stem from a 'plantation-peasant' dichotomy and from the assumption that these are homogeneous, empirical structures. In contrast, ethnographic studies have pointed out the complexity of contemporary agrarian forms. However, a continuing effort to refine these types has, in turn, obscured the variable processes of economic differentiation within local agrarian systems in which production has been, and is, for export. In order to contribute to a more general understanding of these processes, this article provides two case studies of local agrarian change within plantation economies and tries to isolate those factors which contributed to the observed variations in these agrarian histories.

INTRODUCTION

West Indian dependency theorists analyse tropical export agriculture using

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'plantation economy' as a central descriptive and analytical tool.[1] A 'plantation economy' is by definition one which is heavily dependent on the large-scale, export-oriented production of tropical crops and in which plantations control a disproportionate share of national economic aggregates (e.g., total output, capital, land area in cultivation, income and employment) (Beckford, 1972: 13). A plantation economy also has direct colonial antecedents (Courtenay, 1980: 2), and historically, local labour shortages led to 'non-market mechanisms' for allocating labour (Mandle, 1983). Finally, within the agrarian sector, the growth of plantations necessitated, and empirically caused, a preclusion, elimination or pauperization of peasant agriculture.

Using this model, economists have assumed that 'plantations' – and their antithesis, 'peasants' – described and explained West Indian rural society. However, this neat formulation had three major theoretical drawbacks when applied to actual, empirical analyses. First, the concept 'plantation' was linked to an inordinate number of rural 'objects.' Beginning as a single 'agricultural estate' (Wolf and Mintz, 1957: 380), analysts derived 'plantation societies,' 'plantation systems,' a 'plantation psychology' (Beckford, 1972: 14), 'plantation communities' (Beckford, 1972:53), and a 'plantation mode of production' (Mandle, 1982: 37–52). 'Plantation' developed far too many meanings to be empirically useful.

Second, because 'plantation' was not only a descriptive label but also an explanation of a singular agrarian process which eliminated the non-plantation or 'peasant' sector, this peasant sector was homogenized and treated as a uniform and undifferentiated society and culture (Benn, 1974; Silverman, 1979).

Third, because plantations, as units of production, were treated as undifferentiated units which recruit labour, the concept of labour was conceptually fragmented in order to subordinate it to the plantation. This led to such confusing hybrids as 'the tenant plantation,' 'tenant workers,' and the 'family plantation' (Beckford, 1972: 168–82) – all of which were used, like 'peasantry,' without regard for the debates, both theoretical and empirical, which surround these terms.

Despite this theoretical confusion, the plantation model was used to address the more general problem of underdevelopment. Since agriculture was seen as either peasant or plantation, it was assumed that the potential for growth lay in the 'peasant sector' which had hitherto been suppressed, as opposed to the 'plantation sector' which was the cause of underdevelopment in the first instance (Beckford, 1972: 224; Girvan, 1973: 17). With this base, development strategies were both highly theoretical and contradictory. For example, although agriculture had to be re-oriented to produce food for internal use instead of commodities for export, it had to generate, at the same time, 'the resources to create new industries' (Mandle, 1982: 71). Or, although agrarian reform seemed necessary (Beckford, 1972: 224; Girvan, 1973: 17; Long, 1982; Mandle, 1973: 141; Mandle, 1982: 74), the complex, pragmatic problems were reduced to an ideological debate on whether this should involve creating a small-holding 'peasantry' or collectivizing rural producers (Mandle, 1982: 74–7).

Such discussions occurred even though micro-studies of West Indian rural society clearly showed that there has been, and continues to be, extensive empirical complexity in the agrarian processes of so-called plantation economies.[2] To contribute to a more general understanding of this complexity, I describe two local political economies within the 'plantation economies' of rural Guyana and coastal Ecuador. I show what has happened in two local agrarian systems where production has been, and is, for export. I argue that although economic and class differentiation is inevitable, this is neither a singular process nor a simple interaction between peasants and plantations. Rather, complex histories occur, and variations derive from the changing relations of production which underlie the production of the export commodity; from altering land tenure patterns; from the variable role of kinship in both the production and accumulation process; from the role of occupational multiplicity and economic diversification; from the legal and political parameters which continuously affect the interaction of classes; and from the patterns of conflict and political alignments which emerge within the agrarian system. Also crucial are the variable roles played by the State, its agencies and transnational corporations at particular points in time, particularly in terms of the segments which are favoured by the policies of each.

Finally, I suggest that the nature of the export commodities themselves are important. First, I question whether local processing of the commodity is necessary, for this can generate local specialists or entrepreneurs whose profits may be used for local, lateral investments and who possibly, therefore, form the basis of a local capitalist class.

Second, if the export commodity has a local use-value, small-holders are able to move in and out of the export linkage, according to changing preferences rather than making a long-term commitment to a fixed production and distribution strategy. This provides greater flexibility for small-holders and may permit their very survival.

Third, such flexibility can also be provided by an articulation which permits more than one export commodity, especially when inter-cropping or simultaneous cropping is possible and when the different commodities are linked into different marketing networks.

Fourth, and related to the above, is the particular history of the export commodity in particular locales: whether it develops and remains an extension of household production for consumption. Where it does, non-locals (urban dwellers, foreigners, bureaucrats, etc.) are less likely to perceive export commodity production as an area in which to invest their externally generated capital. Production, as well as profits, then remain in the hands of local producers and may be invested locally.

Finally, is the commodity continuously cropped, as are bananas in coastal Ecuador, or is it planted/harvested annually or semi-annually, as is Guyanese rice? This affects the condition of small-holders and local labour. Seasonal cropping permits greater occupational multiplicity and flexibility; conversely, continuous cropping may provide one of the pre-conditions for a fully proletarianized, albeit casually employed, resident labour force.

TWO COUNTIES IN COASTAL ECUADOR

The agrarian history of the Ecuadorian coast is usually described as a series of booms and busts in the tropical export sector beginning in 1880 when an expanding metropolitan demand for cacao caused an increase in coastal production and export

(Larrea, n.d.: 139–40). The resulting boom saw the growth of an internationally connected planter elite, extensive land concentrations (Weinman, 1970), the elimination of yeoman farmers (Uggen, 1975: 73), and a highland to coast labour migration.

