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RÉSUMÉ

Le déclin agraire et la dépendance nutritionnelle dans les Caraïbes : Confronter les illusions d'inévitabilité

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Cet article situe le déclin agraire de la région dans le contexte d'une transformation plus large de la production et de l'intégration du marché mondial. Le but de l'article est de démystifier les forces du marché omniprésentes et écrasantes que confrontent les petits producteurs agricoles des Caraïbes, en attirant l'attention sur les intérêts puissants qui sous-tendent les changements actuels. L'analyse est fondée sur la conviction que la petite agriculture constitue une activité productive et une source de dignité dans la région et, par conséquent, devrait être réorganisée et revalorisée au lieu d'être abandonnée à un fatalisme injustifié.

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Agrarian Decline and Breadbasket Dependence in the Caribbean: Confronting Illusions of Inevitability

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The Caribbean Today: Re-Casted Dependence

It is possible to become a consuming appendage of North America financed by remittances, drug transshipment, loans, tourism services, and offshore financial services, with the attendant implications for Caribbean culture and society.

– Michael Witter (p. 13)

...after enduring 500 years of servitude, and forging livelihoods in these deceptively beautiful killing fields of yesteryear...[we] risk the loss of a distinctive society still in the making...As playgrounds for the rich and powerful the region will have an economic future. What it runs, is the risk of cultural extinction.

– C.Y. Thomas (pp. 20-21)

Imperial powers constructed the Caribbean to be “the sugar bowl, tobacco pouch, coffee shop, and rum supplier of the world” (Mintz 1985: 130). This history produced agrarian landscapes dominated by large plantations, which endured after Emancipation, and an emergent peasantry on the margins. Plantation and peasant agriculture continued to dominate Caribbean societies well into the 20th century before other economic sectors began to develop.

Today, however, agro-export (mostly plantation) production in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)¹ is not only losing its place in global networks but domestic producers (mostly small farmers) are fast being displaced in their own markets. The region's narrow niches in the global economy have changed; in economic terms it now primarily provides tourism resorts, off-shore banking (fed by corporate tax-dodgers), migratory labour (both short- and long-term and skilled and un-skilled), drug transshipment, and some resources (most notably Trinidad's oil).

As Witter and Thomas suggest above, this transformation may well carry on, and for some countries and individuals continue to bring great prosperity. Small states like Barbados and The Bahamas have social and economic indicators in the realm of the industrialized world while Trinidadian leaders insist their country is on track to achieve such status by 2020. Elites in countries like Jamaica possess the wealth to live in large, gated stately homes and drive expensive SUVs. But the economic picture in CARICOM is very uneven, and not nearly so bright for the majority of people in Guyana, Jamaica, and the Windward Island nations (Dominica, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent), while it is downright calamitous for most Haitians. Continued agrarian decline poses a particular threat to those nations in the region facing significant levels of debt and long-term payments imbalances (Haiti, Jamaica, Guyana, Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Belize)² and those with high levels of unemployment.

High unemployment remains a persistent problem throughout much of the region, particularly for the young and poorly educated, and after debt- and adjustment-induced austerity it is now moderated primarily by migration, remittances, and the sizable informal sector (including the drug economy).³ But even continued

¹ The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) was established between Jamaica, Barbados, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago by the Treaty of Chaguaramas (1973), and subsequently grew to include Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and as of 2002, Haiti. In 2004, the combined population was 15.2 million.

² Indebtedness (both external and internal) and related pressures on government accounts have inevitably regressive impacts, diverting resources from public goods and from the poor.

³ Official employment statistics in the region are unreliable (Thomas), but in a recent

waves of external migration have not been enough to prevent the growing squalor of cities like Port-au-Prince, Kingston, or Georgetown, which is undoubtedly connected to disturbing levels of crime and violence.⁴

Compounding the problem of unemployment is the question of *dignified* labour. Obviously the idea of dignity in labour is a complex one that defies precise definition and measurement, though it would seem to demand at a basic level that a person feels some degree of autonomy, challenge (intellectually and/or physically), and sense of meaningfulness in their work and contribution to community (however they might perceive it). Whatever difficulty there may be in defining and measuring it should not stop us from recognizing that just and healthy societies strive to create dignified forms of work for all, as the Zapatista movement has so consistently emphasized (Weis 2004a). Such recognition clearly raises concerns in the Caribbean as connections between servitude past and present are stark in the region's large tourism industry, a rising number of households are sustained by remittances, many unskilled young men see their opportunity as foot soldiers for powerful drug cartels,⁵ and some impoverished women and men continue acting as 'drug mules' (ingesting cocaine for bodily transshipment) at great risk, an obvious testament to the depth of their desperation.

Finally, there are inescapable cultural dimensions to the erosion of the region's productive economy and the re-casting of its dependence, as the quotes by both Witter and Thomas point to. No where is this more apparent than in the dramatic dietary change that has taken place, conspicuous in the proliferation of U.S. fast food

report the World Bank (2005) calls unemployment one of the region's biggest economic problems. Not surprisingly, given that the Bank together with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has had a major role in regional policy restructuring over the past two decades, the report tends to attribute economic growth and gains in social indicators to adjustment while failing to connect these same debt-leveraged policies to any of the region's economic and social problems.

⁴ The tremendous unevenness of wealth and opportunity are certainly nothing new to the Caribbean, but the nature of struggle has been largely turned inwards in a number of countries — what some have called a 'social implosion', as intra-class conflict often plays out in very violent ways (Weis 2005).

