

## **Caribbean Racial Formations - CARIBBEAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE, CARIBBEAN POLITICAL CULTURE, MIDDLE-CLASS HEGEMONY**

system black classes plantation

Although the concept of “racial formation” originated and developed principally from the experience of continental America, it still has relevance to Caribbean conditions and contexts. Briefly defined, the concept refers to a particular political system in which racial considerations are given privileged positions in policy matters and human relationships. In this racially structured political system, a privileged racial section (regarded as superior) governs over subordinate but numerically significant racial sections (regarded as inferior). Within this system the state becomes a racial state that distributes resources unequally along racial lines, and always to the benefit of the dominant racial section. Some theorists, such as Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994), regard this race-biased inequality in resource distribution as the principal project of the state within the particular racial formation.

The Caribbean resembles the United States in some crucial respects, but it also differs from it in other fundamental ways. The resemblances entail: (1) A similar history of slavery and European colonization, (2) the prevalence of racial or color criteria in influencing who gets economic and political power, (3) the slow evolution of political freedoms, including full democratic participation involving all groups within the system, and (4) periodic political struggles for racial and social equality on the part of significant minority groups. The differences tend to be equally significant. For example, while the Caribbean comprises several separate and diverse ministates involving many language groups (English, French, Spanish, Dutch), the United States is a federation of large, culturally similar states. Also, while the Caribbean middle classes in the early twenty-first century can boast of attaining hegemonic status (the highest positions of political and cultural leadership) there is a comparative lack of such power on the part of the American middle classes.

### **CARIBBEAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE**

During the slavery period, Caribbean social structure was basically a hierarchical one in which Amerindians, blacks, and browns were subordinated to white control. While the lighter-skinned (Mulatto) classes were generally spared the more onerous plantation work, the system routinely dehumanized Amerindian and black labor through a regime of constant brutality to ensure absolute obedience. Levels of brutality meted out to disobedient or rebellious slaves were extreme, and often public, in order to set an example for the rest. Such ruling-class violence defined the very nature of plantation life, for it was thought to be necessary for the very survival of the system as a whole. Few Amerindians survived plantation enslavement, and those that did (principally in the mainland territories such as Guyana) were eventually restricted behind institutionalized and remote reservations.

The distribution of resources within Caribbean plantation society was definitely along racial and, later, ethnic lines. Black slaves were regarded as cheap labor necessary to replace an earlier white indentured labor, which had proved to be unreliable. Such cheap labor policies influenced the maintenance of low wages, which continued with the immigration of indentured servants after emancipation. Unlike the lighter-skinned indentured servants, the black ex-slaves were denied credits and loans to go into more lucrative self-employment and business ventures. Compared to blacks, lighter-skinned ethnicities were given more favors and facilities by the colonial office to succeed in wealth creation, while every opportunity was taken by the planter classes to force blacks back into plantation labor. To this end, planters destroyed fruit trees and provision grounds, diverted water supplies from black living areas, and prosecuted former slaves from venturing into plantation areas if they were not plantation workers. In addition, the colonial authorities instituted a tax on land. These measures were meant to keep blacks from living independently of the plantations (Williams 1971; Knight 1994).

This unequal type of resource distribution in early plantation society in the Caribbean has left a legacy of stark poverty, which is reflected in the living conditions of those at the bottom of the social pyramid. In the more multiethnic Caribbean territories,

such as Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Suriname, most of the East Indian and Amerindian populations share with most of the black population the same depressed and impoverished space on the social pyramid.

A second legacy of Caribbean plantation society is the way in which both race and ethnicity become more sharply defined by the conflicts between groups. These sometimes deadly conflicts are themselves spawned by the inequalities of plantation social structures, and by the long term impact of colonial “divide and rule” policies. This divisive colonial legacy could be observed, for example, in the almost life and death conflicts for political power since the 1960s between the two highly politicized ethnicities in Guyana (blacks represented by the People’s National Congress [PNC] Party, and East Indians by the People’s Progressive Party [PPP]), a conflict situation that still persists in the early twenty-first century. Similar deadly ethnic or color-based political conflict and violence are routinely observed in Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica and Suriname.