Agrarian analysts, however, have difficulties describing coastal agrarian systems (Silverman, 1986) because a stereotypical opposition between hacienda and plantation is assumed to correspond to both a highland-coast distinction and a feudal-capitalist division. As a result, coastal agrarian studies are of two types. The first analyses the history of a single agro-export commodity – usually cacao or bananas – from the perspective of the changing international export market. Production patterns are described only as incidental adjuncts to the nature of the export market. Second, general overviews of coastal agriculture aim to typologise the types of production in the seemingly 'capitalist' agro-export sector. Using variations in geographical or centre-periphery location, in the sizes of production units and in the historical periods during which an area came into production and linked with the export market (CIDA, 1965; A. Colin-Delavaud, 1973; C. Colin-Delavaud, 1973), these studies have little concern with the functional and contextual implications of their typologies. Overall, there are only a few ethnographies of coastal agriculture (e.g., Lang, 1969; Redclift, 1978; Uggen, 1975).

In the southern part of the coast, in the province of El Oro, I chose two counties (population 21,953) for a case study of coastal agrarian history, beginning with the so-called cacao boom.[3] This area, like the coast in general, became linked to the agro-export market in the 1880s and 1890s in the context of the expanding boom. Entrepreneurs bought up privately held lands as well as rights to extensive hectareage in what were communal farming areas (Uggen 1975: 71–4). In the two counties, one such buyer was Juan Garcia. Born in Cuenca, in the southern highlands, he bought extensive hectareage between 1874 and his death in 1896. Several of these sales contracts stipulated that the buyer, Garcia, had to respect an existing rental agreement between the previous owner and a tenant, or, that he had to pay the share-croppers the value of the plants which they had seeded, again according to a pre-existing contract. Thus, non-capitalist relations of production remained common during the cacao export boom.

Juan Garcia's two sons were educated in the professions and lived locally. They married into other large planter families and continued to accumulate land. The capital and growing estate, which initially had been jointly run by the father and his unmarried brother, continued to be jointly administered by the two sons in association with their unmarried uncle after the father's death. Over the next two generations, wives brought in additional lands and, although a decree of separation divided the property amongst the cousins in the 1940s, joint sibling associations continued into the 1970s.

In 1909, a provincial directory described something of the local political economy during the boom. First, although cacao for export was central, the agro-export sector was far more diversified than the term 'cacao boom' would imply. Coffee, sugar, and fruit were also exported, as well as tobacco, rice, and rubber. There were cattle for the internal market, and within individual enterprises (called 'haciendas'), mixed production was common. Indeed, mono-cropping, from the descriptions provided, never occurred and on some estates cacao was not the dominant crop. On most 'haciendas,' however, the under-utilisation of land was common. Second, transport nets (roads and rail) linked interior population centres with coastal ports rather than with each other, and marketing was in the hands of local merchants who, in addition to buying up cacao, coffee, rubber etc. for export, retailed imported manufactured goods. Several of these merchants also owned 'haciendas' and capital thus moved between the commercial and agricultural sectors. This cacao elite controlled the political and judicial offices of the province while, on their estates, they used relations of production which were both non-capitalist, as seen in the Garcia deeds, and capitalist.

The cacao boom ended in 1924 as a result of disease, declining world prices and increased competition. Until 1941, although exports declined drastically (CIDA, 1965: 410), the two counties still articulated closely with the export market. A provincial directory in 1934 shows that the population increased in the two counties after 1910, despite the bust, and that agriculture, which absorbed the vast majority of the population, was geared to the agro-export crops of cacao, coffee, bananas, and tobacco. The fact of this continuing articulation was corroborated by informants who recalled the control which two merchant families, who were also estate owners, exercised over marketing their crops. All produce passed through their hands, as did all incoming goods. The difficulty of transport and the isolation in the wet seasons increased their control. The merchants' agricultural enterprises were divided into small-holdings and rented out; rents were paid in cacao.

This feature points to the major change which occurred after the end of the cacao boom, namely, the extension of non-capitalist relations of production. Former wage labourers and current migrants were transformed into tenants and sharecroppers as the bust caused more landlord absenteeism and as indebtedness cut into cash flows (Uggen, 1975: 121–2).

In 1941, the Peruvians invaded southern Ecuador and occupied the two counties, dispersing the inhabitants, their cattle, and the local property registers. After their five month occupation ended, some resident planters returned. They bought lands which many non-returning exiles were selling and occupied properties which no longer had legal titles. They were joined by urban merchants from Guayaquil and Machala and by squatters – former small-holders and highland migrants. The agro-export link remained fundamental to this agrarian society – the main crops being cacao and coffee (Agricultural Census, 1954). However, the changes in landholding patterns began to articulate with an expanding international demand for Ecuadorian bananas, and a new 'boom'[4] gradually reached the two counties in the southern part of the coast.

The boom had begun in the north, in the late 1940s, with the Gros Michel variety of banana. By the early 1960s, changes in the international market (Levie, 1966) forced the introduction of the new Cavendish variety, and with it, major alterations in the zones which articulated with the banana export market. Specifically, the Gros Michel variety and banana production for export were gradually eliminated in the north and central areas of the coast, while the new Cavendish variety became concentrated in areas close to the ports of Guayaquil and Puerto Bolivar, with their better infrastructure (drainage, irrigation, and transport) and more suitable soils and climate. In 1966, El Oro province had 9.6 per cent of the country's banana hectareage and 17.1 per cent of the producers; by 1978, it had almost 35 per cent of the hectareage and 53 per cent of all producers.[5]

The new agro-export articulation is generally regarded as an important avenue by which small producers emerged and prospered. Indeed, in 1965, before the boom in the south, four families owned 50 per cent of the banana land in El Oro (CIDA, 1965) and over the next decade there was a major statistical de-concentration. Producers with less than 20 hectares of bananas constituted, in 1978, almost 74 per cent of all producers – up from 47 per cent in 1966; and the land they held had increased in proportion. They had 32 per cent of the banana hectareage in 1978 as compared with 13 per cent in 1966. Average banana hecterage per producer in 1966 was 37.3; by 1978 it was 17.5. Seemingly, in El Oro, banana production and the articulation with the export market were levelling mechanisms.