⁵ In general, while much recent scholarly work has been done on crime, violence, policing, and 'peace-making' in the region, especially in the context of the drug trade, the issue of dignified work is seldom if ever mentioned.

restaurants and junk food. As a Trinidadian small farmer and activist noted with dismay, it is telling that a KFC restaurant now sits prominently in Port of Spain's Independence Square.⁶ As will be discussed, this also relates to the evolving nature of epidemiological problems in the region.

In short, the problems and prospects of small farming in the Caribbean bear heavily on the region's economic and social change to a far greater degree than is often recognized. These problems and prospects, in turn, cannot be understood without situating them in the broader context of changes in global agricultural production and market integration. In emphasizing how the big picture of agrarian change is bearing on small farmers in the Caribbean, this paper seeks to clarify the global context and, by extension, replace demobilizing illusions of inevitability with recognition that the unevenness and distortions of the global food economy require measured policy responses. This intent is guided by a belief that small farming in the Caribbean is not merely an outmoded historic residuum in an age of globalization, but can have a central place in ongoing struggles for dignified livelihoods.

Peasantization and De-peasantization in the Caribbean

Despite great obstacles, the 'peasantization' of Caribbean societies was rapid and profound after Emancipation. As Mintz (1985: 131) puts it, emergent peasants were forced to grow "in the crevices of their societies, like blades of grass pushing up between the bricks". The immense bio-physical and legal constraints set by the landscape, colonial governments, and the manoeuvring of the plantocracy compelled many ex-slaves into waged labour and tenancy arrangements⁷, but the desire for freedom and dignity led many others to the hills and forests to create new ways of life. Where labour became scarce, principally Guyana and Trinidad, the British brought in indentured labour from India.

For both African and Indian descendants, independent small farming represented an escape from different forms of bondage, and their resilience forged some of the most densely settled rural

⁶ From a discussion at the Walter Rodney Groundings, Georgetown, Guyana, June 2005.

⁷ As well as, for some, a degree of acculturation and desire for stability, the extent of which has been debated.

landscapes in the world. From their marginal positions in the landscape small farmers produced most domestic food supplies, apart from a few basic imported staples (e.g. flour, cornmeal, and salt-fish) (Mintz 1989, 1985; Beckford 1985). As late as the mid-20th century, the Caribbean remained heavily rural and agrarian. In 1950, the population in present-day CARICOM, including Haiti (the region's largest and most rural country), was 75 per cent rural and 63 percent agricultural; without Haiti, it was 63 per cent rural and 40 per cent agricultural (see Figure 1).⁸

Yet despite the significant agrarian populations and agro-trade surpluses being produced into the 1960s, still led by King Sugar, malnutrition was widespread — responsible for nearly half the cases of child (under five) mortality in the region into the 1960s (Sinha). As George Beckford made clear, this contradiction was not a reflection of any inherent human or bio-physical constraints to food self-sufficiency but rather was an outcome of the distortions of plantation economies (Beckford 1972). In contrast, Beckford (who was a major influence in the emergence of the critical tradition of Caribbean political economy) consistently emphasized that small farmers were the wellspring of the region's creativity and a “repository of a popular culture of self-reliance and independence,” and that “the land and the free spirit of free men and women who rejected the plantation to cultivate the land to grow food was the hope for the future” (Levitt: 24).⁹

But the rural and agrarian character of the region was changing rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s. Urbanization was rising with modest levels of industrialization, though branch-plant manufacturing generally failed to ‘take off’ as the region's business elites, intellectuals, and state planners anticipated and thought held

⁸ Disaggregating the agricultural population is difficult, as the divide between small farmers and plantation workers in the Caribbean has long been rather fluid — most plantation workers cultivate small plots and many small farmers provide seasonal labour on plantations. More clear is the fact that the size of the rural population was historically tied closely to agricultural livelihoods. All population, production, and trade statistics have been derived from the Food and Agricultural Organization's open-access statistics database (FAOSTAT data, 2005). The CARICOM Secretariat in Guyana also assisted by providing detailed trade statistics.

⁹ Levitt (p. 24) goes on to suggest that “the need for intellectual, philosophical renewal in the region is more urgent today than it was in the 1960s, when political independence offered hopes of a better future.”