Yet the inequalities in Caribbean social structure breed continual resistance from below. The major examples of this resistance are the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804; the establishment of what are called Maroon societies of defiant runaway slaves in the larger territories such as Jamaica and Suriname throughout the slavery period; post-emancipation rebellions for greater democracy, such as the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica in 1865; the rise of the leftist movements in the 1940s and 1950s towards independence and in the 1960s and 1970s towards socialism; and the emergence of Rastafarian and Black Power struggles towards greater black consciousness and empowerment (Campbell 1987).

## **CARIBBEAN POLITICAL CULTURE**

The racial subordination of blacks in the plantation hierarchy was usually justified by theories professing the universal superiority of whites. In 1854, for example, The Comte de Gobineau developed his “scientific” classification of races, with the whites at the top and blacks at the far bottom of the totem pole. One of Gobineau’s disciples, Thomas Carlyle, a renowned British historian and scholar suggested a similar hierarchy with what he termed “the wisest man” at the top and “the Demerara nigger at the bottom” (Williams 1971, p. 398).

Established religion also played a role in cultivating racial attitudes and belief in the inferiority of blacks. The influence and complicity of the Catholic Church in the outlawing of Africanist religions such as Vodou in Haiti, and Obeah in the British Caribbean, which were regarded as devil worship, is one example of the church’s role in associating blackness with evil. However, it is also fair to say that some of the Christian churches—particularly the non-established Presbyterians and Congregationalists—played an admirable role in helping to free the slaves, sometimes at the costs of the lives of some of their priests. At the same time, some Africanist religions, particularly Haitian Vodou and Jamaican Rastafarianism, have played a significant role historically in the liberation and creativity of the black masses throughout the region. The lyrics and songs of the famous Rastafarian reggae artist Bob Marley bear ample testimony to this liberating and creative spirit of Africanist ways of life in the region.

Like the established churches, public schools have often become ideological institutions by consistently reinforcing European centrality and domination in the Caribbean. This was experienced more sharply during the colonial period, when the curriculum of public schools emphasized the study of the histories and languages of the various European states, to the exclusion of Caribbean history and native languages. The reading books for elementary schools were not only biased in this ideological direction, but they tended to de-emphasize the development of critical thinking and insights by concentrating on what the “Mighty Sparrow,” a Trinidad calypso singer, called “too much a’ stupid ness” in his famous calypso song “Dan is the Man in the Van.” Sparrow concluded the song with the ironic note that if during his time at school “his head was bright” (meaning if he had studied or internalized the books too well) he would have ended up becoming “a damn fool.”

Caribbean activist intellectuals have also offered major challenges to the racial structures inherited from colonialism. The most notable of these have been Marcus Garvey from Jamaica in the 1920s and 1930s, C.L.R. James from Trinidad in the 1940s and 1950s, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon from Martinique during the 1960s, and Walter Rodney from Guyana during

the 1970s. Their challenges to the system involved an anticolonialism coupled with a message of black consciousness and empowerment. Some, like James and Rodney, have gone as far as challenging the capitalist system itself, while others, like Fanon, have advocated extreme responses, such as collective violence against the system.

## **MIDDLE-CLASS HEGEMONY**

The Caribbean middle classes, because of their diverse characteristics, play a rather complex and controversial role in the maintenance and survival of the existing structures and culture of Caribbean racial formations. For example, while the tendency of some sections of the middle classes (particularly the business section) is to champion the privileges derived from the race and class inequalities in the system, a smaller but significant section of that class (particularly the intellectuals) often challenges the discrepancies and seeks appropriate and often radical changes in that system. These conflicting conjunctures often assume ideological forms, dividing Left from Right in the contest for political power. Bitter contests over the issues of colonialism and nationalism during the 1950s, followed by cold war struggles for and against socialism of the 1970s, eventually led to the violent destabilization and defeat of the Left by powerful international forces (mainly the United States) during the 1980s. It was the dual and seemingly contradictory character of Caribbean middle-class politics that led C.L.R. James to discern what he regarded as their “inherent instability” (James 1962).