Within the two counties between 1966 and 1978, the levelling was accompanied by an opening of new lands and a concomitant increase in the number of holdings.[6] Underlying all this, however, were complex socio-economic processes as cacao estates were revived by descendants of the old cacao elite, by expansionary producers who had entered the two counties in the 1940s, and by professionals who now invested urban capital in bananas. In addition, small-holding tenants began to plant bananas and open new lands. Although wage labour became the dominant mode of labour recruitment, this did not replace non-capitalist relations, and a renewed highland to coast migration provided more labourers, tenants, and share-croppers. To understand what happened to each of these groups in the context of the expanding boom, it is necessary to look at their initial relation to land, labour and capital, to see the impact of agrarian reform legislation in the mid-1960s, and finally, to view the cumulative effects of the export market articulation by the late 1970s.

The merchants and planters who entered after the Peruvian invasion in 1941 lived locally, personally managed their estates, used wage labour on their holdings, and made a rapid transition to mono-cropping bananas. Siblings often had joint enterprises, but unlike the cacao elite, such siblings had divided their lands upon inheritance and had brought together only some land and capital into a limited liability company. It was a system of co-operation rather than of undivided patrimonies.

The urban professionals who bought up land as an investment also mono-cropped bananas and used wage labour. They did not live in the area, however; instead, a hired foreman looked after their holdings while they commuted between city and plantation, generally weekly.

A third important group in the two counties was made up of the highland migrants who had taken out share-cropping contracts with the old cacao elite in the 1950s and early 1960s. The majority were also part-time wage labourers on the banana plantations owned by the post-1941 planters. These migrants did not retain familial economies even though sets of brothers often arrived together. In the case of the three Vite brothers, one became a share-cropper as well as a wage labourer, taking out a cropping contract in the early 1960s. Another brother saved some capital and bought a small-holding; he also inherited an additional small-holding through his wife. The third brother worked solely for wages. As it turned out, Ecuadorian agrarian processes were to have severe effects on this early pattern of differentiation.

In 1964, the first agrarian reform legislation abolished non-capitalist forms of production by permitting share-croppers and tenants to form 'co-operatives' and to petition for the expropriation of the owners on whose lands they were cropping, tenanting, or squatting. In 1966, the share-croppers on one of the Garcia estates did precisely that; and because the Peruvians had destroyed the local land registry and the Garcia siblings could produce only inadequate proof of land ownership, such as unregistered deeds of sale, over 550 hectares were expropriated and turned over to the co-operative in individual holdings varying from 5 to 85 hectares.

In the mid-1970s, with additional reform laws, there were more denunciations of Garcia as of other old landlords. According to informants, these later claims were only intermittently successful because landlords were able to 'prove' that the claimants had been only wage workers and not share-croppers. They did this by having their own, dependent labourers depose that the claimant was simply a wage worker also. This caused great bitterness amongst local people; it also caused a major cleavage in the workers' movement: some received land while others were totally proletarianized. In any case, by the late 1970s, the continuing link with the banana export sector was severely affecting the differentiation process amongst these various groups as a result of differential access to capital, land, and labour.

In the two counties, only one transnational intervened in banana production and it did so in only one way. Standard Fruit selected those plantations of over 50 hectares with particularly good soils and location. Using its own capital, Standard's technicians improved drainage and irrigation, introduced transport by funiculars, and built mechanised packing plants, roads, and fencing. Standard then administered the plantation for the period which it took the owner, by selling all the fruit to Standard, to pay back the original capital investment. At the expiry of the contract, Standard could continue administering the plantation or the owner could reclaim it and sign an export contract with another exporter. Such a technified plantation rivalled, in productivity, the plantations of Central America; and even where production costs were high, the returns were well worth the capital investment.

The other method by which a banana producer could increase returns was to buy more land. However, the State had placed an embargo on new banana hectareage due to declining markets and the high productivity of the Cavendish; only land already planted could be bought, and prices, not surprisingly, were extremely high. By 1978, investing capital was the only way to increase production.

In addition to regulating production, State involvement was through the Programa Nacional del Banano, an agency which provided technical advice and fumigation services to all 'official producers' – a designation assigned by field agronomists who, each year, amended the list of producers eligible for services. The criteria for inclusion, that is, the criteria for not de-listing hectareage given the embargo on new hectareage, were the quality of bananas produced, the absence of inter-cropped, mature cacao plants and the likelihood that the producer could secure export space via the inspectors of the various companies who roamed the banana zone buying bananas. Since fruit quality and capital investment reinforce each other, as do extensive hectareage and mono-cropping, small producers were being gradually de-listed.[7] They then were denied fumigation services, the fruit quality deteriorated further and they were less and less likely to sell. Although intermediaries were illegal,[8] de-listed or unlisted small producers did sell to larger growers who often required extra bananas to fill their export quota for the week; or, for a time, they bribed a company's buyers.

Programa officials present the Agency as a champion of the small producers and as opposed, therefore, to the tyranny of the transnational and large Ecuadorian exporters. However, their insistence on quality fruit, their constant complaints about the inefficiency of small-scale production, and their collusion in State efforts to de-list 10,000 hectares by the late 1970s, means that they favour the medium producers who, not surprisingly, often include the Programa's agronomists and officials themselves – that is, those urban professionals who were the more recent investors in banana lands.

The differentiation process within the banana sector of the two counties, then, had three features. First, highly capitalized enterprises were capturing continuously greater proportions of the export market. Second, the smallest producers were being sloughed off by this cumulative concentration process. They turned to other export crops, notably cacao and coffee, the former of which was initially inter-cropped amongst the banana plants. Such a 'mixed plantation' was maintained for several years until the cacao was taller than the banana plants so that banana fumigation damaged the cacao flower. A choice was then made between the two, and small-holders generally chose cacao – not simply because of the problems in gaining access to the banana export market, but also because of production costs. Every five hectares of bananas requires one full-time labourer, whereas 20 hectares of cacao can be managed by a man and one son. Cacao for the small-holder was an export crop suitable to familial cultivation, whereas bananas required capitalist relations. Bananas, however, if they could be regularly sold to exporters, were considerably more profitable.