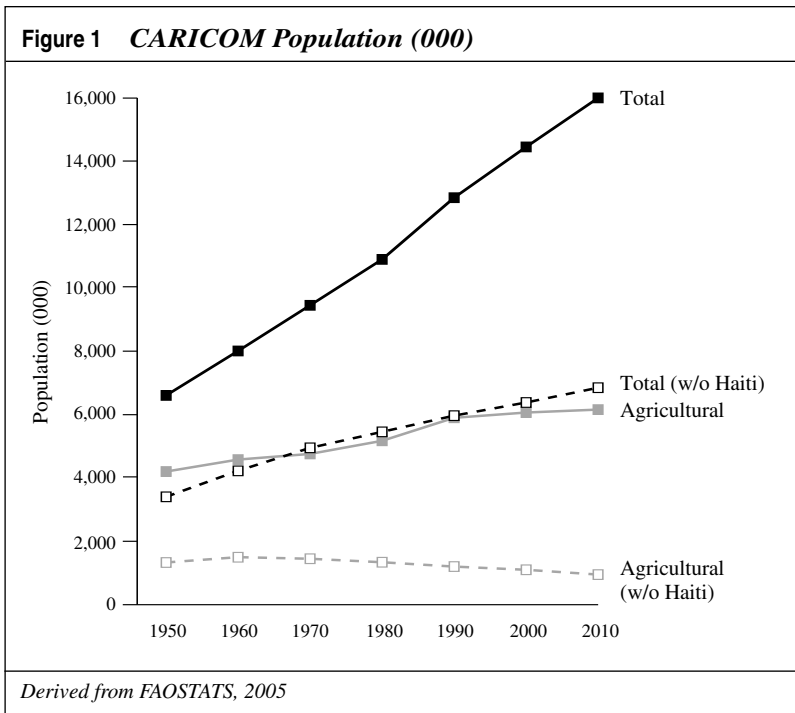
the key to modern economic growth.¹⁰ In addition to the limited industrial growth, the region's political economic course was also shaped by the dissolution of the West Indies Federation (established in 1958 between Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad) to separate independence movements, increasing international migration, and the growth of new sources of wealth: tourism (for all but Guyana, Suriname, and Haiti), bauxite (for Jamaica and Guyana), oil (Trinidad), and later off-shore banking (Barbados, The Bahamas, and Antigua). Haiti's prospects were immeasurably impaired by the ruinous kleptocracy of Papa Doc Duvalier.

Despite the establishment of CARICOM in 1973 by the principals of the failed West Indies Federation, the extent of regional economic integration has fallen far short of the possibilities advocates saw it containing (Brewster and Thomas). The Common External Tariff (CET) was established to level external tariffs across member nations, ensuring preferential market access, but intra-CARICOM trade has only ever accounted for a small percentage of total trade for most members as a result of similar production structures and dependencies. This stunted integration combined with the unequal distribution of new sources of wealth set CARICOM nations on markedly different economic paths (the range of social and economic indices within CARICOM expanded greatly with the ascension of Haiti, one of the poorest nations in the world).

CARICOM as a whole has undergone a steady 'de-peasantization', and the decline in the ratio of agricultural livelihoods to total population gets magnified when Haiti is disaggregated. Not including Haiti, the rest of CARICOM's agricultural population has declined from 36 per cent of total population in 1960, to 24 per cent in 1980, to 17 per cent in 2000 (see Figure 1).

Declining agricultural employment levels in CARICOM have generally not corresponded with the sort of efficiency gains that were occurring in many other parts of the world, especially from the 1960s onward. Agro-export production in the Commonwealth

¹⁰ Puerto Rico, a semi-colony of the US, was a unique case and a notable exception as 'Operation Bootstrap' turned the island's agricultural economy into one based on cheap labour and light manufacturing. Puerto Rico also exported a large supply of cheap labour to U.S. cities. In 1950, work in agriculture comprised nearly half of the Puerto Rican labour force; by 1980, this was down to only 3.5 per cent.



Caribbean fell by roughly 40 per cent from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s (Chernick), and the 'tropical commodities disaster' (i.e. persistently declining terms of trade) since the late 1960s (Robbins) would have sped the region's shift from net agro-exporter to net agro-importer faster were it not for the Lomé Convention in 1975. Through the Lomé Convention, newly independent nations in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific (ACP) were shielded from the full brunt of falling terms of trade by protected markets in the European Community (EC). The central tenets of Lomé were non-reciprocal, duty-free access and stabilized prices to all industrial and most agricultural exports from the ACP to the EC, and increased development aid and industrial cooperation for ACP countries.

Within CARICOM, Lomé allowed uncompetitive sugar industries to limp along and boosted banana production in Jamaica and the Eastern Caribbean. In Jamaica, banana production was re-invigorated on plantations, while in the Windward Islands a relatively equitable smallholder system improved the standard of

living for many (thus, bananas have a far more positive association in the Windward Islands than they do in the ‘Banana Republics’ of Latin America) (Myers). Yet while Lomé stabilized export earnings and reduced some of the vulnerability associated with commodity dependence, in so doing it helped perpetuate these narrow export bases and hence acted as a palliative rather than a cure for imbalanced trade relationships — a problem that became a crisis in the mid-1990s with bananas and in 2004 with sugar.

The balance of payments problem posed by the shift from net agro-exporter to net agro-importer was obscured, to varying degrees within CARICOM, by rising foreign exchange earnings in non-agricultural sectors. The employment dilemma posed by agrarian decline with limited industrialization was partly off-set by growth in service sector employment, especially tourism, and partly by the region’s very high levels of external migration. Sidney Mintz’s (1985: 151) assessment two decades ago that this migration was rapidly redefining “the nature of rural life” in the Caribbean has pronounced evidence: outside of Haiti, the ratio of CARICOM’s agricultural to rural population has fallen steadily and is projected to be only one-third by 2010. In describing this transformation, Mintz (1985: 151) also noted how the Caribbean region “consistently produces more labour than its dependent and irregular economies can steadily employ” — an appraisal that has also continued to resonate with time.

The Big Picture: Agrarian Change and Peasant Vulnerability

Like the Caribbean, while some parts of the agricultural sectors in the Third World had long been devoted to serving international markets, many areas retained a large measure of self-sufficiency prior to 1950. International agro-trade changed considerably thereafter, led by prolonged productivity increases in temperate regions where scientific developments and capital-intensive methods coupled with the heavy state intervention to produce massive surpluses. An export imperative quickly became engrained in the U.S. agricultural sector, initially supplying a decimated Europe after World War II, and soon after (as European agriculture rebounded and protectionist policies were established) turning to the Third World to outlet its surpluses.¹¹

¹¹ The U.S. institutionalized food aid and concessional sales to the Third World as

Over time wheat and flour came to replace traditional dietary staples in large parts of the Third World, aid turned into trade, and it was not long before European and North American farm sectors were competing for export turf, eventually adding other elements of the temperate grain-oilseed-livestock complex (e.g. powdered milk, soy-based feedstuffs) to the mix (Friedmann). One good illustration of the scale and speed of change in global food production is that planetary per capita meat consumption nearly doubled between 1950 and 1990.