The hegemony, or political and cultural dominance, of these classes depends upon their maintaining the support of powerful economic and political forces in the international system. The Caribbean middle classes, through their commercial linkages with international and global capitalism, benefit from the persistence of international economic inequalities along racial lines in the international system. From their inception during the slavery period, the Caribbean middle classes (originating from the Mulatto sections of the population) reinforced the white racial order by championing their own derived or assumed superiority over the black populations (free and slave), based on their own snobbish order of degrees of lightness of skin color. Eric Williams, who was prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago from 1962 to 1981, suggested that there were at least ten different hierarchical degrees of skin color gradations, ranging from “mixed bloods” and “octoroons” closest to white at the top, to the “griffe,” “sacatra,” and other darker-skinned Mulattoes closest to black at the bottom of the color pyramid (Williams 1971, pp. 187–188).

In the early 2000s, the middle classes benefit from the rather incomplete system of democracy that Caribbean states inherited from the European colonial powers. The qualifications for voting moved very gradually from ownership of slaves and high-priced property in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to income, literacy, and finally “age” (universal suffrage) during the twentieth century. This late development of democracy favors the upper classes in the Caribbean racial order. In addition, the better access of the middle classes to economic power and wealth, coupled with the high cost of qualifications to run for office, obviously give these classes an edge over the darker-skinned masses in the control of political power.

Meanwhile, there is a great deal of authoritarianism (or dictatorship) within Caribbean democracy, as reflected in the usually skewed system of representation between rulers and ruled. Such dictatorial control by the lighter skinned over the darker races is most starkly exemplified in the cases of the French- and Spanish-speaking territories with significantly large black populations, such as Haiti and the Dominican Republic, respectively. The case of Haiti is most noteworthy for the frequent derailment of democratic participation of the overwhelming black masses by a few rich middle-class families and businessmen (working mostly behind the scenes). A stark example of this is the overthrow of the democratically elected president, Jean Bertrand Aristide, and his overwhelmingly black Lavallas party, both in 1991 and in 2004.

That race significantly contributes to the structuring of Caribbean society, economy, and political culture does not necessarily mean that the racial factor is always obvious. In fact, the racial formations in the Caribbean would seem to represent what Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) regard as essentially unconscious rules of classification within a sociohistorical process. Thus, race is often realized in both theory and practice in the Caribbean sociohistorical experience. What essentially defines the Caribbean racial formation is the continual experience by the Caribbean people of a social process in which

race—directly or indirectly, and consciously or unconsciously—plays a significant, although not exclusive, role in people’s activities and relationships.

The racial/class hierarchical structure inherited from colonialism in the Caribbean, with white and light-colored representations at the top and the masses of the darker-skinned races and ethnicities at the bottom, keeps reinforcing itself by the following means: (1) Continuing white control of pivotal economic resources at the international level, coupled with skewed or unequal distribution of those resources along hierarchical racial lines at the domestic levels; (2) the cultivation of middle-class historical dominance of the political system, coupled with their comprador (or service) status with regard to international capitalism, and a traditional color-based snobbery with regard to the darker-skinned races and ethnic groups; and (3) a flawed or incomplete democratic system in the region, which marginalizes or excludes the lower classes by putting a relatively high economic price on electoral competition and access to political power.

## Additional Topics

### EVOLUTION OF PLANTATION SOCIETY

From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, slavery set the stage for the evolution of a political and social system in the Caribbean that was structured principally along race and class lines. However, the racial and class considerations coincided so closely with each other that something closely approximating a caste system developed in early Caribbean history. In this system an exclusive wh...

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Jasmine

almost 2 years ago

I would like to know who the author is. I can't seem to find one on this page and it would be preferable to have in order to properly cite this source. Thank you.



donna dinnoo

almost 3 years ago

thank you for the precise information on the subject. i am preparing a policy plan for the implementation of community policing in trinidad and tobago, and this information helps me understand the culture that has shaped this nation