Third, the viable, non-technified producers were simultaneously in opposition and alliance with the technified producer because they had to disengage from the attrition processes which removed the small producers while simultaneously facing many of the same problems. Disengagement could be partially accomplished by, inter alia, attempting to obtain export contracts with a transnational or national exporter; by a continued professional status which provided outside capital and limited dependence on bananas; and by taking advantage of the policies of the Programa which provided subsidized technical aid and the occasional independent export contract. Disengagement was temporarily helped by cutting production costs – such as not using insecticide-treated bags – and by diversifying production and investing capital in other enterprises – notably cacao land, pasture and education.[9] Depending on how this disengagement occurred, the potential for continuing differentiation was great.

Within the co-operatives, banana production was aggravating cleavages. The dismemberment of the Garcia estate in favour of the share-croppers resulted in different-sized holdings legally assigned to individual producers who, in turn, depending on their share-cropping contract, had had holdings planted with different crops. Cacao was predominant in some, bananas in others. From the beginning therefore, differences existed. These were not only exacerbated over time, they also cut into the ideology of co-operation which had come out of that period which the members call 'the fight for the land.' Since then, several holdings had been sold to others thereby causing the beginnings of a land concentration within the co-operative; several members had joined a banana export co-operative which linked them to outside bourgeois producers and urban professionals, and which overrode their links within the co-operative; and the co-operative, in failing to pool land or capital, essentially had become a group of independent producers who shared only a history. Labour also was no longer pooled. When communal work was required for such things as repairing drainage trenches, members no longer came themselves but sent labourers or contributed money. Having differentiated themselves from their extended kin on arriving on the coast, and from other workers via agrarian reform, co-operative members were in turn being divided and re-aligned with other classes.

The labourers constituted 60 per cent of the rural male population in the two counties. As a class, they too were internally differentiated. Some owned one to five hectares – an amount insufficient to support a household – and supplemented their incomes with wage labour. Others were completely proletarianized; they were recent highland migrants who had had little opportunity to gain from agrarian reform or land purchase.

Workers were not unionized; this was the result of further cleavages. According to one union organizer, many labourers have important ties with the highlands: 'They earn their money and then go home and spend it on a fiesta or on land.' The casual status of others also precluded unionization as did the absolute opposition of growers. These features were largely the result of the way labour was recruited. On Hacienda Maria, a technified banana plantation of 200 hectares, there were 80 full-time workers and about 40 part-time workers who put in two to three days each week. A third of the labour force was therefore casual. Full-time workers lived and worked on the plantation. Casual labour, however, was recruited by the estate foreman from nearby villages; workers grouped themselves into gangs of six and a designated leader negotiated with the foreman. No casual worker was hired on his own. A gang generally worked for several different growers in the space of a week.

Owners, therefore, only had direct contact with a part of their labour force. As a reflection of this bifurcation, relations between producers and labourers took on one of two stereotypical patterns – either patron-clientage or extreme conflict, which, in some situations such as wage disputes, led to violence. An example of clientage was where a worker's child was taken into the producer's home, raised there, and later expected to provide absolute loyalty. More usual was the cheap housing provided for full-time workers. There were also cases in which a long-time, loyal worker was made foreman of a plantation or of a section of an estate. He was responsible for guarding the produce, recruiting labour gangs, and even making production decisions in the case of an absentee grower. This foreman earned more than his fellows and became an intermediate level in a patron-client network: the gangs which he hired were his kin and friends.

The foremen thus became the points at which the two types of relationship – class antagonism and patron-client dependency – articulated. However, the limited number of foremen, and their limited functions, meant that the two systems were essentially separate.

Class conflict was exacerbated by two additional features. First, there was no governmental arena in which conflict could be negotiated and dampened. Local councils in the two counties were essentially powerless – run by the large growers, whether by appointment or election, for no real purpose. Whenever public works and local infrastructure were needed, it was provided by the seeming generosity of a large banana producer. In one village, the schools, the water supply and a local park were the result of a grower's ostensible goodwill. Second, the opposition between owners and workers was exacerbated as technification proceeded and cut down on labour needs. Hacienda Ceibales, recently an untechnified plantation of 300 hectares, had had 18 packing plants, each employing 24 labourers for five days each week. Funiculars were installed, however, and a central packing plant built. On completion, the one plant handled the same 1,500 boxes which were cut weekly with only one day of work. The field labour for cutting was also reduced: before funiculars, three gangs worked six days; afterwards, the three gangs worked only one day.

RAJGAHR VILLAGE, GUYANA

There is a long tradition in Caribbean rural analysis which seeks to clarify rural 'structures.' Confronted by an empirical complexity of 'part-peasants,' plantation workers who had plots of land, 'peasants' who worked on plantations, fishermen who had farms, farmers who fished, etc., analysts have tried to create order out of the seeming chaos by refining rural 'types.' In coastal Guyana, for example, agrarian history is seldom attempted. Instead, it is assumed that its character is contained in the label 'plantation economy,' which, in turn, presumes that the agrarian sector was neatly divided between plantations linked to transnationals and struggling, under-capitalized peasants. In Rajgahr Village, West Coast Berbice,[10] neither the concept nor the dichotomy are helpful for understanding rural social organization, agrarian history, or the agro-export sector. Indeed, they obscure the complex process of economic differentiation. In this section, I look at this process in order to elaborate this point and to derive, in comparison with the Ecuadorian case, the implications of export agriculture on local agrarian processes.