Export competition together with the strategic need for food security contributed to a system in which export subsidies, domestic price supports, direct payments, and import controls became widespread in rich, temperate countries. In short, a spiral was created where chronic grain surpluses brought pressures for more intervention, surpluses increased and were exported (assisted by the compression of time and space by transportation and communication technologies), levels of state support for agriculture in rich countries continued to grow into the 1980s, and food import dependencies deepened over time (Friedmann).

The average assistance given by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) governments to their agricultural sectors increased from 32 per cent of the total value of their agricultural output in 1979-81 to 47 per cent in 1986, and nearly every OECD country also selectively increased its agricultural protectionism over this period (Burniaux et al.). In rich countries, the nature of the subsidy regimes has favoured the most well endowed farmers and contributed to an increasing concentration of production, allowing large producers, merchants, and processors to thrive within an artificially deflated price environment while squeezing small farmers at home and in markets abroad.

Around the same time as state regulation and supports were growing in rich countries, much of the Third World was forced into the arms and policy dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, whose cookie-cutter economic reforms had critical impacts on agricultural sectors. In essence, structural

the primary means for dumping its grain surpluses, reflecting a combination of objectives: to keep domestic prices under control; to fortify Cold War alliances; and to facilitate market penetration.

adjustment in agriculture brought market liberalization, increased export orientation, the elimination of state marketing boards and subsidized credit, and reduced public support for things such as research and extension. The Jamaican experience with agricultural adjustment illuminates many of the problems with this logic and its impacts (Weis 2004b). These agricultural policy changes were guided, explicitly and implicitly, by a 'free market approach to food security' — that is, the idea that food security is best ensured by liberalizing markets to cheap imports and focusing production on comparatively advantaged exports (agricultural or otherwise) to maximize foreign exchange and buy food from a global system which, as it integrates, tends towards increasing efficiency (though the call for the state to give way to the market obviously contrasts starkly with the large and complex agro-subsidy regime in rich countries, and the image of a benign and efficient market contrasts with the gross distortions that characterize the global food economy and the environmental externalities that go unaccounted in the long-distant transport of food).

In the 1970s and 1980s the global system of agro-production remained heavily influenced by state supports in rich countries and selective market protectionism, but transnational corporations (TNCs) were fast becoming the key forces integrating nationally regulated farm sectors with globally sourced processing, distribution, and retail complexes. The growth and consolidation of TNCs was giving them increasing control over farm output, while a similarly striking consolidation of seed, fertilizer, and agro-chemical TNCs began dominating farm inputs. The IMF- and World Bank-prescribed agricultural reforms went hand-in-glove with the rising corporate control over global agro-processing, distribution, retail trade, and inputs, a process which continues to the present. Non-traditional agro-export expansion, eagerly promoted by the IMF and World Bank, has tended to reproduce or deepen colonially engrained inequalities in the landscapes of the Americas, entrenching landed elites or encouraging land consolidation by a new commercial class of farmers (Thrupp).

The rising corporate control (and share of profit) within agro-food chains has contributed to a number of notable trends: diminishing farm-gate earnings, with concomitant scale and

mechanization imperatives; the reduction of on-farm biodiversity with homogenized inputs and the spread of industrial techniques; intense marketing creating strong brand loyalty that detaches association from space; and what Friedmann calls the tendency towards *distance* and *durability* — illustrated by the useful concept of ‘food miles’ (which accounts for the distance food travels from land to mouth) — that leads to increasing dietary convergence. In short, while large state supports persist in rich countries, agriculture has become “less and less an anchor of society, and more and more the outcome of corporate sourcing strategies” (McMichael 2000a: 23).

While agro-TNCs were well served by the bi-lateral disciplines placed on Third World countries by the IMF and World Bank, they also began seeking a supra-national institution that would secure and expand market access and abet global sourcing. This pressure was a significant reason why agriculture, which was previously immune from multilateral trade discipline, was brought to the Uruguay Round negotiations (1986-94) that produced the World Trade Organization (WTO), something that is seen most plainly in the oft-noted fact that a former Cargill executive spearheaded the U.S. negotiating team as the WTO’s Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) was constructed. Other agro-TNCs were also vigorous advocates.

In the AoA, member states agreed to convert non-tariff barriers into tariffs and to limit import tariffs to different ‘bound’ levels. As well, agro-subsidies were categorized broadly speaking into good (Green Box) and bad (or ‘trade-distorting’), with the latter set on schedules for reduction. The negotiations sought to reduce existing agricultural tariffs by 15 per cent in the First World and 10 per cent in the Third World, but there was some flexibility. For instance, CARICOM’s CET for agricultural products from non-CARICOM nations was 40 per cent, but it chose a ‘ceiling’ binding of 100 per cent in signing the AoA, with no exception lists and no provision for future reductions (CARICOM nations negotiate collectively but can adopt individual positions).