In 1970, Rajgahr village had a population of 3,158 people, all of East Indian descent, in 492 households. The main occupation was rice farming: over 60 per cent of the village households planted rice, and in all, villagers cultivated over 4,500 acres in and around the village. When the village was founded as an East Indian Land Settlement for former indentured labourers in 1902, all village households were seemingly equal. Each had been allotted a houselot, a cultivation lot (three-quarters of an acre), and the right to rent two or three acres behind the village proper.[11] The lands were planted mainly in rice, with surplus sold to padi agents working for British firms, or after 1905, to a local rice miller. This cash was used to pay rates and rents and to purchase secondary foodstuffs. Additional cash came from wage labour, for all the men worked also on a nearby sugar estate. Indeed, not only had Rajgahr been purposefully located to provide a labour pool (Young, 1958: 152), but land allocations were insufficient to permit full-time rice cultivation.

Despite this seeming equality amongst households in 1902, by 1970 65 per cent of farmers had less than 10 acres of riceland, whereas 26 per cent had between 11 and 26 acres. The remaining 19 per cent had more than 21 acres, with about a dozen households having over 100. Household incomes varied from under several hundred dollars to over $10,000 U.S., and the local economy was a kaleidoscope of occupational multiplicity. In addition to the stereotypical combination of rice cultivation and plantation wage labour, there were tradesmen, professionals, shopkeepers, millers, dealers (cattle, fish, greens), and transporters (owners of buses, taxis and trucks). Many of these combined several occupations into one enterprise and many hired the labour of their fellow villagers.

This diversification began with the village's increasing integration into the domestic and export rice market prior to, and during, World War I. This was brought about by colonial policy, which before the War aimed at making the colony self-sufficient in a basic foodstuff, and which during the War aimed to use Guyanese rice to supply the West Indian market. As these interests developed over the first two decades of the twentieth century, colonial policy effected changes which were crucial for the Rajgahr economy.

In 1910, an American agro-export company was given extensive acreage on empty lands next to the village. Although the company empoldered its holding and caused severe drainage problems for neighbouring Rajgahr, within a few years, the 1914 Polder Ordinances provided a new drainage and irrigation scheme. Begun in 1916 and completed in 1919, it opened up 1,000 acres of riceland behind the village. Co-operative Credit Banks, founded in 1916, loaned money to finance a rice expansion which was also made possible by new technology introduced by the now departed American company.

However, the drainage and irrigation scheme never functioned properly and crop returns were reduced in a situation in which households had gone into debt in order to expand production. The Co-operative Credit Banks, which might have alleviated the situation, were under-capitalized and the availability of wage work on the sugar estate was uncertain (Report of the Immigration Agent General, 1913, 1914, 1917, 1918). Capital was scarce. Yet, prices for rice were high during the War, and after the War the colonial government again encouraged agricultural expansion by introducing new Crown Land Regulations in 1919 allowing small-holders to buy or lease unused Crown Lands. Lands across the Abary River, seven miles behind the village, were surveyed and placed under these ordinances. In Rajgahr, about a dozen households out of a population of 623, according to the 1911 census, took out leases in this Crown Land area. This decision had important repercussions over the next five decades.

Essentially, the issues were whether a household would relocate for part of the year to the undeveloped, undrained Abary, and whether it was willing to go into debt in order to drain and cultivate this low-lying savannah. With roads impassable in the rainy season, such households also had to forego wage work on the sugar estates. Alternatively, households could remain in the village and simply take up a share in the newly drained 1,000 acres adjacent to the village. Such households could complement rice production with wage labour and did not need to expand capital to take out a lease or to develop new lands.

The 12 households which chose to expand their rice base into the Abary all had sons in their teens: the availability of labour must have been crucial in their decision. So was the availability of cash. The fact that all households chose to lease rather than to buy meant that a capital shortage perhaps precluded other households from the expansion.

Equally important for expanding production, either locally or in the Abary, was credit. This became available because rice had increased in importance as an export commodity and had given increasingly large profits to the entrepreneurs and agents who controlled the link between the producers and transnational export companies. One such entrepreneur used his profits to buy a local rice mill, and using the cash from his role as a padi agent, he began extending credit and loans to cover villagers' production costs and crop failures. The owner of a second village rice mill, to maintain his clientele, was forced to do the same.

Thus, land, labour, and capital, each from a different source, came together to expand the rice base of village households, whether locally or in the Abary. Initially, the situation of the full-time Abary cultivators was the more difficult: they were heavily indebted to the millers and they no longer worked for wages. However, during the 1920s and 1930s, when a contracting sugar market and new technology displaced labour (Mandle, 1973: 75), the relative advantage of the rice-wage labour option deteriorated as compared with the full-time rice adaptation. Indeed, during that same period, rice rapidly grew as an export commodity to the West Indies, and the debts to the millers decreased. By the mid-1930s, a small capitalist class of rice farmers had emerged: they specialized in rice and hired non-household labour.

This new capitalist class also included several households from the adjacent village of Armadale. There, over 1,000 acres were in the hands of one family which had raised capital in two ways. First, the family founder, Easter Jaikarran, had been a local moneylender in the early years of the twentieth century when interest rates were as high as 416 per cent (Report of the Immigration Agent General, 1903). This provided a second means of generating capital – investment in local industry. In 1915, Jaikarran bought a rice mill which the American company had built on their holding. He moved it to Rajgahr and sold it to a villager while still holding the mortgage. The villager, illiterate in English and a part-time wage labourer, went into debt. Jaikarran foreclosed and sold the mill to his sister's brother-in-law, that is, to one of the families which, ironically, were to undercut Jaikarran's moneylending activities by extending credit to cultivators at an interest rate of only 12 per cent. A short time later, however, Jaikarran died. His sons inherited the Armadale property and they jointly ran the enterprise for several decades, gradually bringing more and more of the Armadale lands under rice or cattle. In the 1920s and 1930s, they did this in association with one of the millers: the miller provided the capital, the Jaikarrans the land and labour, and the profits were evenly divided. The Jaikarrans generally married Rajgahr residents, mainly from the Abary group, and indeed, many of the Jaikarran families lived in Rajgahr and most also took up Abary lands.

Like the Jaikarrans in Armadale, Rajgahr farmers with Abary land also began to diversify. Excess land which could not be brought under rice was used for cattle. Non-Abary villagers also kept a few head on their local acreage. Such acreage, however, was losing ground to rice, and ultimately it would be only the Abary landholders who could maintain large and profitable herds.