The pretensions that the AoA was inaugurating a new era of ‘fairness’ in global agro-trade came under fire quickly after it was unveiled, with critics demonstrating how it actually cemented the massively distorted global system that had been built up to that

point through a narrow and selective conception of trade distorting measures that were committed for reduction.¹² In effectively sanctioning much of the rich country subsidy regime while at the same time entrenching liberalization (or, at the very least, capping tariff flexibility into the future with vulnerable targets set for further cuts), the AoA was seen to represent the worst-case scenario for small farmers. This fear was subsequently borne out as First World aggregate agro-subsidies have actually increased since 1995 while food import dependence continues to rise in many parts of the Third World.

The extremely unequal industrialization of agriculture has produced vast global disparities in per farmer productivity, imbalances that have fed the polarization of agro-trade patterns (Amin). A handful of powerful producing nations dominate global agro-exports; in 2002, 56 per cent of the world's agro-exports came from countries with only 2 per cent of the world's total agricultural population (Weis 2003). The United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) projects this general course to continue in the foreseeable future, noting that "in particular, net imports of cereals and livestock products will continue to rise quite rapidly" in much of the Third World (FAO 2002). The scale, technology, and subsidy-fortified competitiveness of temperate producers (and the associated dietary change) is having a major impact on the international division of labour.

Between 1950 and 1990, agriculture as a relative share of the labour force in the Third World declined by a staggering 40 per cent (Araghi), and the world's agricultural population grew at a much slower rate than did the world's total population between 1990 and 2002, falling significantly (46.4 to 41.6 per cent) as a percentage of the total population in little more than a decade. While some ex-peasants have gained employment in services or industry, many are marginalized from the formal sector and mired in the swelling slums that are such a marked feature of the Third World cityscape — what Araghi (p. 145) calls the "huge urban masses of superfluous people". The profound and growing unemployment, poverty, housing, food security, and service provisioning problems

¹² A critical discussion of the AoA's Green Box is developed in another paper (Weis 2003).

in urban areas are documented thoroughly in the United Nations' Human Settlements Programme *The Challenge of Slums* (2003) and skilfully analyzed by Davis.

In short, the free market approach to food security has widely translated into "food dependence on world 'breadbasket' regions" (McMichael 2000a: 23). Yet though shrinking in relative size, peasant households still constitute roughly *two-fifths of humanity*. And with so many incorporated into market relations (though generally excluded from new high-value agro-export networks) and increasingly exposed to intense competition in the context of long-term global price declines for producers (FAO, 2002), the magnitude of dislocation and vulnerability threatened by the current trajectory of global food production and distribution is staggering (Davis, Araghi and Amin)

As discussed in the first section, the Caribbean is a useful place to examine this question, as the swift job- and production-scarce de-peasantization there has contributed to serious social and economic problems in parts of the region — in spite of exceptional relative scales of migration and remittances — and serves as a warning for other regions about rapid integration within a highly uneven global food economy.

Breadbasket Imperialism

"...de foreign people sucking alla de substance outta dis country wit deir crops".

— a Jamaican small farmer¹³

The Caribbean is situated between the world's three great agro-exporting regions, North America, Europe, and the southern cone of South America, but it is the political economy of U.S. agriculture which has the most bearing on the competitive playing field facing agriculture in CARICOM nations. The U.S. is the source of roughly half of CARICOM's agro-imports, providing both direct and indirect (i.e. diet shifting) competition, and has been very aggressive in promoting its agro-exports in the region. It has also been the leading advocate of trade liberalization at multi-lateral forums (as well as wielding inordinate influence bilaterally, through the IMF and World Bank).

¹³ From an interview conducted during fieldwork in Jamaica in 2001-2002.

As noted, while TNCs are the dominant actors in the global food economy, the state continues to maintain a very important, quasi-mercantile role in agriculture in many rich countries with the sanctioning of the WTO. It was no secret that American agribusiness was pleased with the AoA, and soon afterward the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) boasted that its “careful, persistent” efforts “promoting U.S. products, penetrating new markets [and] tearing down trade barriers...paid off handsomely in the mid-1990s” as “global demand surged and U.S. exports exploded” (Galvin) (these ‘exploding’ agro-exports produced a record agro-trade surplus in 1996, but rising imports have caused that surplus to subsequently shrink). Approximately one-third of total American agro-output is now exported (up from 20 per cent in the mid-1980s) and, as one government official put it, exports have become “critical to nearly every sector of U.S. agriculture” (Scher).

Though the powers in the U.S. agricultural sector regarded the AoA positively, they were not satisfied; it was seen only as a first step in institutionalizing liberalization. In the late 1990s, the USDA called “the expansion of global market opportunities for U.S. agricultural producers...one of the Department’s primary objectives”, and promised to continue its “aggressive efforts of recent years to bolster export competitiveness, open new markets, and expand exports” (Glickman). This position is commonly framed by an insistence that the existing system is unfair to U.S. agriculture because its agro-tariffs are, on average, the lowest in the world (about 5 per cent, in contrast to a global average of 56 per cent¹⁴) — while, not surprisingly, failing to note per farmer subsidies amongst the highest in the world.