Thus, the new capitalist class which had emerged by the mid-1930s consisted of full-time rice farmers and cattle rearers who had used local merchant capital to finance their expansion and government policy to obtain the land – both the result of an expanding export market. Then, familial labour having given way to hired labour, mechanization was the next step – the result of events between 1935 and 1950.

First, rice prices declined 'disastrously' after 1935 (Mandle, 1973: 78) and villagers responded to declining incomes by introducing new crops – greens and provisions – on their cultivation lots, although they maintained rice on the 1,000 acres behind the village. This new cultivation, which was also a response to soil exhaustion, meant a partial withdrawal from the export market and a closer articulation with the internal market. Profits increased despite the declining rice prices and total crop failure was precluded. The overall effects were to decrease indebtedness, to remove interest payments to the millers, and to increase domestic capital and savings.

Second, colonial policy again intervened. In 1939, a Rice Marketing Board was established as the sole exporter of rice and as an agency entitled to make direct contracts with importing countries. This removed the millers and padi agents from their entrepreneurial roles and displaced the transnationals from the rice trade. Producers' returns increased.

Third, with the advent of the War, rice prices improved. By 1943, these had doubled over 1939 (Nath, 1970: 157). Finally, a Grow More Food Campaign was established to discourage imports during the War. Marketing depots were set up and prices for produce were fixed. There was a marked increase in the cultivation of ground provisions. In Rajgahr, over 500 acres were put under cultivation – just slightly less than the acreage in rice.

By the end of the War, a new stratification pattern resulted from these conjunctures. Two of the old segments continued: first, the Abary capitalist farmers, and second, that section of the local population which was still dependent on estate labour and miller financing and credit. Indeed, even in 1970, poorer households sold to rice millers – the least profitable method of surplus disposal. Out of this indebted group, however, by 1945, there had emerged a class of villagers which, although still dependent on estate work and on family labour in rice cultivation, was no longer indebted. It thus had the potential to accumulate capital and differentiate even further.

The post-War period continued to be one of great prosperity for most Rajgahr people. The sugar estates, in anticipation of the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement, expanded production and wage labour opportunities (Reubens and Reubens, 1962: 18–9). Rice prices continued to rise (Nath, 1970: 257) and the colonial administration again financed an expansion through a program of land development loans. In Rajgahr, a $14,000 loan was used to open up another 1,350 acres behind the old cultivation area and village households were allocated plots of three to eight acres. The Grow More Food Campaign continued, and with the additional riceland, crop diversity could be maintained. Amongst Abary cultivators, the second generation was now married with children, and brothers worked together, in anticipation of their inheritance, to bring the second and third depths into production. As beneficial occupiers of the first depth, they could obtain leases to these lands, containing 20 to 30 acres, virtually automatically. Land which could not be planted in rice was used to expand cattle herds.

It was at this point, in 1949, that the articulation of colonial policy with local and international economic conditions again had important repercussions. The colonial administration, to further improve the rice industry, began to encourage mechanization and co-operative production. In 1949, after five years of local experimentation by the Rice Marketing Board, tractors and combines were imported and sold to producers with the help of government loans. In Rajgahr, the first tractor was bought by a group of unindebted cultivators and Abary farmers who combined to pool the necessary capital and who formed, with the help of the Co-operative Department, a producers' co-op. They obtained their new village acreage in a block of 131 acres, pooled their labour to work this land, and the following year, added another 175 acres which they rented in Armadale. Other Abary farmers, in sibling groups and financed by the Marketing Board, also invested in tractors.

The returns for the Co-operative were exceptionally high, as they were for the extensive Abary farmers. Indeed, all segments of the village prospered in those years. The Co-op farmers were able to stop wage work and several bought out leases in the Abary. Mechanization, however, had exacerbated a major contradiction in the local economy. This was the conflict between cattle owner and rice farmer which centred on the relative allocation of rice land as opposed to pasture, and on the propensity of cattle to wander into cultivation areas causing damage as well as large expenditures on fencing. The Village Council, legally responsible for allocating lands, had generally maintained, until 1953, a balance in land allocation and had provided fencing. However, the Abary expansion had increased cattle numbers and these rearers used Rajgahr land to conserve their Abary pasture. Simultaneously, the conversion of the 1,350 acres to rice meant that unofficial commonage was lost. Pasture had decreased, herds had increased, and the dangers to cultivation were exacerbated.

In 1953, with all land allocated to either rice or cattle and with new machinery requiring extensive acreage, great pressure was placed on the Council by those machine owners who had no cattle to eliminate the remaining pasture and to convert all land to rice. They were supported by a segment of non-mechanized small-holders who had permanent or casual employment on the sugar estates and who wanted to expand rice cultivation as an adjunct – a feature made more immediate because estate labour opportunities were also contracting (Reubens and Reubens, 1962: 19). Both of these groups were opposed by Abary cultivators who preferred to have cattle land rather than rice land in the village area because they could efficiently use their machinery on their extensive Abary holdings. They were supported by a second segment of non-mechanized small-holders, namely, those for whom pasture was more important than rice land since they needed a place to agist their ploughing oxen.

It was these small-holders who faced the greatest dilemma. If they expanded their rice acreage, they lost their oxen; and for some who sold milk locally from their few milch cows, a source of income was in jeopardy. Conversely, if small-holders did not expand their rice base, they had insufficient land for growing families and children. This dilemma was complicated by new capital and technology in the sugar sector which cut the labour force by 20 per cent. At this point the number of small shops in the village proliferated as villagers sought out alternate means of livelihood: 22 building applications were made in the four years between 1953 and 1956 as opposed to ten applications in the decade between 1939 and 1948.