The first attempt to deepen agro-trade liberalization through the WTO came to naught amidst the battle of Seattle (1999) and plans were again de-railed at the Cancun Ministerial (2003), but the revival of negotiations on agriculture in August 2004 poses the possibility that flexibility at the border could soon be attacked. With

¹⁴ Although this is deceptive because tariffs are low where domestic subsidies are high or in non-competing tropical/semi-tropical products (e.g. coffee, cocoa, mango, pineapple, and bananas), while the U.S. uses some selectively high tariffs where important domestic sub-sectors are vulnerable to competition. This selective protectionism limits the potential for some non-traditional export development in the Caribbean.

adjustment reforms having reduced the state's role in agriculture, tariffs are the primary policy mechanism most CARICOM governments have left to support their small farmers, and the bound tariff ceilings committed under the AoA (100 per cent) have come under repeated pressure for reductions at subsequent multilateral trade negotiations, particularly from the U.S.¹⁵

U.S. agro-trade interests in the Caribbean are considerable, much greater than the size of the region might suggest. The U.S. runs a large agro-trade surplus to CARICOM and its agro-exports there have grown significantly since the early 1990s, reaching roughly US\$900 m in 2004 (a year in which the total U.S. agro-trade surplus dipped to US\$7.3 b, after hovering between US\$11 and US\$15 b from 1998 to 2003). In the broader Caribbean, the U.S. agro-trade surplus has been further boosted since 2002 by the partial circumvention of the Cuban embargo for agricultural commodities.¹⁶ An official at the Jamaican Ministry of Agriculture characterized U.S. agricultural interests as aiming "to feed the Caribbean," and this aggressiveness is plain to see in the Caribbean Basin Agricultural Trade Office (www.cbato.fas.usda.gov) of the U.S. Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) as well as in recent issues of the FAS monthly *AgExporter* (Weis 2004b).¹⁷

Even Haiti, with its large agrarian population and limited purchasing power, is becoming increasingly dependent on food imports. Under IMF direction in 1994, Haiti reduced its tariffs on imported rice — the primary food staple produced in the country — from 35 to 3 per cent, and both rice and total imports more than doubled in the ensuing decade.¹⁸ The downside of gains in overall

¹⁵ Both at the WTO and for the Free Trade Area of the Americas (from personal correspondence with officials involved in CARICOM's negotiations).

¹⁶ Cuba's food market is an important target for the U.S. agricultural sector, which has been the most influential voice in the U.S. calling for an end to trade sanctions there.

¹⁷ The FAS is a specialized agency which integrates marketing, credit, and trade policy tools for US agro-exporters. The cover of *AgExporter* of the October 2002 theme issue on the Caribbean implores that is "Not Just a Pretty Place" but "Has Multiple Markets for U.S. Agriculture" (FAS, 2002), while a November 2001 *AgExporter* article proclaims "Location, Location, Location: The Caribbean Presents an Opportunity Close at Hand" (Martinez).

¹⁸ Haiti's rice imports averaged US\$45.7 m from 1990 to 1994, and rose to US\$105,279 m in 2003. A condition of Aristide's return to power in 1994 after the

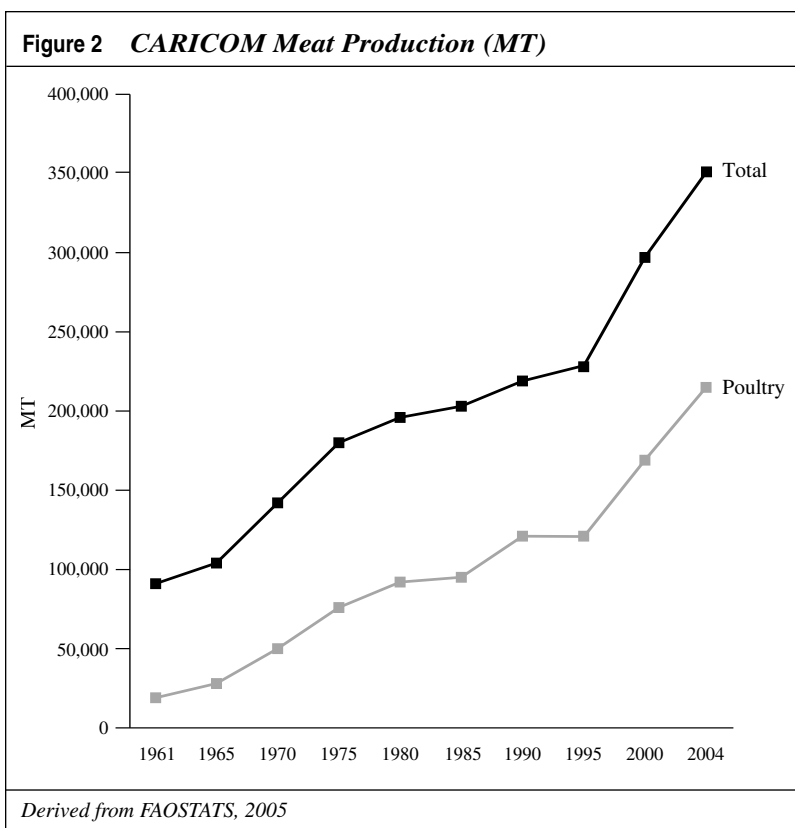
food supply in Haiti is the affect rising imports have had on domestic producers. A recent Oxfam report notes that “today three out of every four plates of rice eaten in Haiti comes from the US,” and juxtaposes the rising profits of U.S. agribusiness giant Riceland Foods, a chief beneficiary of this trade, with the fact that “local farmers’ livelihoods have been devastated and rice growing areas now have among the highest levels of malnutrition and poverty” in the country (Green).

While the U.S. breadbasket export strategy was originally built on grains and oilseeds, since the 1980s the large increases have been in valued-added products, including meat and dairy, as well as fresh fruits and vegetables, and these are the areas where future growth is projected.¹⁹ The grain-oilseed-livestock complex is at the heart of CARICOM’s food import patterns, with cereals, oilseeds, meat, dairy and egg products accounting for roughly half of all food imports. As Figure 2 illustrates, the region has also increasingly internalized one element of this complex: industrial broiler chicken production (though most associated inputs are imported).

These import and production trends are connected to a major dietary transition in the region. Meat, historically a rare item for most people, has moved to the centre of Caribbean diets. For instance, per capita chicken consumption in Barbados is twice that of the industrialized world (Craigwell and Moore). Although many households within CARICOM still face serious problems of food insecurity, outside of Haiti the predominant dietary trend over the

first coup against him was that his government implement IMF-prescribed economic reforms.

¹⁹ The biggest trend in the structure of US agro-exports in the 1980s and 1990s is the decreasing relative importance of grain and feed exports and the rising relative importance of ‘higher value’ meat and animal products (increasing from 9 to 20 per cent of total exports over these decades). US meat production increased by 48 per cent between 1980 and 1998, led by a boom in poultry (which grew by 135 per cent, partly spurred by government programs), and encouraged by an almost 800 per cent increase in meat exports (which accounted for nearly 31 per cent of the total increase in meat production). Fruits and vegetables have also become an increasingly significant part of the U.S. export picture, growing from 6 to 14 per cent of total exports over the 1980s and 1990s (USCB 2000). Liberalization does, however, pose a dilemma for the U.S. with certain fruits and vegetables (as well as products such as fruit juices, sugar, and tobacco) where it is both a major producer and importer. For these sectors threatened by import competition U.S. markets remain heavily protected, except in the off-seasons.



past three decades is the increase in food availability and shift towards diets that are heavily laden with saturated fats. Positively, there has been a great decline in protein and energy malnutrition, but the flipside is the significant rise in rates of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, high blood pressure, stroke, and some cancers (PAHO; Bacallao et al.).²⁰ Both the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute (CFNI) and the Caribbean Cooperation in Health (CCH) unit of the Pan-American Health Organization have connected rising levels of chronic disease with dietary patterns, in particular the steadily rising consumption of animal products and

²⁰ Mirroring a global trend, as the World Health Organization recently declared obesity to be a global epidemic.

the inadequate consumption of complex carbohydrates (CCH, Sinha). In the mid-1990s, fat intake in most CARICOM countries far exceeded recommended levels while most did not even reach half their recommended consumption for fruits, vegetables, roots, and tubers (Sinha).

Dietary change in the Caribbean is also connected to powerful cultural forces. Food is, after all, not only a basic need that has been largely commodified, but something that from cultivation to preparation to consumption bears deeply on culture. Though impossible to measure, the spread of U.S. media, advertising, and fast food restaurants in the Caribbean has undoubtedly influenced changing dietary aspirations, especially amongst youth, as have patterns of short and long term migration and forms of tourism development. The U.S. FAS clearly sees this as an encouraging development. An *AgExporter* article insists that “the permeation of cultural influences” helps to “make U.S. goods so popular” (Martinez), and an unclassified FAS document (assessing the potential for agro-export expansion in Jamaica) notes that “fast food restaurants are the single largest segment of the restaurants sub-sector and provide excellent marketing opportunities for U.S. high-value food products” (FAS 2003: 8).

In addition to increasingly feeding the Caribbean, the U.S. has also been instrumental in the multi-lateral context undermining the region’s export base. On behalf of powerful agro-TNCs (Chiquita was particularly influential) and together with Latin American banana exporting nations, U.S. trade experts successfully argued to the WTO that the preferential access for ACP bananas in European Union markets was an unfair trade practice. Because these protected markets had fostered extreme dependencies in the Windward Islands, the sharp descent of banana exports as the decision has been phased in is very damaging to small farmers there (Myers provides great detail into the history of the now famous ‘Banana Wars’ and the particular problems facing Dominica, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent).

Preferential sugar agreements have also been doomed by the WTO. Most of the world’s trade in sugar has historically moved through various preferential agreements, but this system — upon the successful challenge of competitive exporters Australia, Brazil, and Thailand — is now in the process of being dismantled. The first

drastic change was signalled by the European Union's announcement in 2005 that it would reduce subsidies to its sugar beet producers and cut the price paid for preferential sugar by 39 percent over 3 years.²¹

For CARICOM, which had originally entered into an agreement with Britain in perpetuity — under terms initially beneficial to Britain, but which over time shifted in their favour as their price was tied to the subsidy-inflated price given to European beet producers — this decision is being viewed as a betrayal, though appeals have focused on slowing the pace of implementation. These changes could well prove to be the undoing of sugar on any significant scale in most of CARICOM, as uncompetitive sugar producers in the region now have a very small window to adjust. Only Guyana and Belize are anywhere close to being able to produce at internationally competitive price levels, and the living conditions for most of the region's sugar workers are already far from decent.