By the mid-1950s, mechanization had been crucial in stimulating local differentiation. First, a segment of unindebted cultivators had mechanized using co-operative organization. By 1953, this co-op was in difficulty. Profits were constrained because landholdings in the village were not large enough and the rented lands in Armadale, due to poor drainage, were yielding poorly. Members had also begun to send labourers to do their share of co-op work and most had taken their accumulated capital and invested in shops, in their own machinery, in Abary land, or in transport. In 1955, the co-op was dissolved. What had occurred was that the class of capitalist farmers, as originally represented by the Abary and Armadale cultivators, had expanded to include those former unindebted cultivators who now had large-scale cultivation and cattle herds, and who hired labour. Equally important, agrarian capital was being invested in the service sector, thereby creating jobs for those villagers who remained dependent, in some way, on wage labour.

Second, the unindebted cultivator who remained unmechanized and dependent on oxen was now trapped. This was resolved in 1959 when the Village Council, controlled by a local segment of a national political party committed to expanding rice cultivation, converted all village lands to rice. The effects were predictable. First, small cattle herding and milk production were eliminated as secondary occupations and beef rearing became the prerogative of the large Abary landholder. Second, oxen were eliminated. As a result, some of the unindebted small-holders invested capital in machinery while others became totally dependent on hiring machine contractors for their ploughing and reaping. Some of the investors were fortunate; informants said that those who supported the government political party obtained land in a development scheme in nearby Onverwagt and could use their machinery efficiently. Those who failed to obtain land, however, found themselves over-mechanized: their village holdings did not provide sufficient acreage for efficient use. Some of these were able to do hire work; others simply sought out non-agricultural occupations and under-utilized their agricultural investment. The local economy had continued to become more complex.

That rice land was so differentially allocated by 1970 was an outgrowth of the previously discussed patterns of cumulative change as well as of particular tenure regulations. In 1959, when all village land was converted to rice, the Council cancelled all previous allocations and re-allotted all land according to the number of houselots which a villager owned. Since wealthy villagers commonly invested in such lots as part of their sons' inheritance, those households, generally capitalist, received more village acreage than others. Villagers who only rented their houselots from the Council were made landless. Also, many villagers had informally inherited their parents' village allotments on which they continued to pay rents. Households had assumed that this acreage 'belonged' to them and had planned their economic strategies accordingly. All such 'inherited' land was lost.

These changes in village tenure patterns interacted, as has been seen, with differential access to Abary land, Armadale land, and land in the Onverwagt scheme. The were exacerbated by share-cropping contracts in which landholders in neighbouring villages allowed large Rajgahr farmers to cultivate their land in return for 50 per cent of the crop – a profitable contract available only to those with several tractors and a combine. Finally, differential allocation was most recently enhanced by national party politics: in the 1970s, supporters of the government party received extensive Crown acreage.

This feature was evident in a final stage of Rajgahr history prior to 1971 – an incorporation period (Silverman, 1976) when national politics, polarized between two political parties, led to the subversion of the Rajgahr capitalist class away from its traditional party. The massive infusion of patronage resources to accomplish this – land, jobs, and capital – began a new process which had, inter alia, one major effect of relevance here. Local capitalists, both agrarian and non-agrarian, began investing in economic enterprises (transport, milling, shops, etc.) outside the village – in other areas of the coast, in the city and, indeed, in North America.

CONCLUSIONS

Empirical analyses of agrarian processes in localities which produce tropical, export commodities, reveal complex histories and patterns of differentiation. This is illustrated by the fact that the two cases have common features as well as important differences; neither is a replication or a mirror opposite of the other. This was seen in the relations of production in the two areas, in the role of kinship in the production and accumulation process, in the land tenure patterns, in the nature of occupational multiplicity, in the legal and political parameters which affected political alignments and the interaction of classes, in the variable role played by the State and transnational corporations at particular points in time, and finally, in the nature of the two export commodities themselves.

According to Eric Wolf, variations in the organization of production and in the accumulation and investment of capital can be linked to the rules of inheritance and the structure of households (1966: 65–77). This perspective points to features common to the two cases. Amongst Rajgahr East Indians and the cacao elite, impartible inheritance and joint family ventures were often the recipe for economic success and accumulation. Similarly, the partible but co-operating associations amongst the banana elite had a similar function. All these contrasted starkly with the individualized enterprises of the smaller Guyanese rice farmers-wage labourers and the small Ecuadorian landholders and labourers.

Such individualized enterprises demonstrate, however, that kin-based coalitions did not account for all agro-export production in all periods; rather, non-capitalist relations (sharecropping and tenancy) were common during the cacao boom, not unusual in the pre-agrarian reform banana boom, important during the early Abary period via the rice miller-rice farmer contracts, and of some importance during the late 1970s when large rice farmers made such agreements with neighbouring land holders. Co-operative labour was also important in both places, although differently generated in each context. Thus, the relative importance of household labour, kin recruited labour, hired labour, tenancy, sharecropping, and co-operative labour has no inevitable lineal history in either of the two cases; nor do they summarize in themselves either the wealth or the potential for accumulation of the households involved.

Wolf goes on to say that inheritance patterns, household organization, and production relations have a more general referent: they depend on the nature of the over-arching political domain and the division of labour in the wider economy (*ibid*: 54, 72). Indeed, in coastal Ecuador, flexibility in organizing production was severely constrained by the linkage to the export market. In the early years, cacao production on large estates and tenure patterns encouraged non-capitalist relations of production; however, as cacao was gradually replaced by banana production, profitability increasingly required an expansion of hired labour and capital inputs. As a result, small enterprises were moving into a different relationship with the market by growing cacao or coffee, and thereby maintaining household economies. The threshold for success in banana production was continually narrowing. In Rajgahr, in contrast, rice production permitted more variable relations of production according to the availability of capital and labour; and individuals had more flexibility in expanding or contracting their commitment. They also had other outlets for labour and capital.

This occurred because there was a more diversified economy beyond the household. Rajgahr Village was a local economic hub – with shops and services serving villagers and nearby outsiders. In the two counties, in contrast, banana producers who accumulated capital invested in more bananas or in diversified production (cattle, cacao), or they removed it from the area; they did not invest locally in lateral, non-agricultural enterprises. Labourers had no capital to invest, and, given an undiversified economy and low wages, they had little opportunity to generate it. In the various hamlets in the two counties, there was only an occasional shop and few tradespeople. The non-farming sector was negligible; this not only meant that capital had not been invested, it also meant that labour had few options. Thus, occupational multiplicity in the two counties was possible only for very small-holding casual labourers while also being a prerogative of the very wealthy (diversified agro-export production combined with the professions and the bureaucracy). In Guyana, in contrast, occupational multiplicity was the norm for all households even though particular combinations were limited by the available land, capital, and labour.

What we see then, is a complex process in which activity on the local level can itself alter the division of labour in the wider economy and this in turn affects further potential for change – at least as far as the local or regional level is concerned, and always, of course, in association with colonial/State authority and transnational corporations.

The local manifestations of authority, or the 'political domain,' varied considerably in the two cases. In the Ecuadorian counties, there was no local political arena; inter-class relations were based either on patronal ties or on conflict, both latent and overt. In contrast, Rajgahr's political-legal status allowed conflicts, both inter- and intra-class, to be muted through a local council, local factionalism, and individual articulations with the national political arena. These were complemented by the variable role of the State in each area at different times. In each locale, State agencies (the Rice Marketing Board, the Grow More Food Campaign, the Programa, and the Agrarian Reform Institute), State policies and legislation and transnational involvements had important repercussions on particular segments or classes at particular points and they often were crucial in altering the very direction of change and in the formation of classes.

The varying patterns of class formation can in turn be linked to the nature of the export commodities. Here, the key issues are the processing, use-value, local history, and cropping patterns of the export commodity. Because rice required local processing, Rajgahr millers were able to transform themselves, and others, into capitalists; it is not surprising that the most diversified enterprises in Rajgahr belonged to millers. Ecuadorian merchants during the cacao period, in contrast, never had to invest in local processing; and the local economy remained undiversified.

Second, because rice was not only an export commodity but also the basic subsistence crop, Rajgahr small-holders had greater flexibility. They could articulate with the export sector with varying commitment at different times. Third, and similarly, the movement between two marketing networks, rice and provisions in Rajgahr, and bananas and cacao – at least for a time – in the two Ecuadorian counties, also allowed more flexible responses amongst producers and favoured the continuing involvement of small-holders in export production. Fourth, the fact that rice is perceived locally as a low status 'coolie' crop meant that non-local investors did not intrude on production as they did in the two Ecuadorian counties. In Rajgahr, therefore, capital could be accumulated, and invested, locally – with all the ramifications that such accumulation implies. Finally, in Rajgahr, the semi-annual tasks of planting and harvesting rice were easily combined with wage labour, shopkeeping, lorry driving, teaching, etc. In the two counties, the attempt by small-holders to change export crops, from bananas to cacao, was not only a movement away from transnational control and towards an increased use of household labour, it was also a movement towards combining part-time wage labour with small-scale production.

Such conclusions and hypotheses clearly require further elaboration and testing cross-culturally. They do show, however, that dependency theory and its concept of 'plantation economy' is insufficient to describe the local dynamic, the wider domains, and the crucial history of their articulations. On a more general level, however, the cases point, once again, to the complexity of local agrarian systems which are linked to an export market and to the numerous ramifications which must be considered when the issue of dependency, and its solutions, are applied to actual historical situations and empirical conditions.

NOTES

1 It has recently been suggested that the concept of 'plantation economy and society' is only metaphorically relevant to the contemporary West Indies (Craig, 1981: 147–51). However, its relevance to rural society has remained unquestioned and must be addressed.

2 Limitations of space prevent the inclusion of general bibliographic references. Only items directly referred to are cited.

3 Research was carried out in 1977 and 1978 funded by a Canada Council Leave Fellowship and a grant from the Centre for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CERLAC), York University.

4 What occurred was that exports increased radically because Ecuador was singled out by the transnational export companies to provide the secondary, reserve production to complement their Central American plantations (Larrea, n.d.: 80–98).

5 These data are derived from lists of producers which are prepared annually by the Programa Nacional del Banano, a section of the Ministry of Agriculture.

6 In 1954, total hectareage for all crops in the two counties was 33,500; in 1976, it was over 65,900 hectares. The number of occupiers was 2,236 in 1954 and 3,135 in 1976.

7 A small producer (5 or 6 hectares) can maintain a well-kept plantation of high quality fruit which is easily saleable, perhaps even on a long-term contract. This, however, is unusual. Programa agronomists attribute this to the amount of labour required to maintain such a plantation, the unwillingness of producers to invest this labour and their preference for a more easily cultivated crop, such as cacao. However, it is also related to the shortage of cash for paying additional labour and to the fact that intensive production can cut into the potential for doing wage work on the side.

8 This is one example of State efforts to control the transnationals and to provide opportunities for the medium, and ostensibly small, producers. Decree 565 of 1969 stipulated that export space could not be given to individuals who were not themselves producers. Similarly, Decree 874 of 1970 legislated that export space had to be rationed according to a producer's hectareage and that no one producer could provide more than 10 per cent of a given shipment. Informants agreed that such regulations are easily by-passed because of over-production and the consequent competition for export space amongst those who have no export contracts.

9 When the medium and large untechnified banana producers invest in cacao as a means of diversifying their production and disengaging their enterprises from the attrition process, they either devote a separate section of their plantation to this crop, or, they buy new land specifically for cacao. They thereby maintain, like small producers, a foot in both worlds; but, unlike the small producer, they do it in such a way that it does not undermine the position of either crop.

10 Research was carried out between February 1969 and April 1970 with financial assistance from the Canada Council Doctoral Fellowship Programme, the Centre for Developing Area Studies at McGill University, and the Research Institute for the Study of Man, New York. A fuller account of the history of this village is given in Silverman (1980).

11 It is not possible to know the nature of early Rajgahr differentiation, if any, or the extent to which each settler household replicated others. That some households planted two acres of rice and others planted three must have meant some initial inequality in access to labour and capital. Certainly a household with older, unmarried sons would have had productive advantages. However, it is impossible to say whether this was only for a particular period of the household's developmental cycle or whether this provided the basis for a permanent and cumulative differentiation.

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