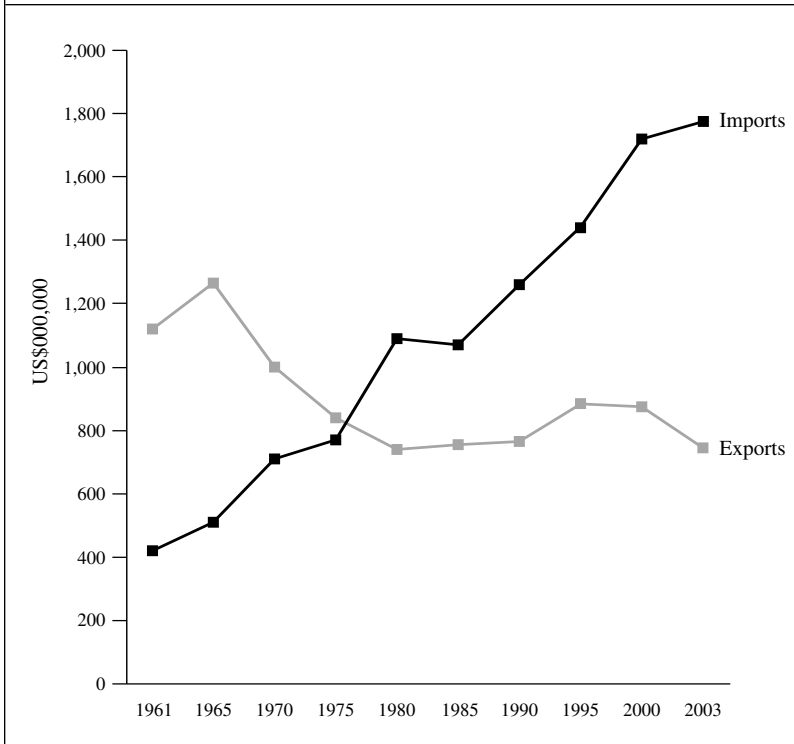
The net outcome of CARICOM's agrarian decline, in trade terms, is depicted vividly in Figure 3. Further, with diets shifting in ways that cannot be sustained by domestic production and with serious threats to the traditional export base still playing out, this imbalance threatens to widen in the near future in the absence of concerted efforts.

Encountering the Global

Though the problems and prospects of Caribbean agriculture remain crucially woven into the inequitable landscapes of the region, they also have clear global dimensions. This paper has focused at this macro-level in the belief that the dynamics globalization are too often reified, partly by the abstracted logic of liberalization and comparative advantage, and that by clarifying the pressures driving market integration and the nature of competition it can help to dissolve illusions that certain outcomes are inevitable. In this case, when the broader context of agrarian decline in the Caribbean is coupled with a recognition of agriculture's multi-dimensional

²¹ Given the politicization of sugar with Europe, proposed compensation payments for EU sugar beet farmers have run into the billions of euros. Meanwhile, proposals in late 2005 had 40m euros being spread amongst all of the ACP in compensation for lost income.

Figure 3 *CARICOM Agro-Trade (US\$000,000)*
– Adjusted Base Year Prices



Derived from FAOSTATS, 2005

contributions, not only in terms of material production but also — if we are speaking about small farming — in the re-production of dignified livelihoods, then the urgency of encountering the prevailing fatalism becomes more apparent. Fatalism tends to induce inertia, and when this is shaken and uprooted alternative policy responses can seem more tenable.

One very significant example where this occurred was at Cancun in 2003 as social movements (e.g. Via Campesina), progressive think-tanks (e.g. Third World Network, Focus on the Global South), and scholarly research helped to inform and embolden negotiating contingents from Third World countries about the problems with the WTO, with agricultural disparities

providing a key focal point in the de-railing of negotiations (a struggle which continues after the negotiations were quietly re-railled in 2004). At Cancun CARICOM nations were part of the G-90+ that arose as a bloc in loose association with the more powerful Third World grouping, the G-20+ (led by Brazil and India), rallying in part around calls for greater 'food sovereignty'. For their small farmers to have a future, CARICOM nations must continue to build alliances that advocate for rights to policy mechanisms that can promote food sovereignty, including defending bound tariff levels in ongoing trade negotiations (or, more radically, to work towards a de-legitimization of the AoA altogether). They must also use this tariff flexibility more strategically in the future to protect domestic production against uneven and dislocating competition (Weis 2004b).

Because food is something through which people encounter productive relations very intimately, multiple times every day, increased awareness about systemic problems with food production — including the cultural and health issues associated with dietary change — can have a special role in catalyzing opposition to neoliberal economic prescriptions and invigorating struggles for social change. For instance, some of the strongest and most consistent calls for policies to support diversified local agricultural production in CARICOM nations have come from health analysts (Bacallao, CCH, Sinha). Food and agriculture might also act as a spur for social change in the Caribbean if new seams for land reform emerge out of the region's crises of plantation production.²² If hopeful alternatives can be built in these seams, forcing them to widen, it could help to break down a degree of the historically-embedded denial about questions of land and inequality that adjustment has solidified (Weis 2005, 2004c).

The energy for small farm-centred agrarian change in the region will ultimately hinge, in significant measure, on whether local food can be centrally re-positioned into Caribbean imaginations about

²² This will demand an assault upon the time-warped view in the region of sugar as social welfare. As C.Y. Thomas, one of the region's most eminent development economists, has long been emphasizing, for sugar to have any future in CARICOM the focus must shift towards innovation and value-added processing (including the generation of alternative fuels), rather than the traditional emphases on maintaining jobs (from the state) and containing wage costs (in the industry).

society, economy, and culture, and on whether small farmers can see themselves — and make themselves seen — as a class with not only a proud past but a potentially vibrant future. Better understanding the global context and how, as McMichael (2000b: 132) puts it, “liberalization is by no means a neutral matter of installing a ‘level playing field’ in the global food economy”, is one important step in this struggle.

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