

5. The Caribbean Plantation Economy and Dependency Theory

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I meet Rex McKenzie in Sutton, a town on the outskirts of South London not too far from Kingston, where he lectures in Economics. We had met earlier in the year, and we had gone from discussing the lack of radical thinking in the economics discipline to the intertwined nature of racism and capitalist exploitation. We start off the interview with the question of how he got into dependency theory.

Gunder Frank is probably where I started and that had tremendous resonance, the obvious things were of course foreign direct investment, imperialism, the whole Latin American malaise. I came across a book by a guy called Beckford, George Beckford. The book was called *Persistent Poverty*.²² Beckford was a Jamaican scholar at the University of the West Indies, and he, along with Kari Polanyi, Levitt and Lloyd Best were the chief architects of something called the “plantation economy.” You know, that really kicked me off. So I got involved in plantation economy studies. I always remember this quote about the plantation economy, which I am trying to apply to South Africa to this day. It says “the plantation economy is a total institution.” The term “total institution” itself was taken from Goffman, who did studies on mental asylums. It was a way in which a small group of people organised a very large group of people to basically do as they are told. And that was the aspect that I was interested in, because I was interested in what I observed in the Caribbean behaviour, and why this behaviour emulates the master. Why do we emulate the master in behaving in a particular way? So, apart from economic dependency, there was this whole thing about a cultural dependency that fascinates me. There is an untold story about Jamaica. And the untold story is, there is racism in Jamaica today, there is racism where lighter skin black people look down on darker skin

²² George L. Beckford, *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 1972).

black people, and darker skin black people look up with a kind of grudging respect at lighter skinned ones. And then, I would notice that the way that we operate is in a colonial manner. So in Jamaica's culture, there is a very kind of Victorian way of doing things, with relations of class, so that is where I entered into it.

What concerns me particularly is violence. The Latin American and Caribbean contexts are the most violent, and if you look at the most violent cities in the world, they are all in Latin America and the Caribbean, except South Africa. And again, there is this total institution, and violence is very much the basis of the system. It was the way the system was created, the way it was maintained. I think the violence has something to do with this plantation, it is part of its origins, and I think the behaviour is rooted in the plantation. The Rastafarians, who were, and maybe still are, the very conscience of the Caribbean in many ways, would say: they removed the chains, but we are still enslaved. And within their kind of depiction of the world, Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean is just a big plantation. The analysis resonates with me, because I am seeing in the 21st Century instances, which smack of this kind of behaviour. So apart from the economic aspects, there are very real patterns of behaviour, which I think were established a long time ago, and that are very difficult to break, which are connected with race, and which are connected with class.

To an extent, there is no model of our own. The choice in the Caribbean is the choice between the neoliberal model, and in the case of Cuba, what was a Soviet model. Without that model, Cuba flounders. The reason that we cannot devise our own model is because we are locked into the conditions of our founding. For instance, in Jamaica, there were, and to some extent still are, these garrisons, they call them garrison politics, where there is a strong man. Do you remember the case of Coke? There was a case several years ago, of a guy, who was the chief man, he would control life. There was a partnership between political leaders and criminals, and they worked together to control the people and the economy. Of course the complicating factor is the drug culture, which makes life very difficult. But, it is remarkable how certain facets of that organisation speak to the plantation. It is remarkable, and I would like to see more work in this area. There's a guy called Harriot, he's done a lot of work on violence in Jamaica, mostly linked to drug culture, but also the way that politics is organised. Then there is Amanda Sives, she has done a fair bit of work on patrons and clients, and that is how she thinks Jamaica is organised, as a patron-client country. Now that comes directly out of plantation studies, because in the plantation, the only way for the slave to move forward was if he got the patronage of the overseer. Again, in the modern day, in the contemporary context, people are looking for a big man to support them and further their interests. So Sives is right when she picks up the whole thing as a patron-client

relation, but if you look at South Africa, if you look at the African continent, you see a lot of patron-client relations.

Now first of all, what is the plantation? The plantation is a modern, historical and institutional model, with different layers. There is plantation 1, plantation 2, plantation 3. Beckford started to do the initial work and then Polanyi Levitt and Lloyd Best were the people who did plantation 2, and plantation 3. Plantation 1 would be where you organised around say sugar, one crop, and you produce sugar on the plantation, and the plantation is its own society. If you think of Marikana in South Africa, you are seeing the same thing, you are seeing the same kind of organisation. You have your mine and you have your town, and everything in the town has to do with Lonmin. Everything. This is how the plantation is put forward. And then, as time moved on, resources like bauxite, and oil were discovered, but again, it is one commodity, one primary commodity. I think perhaps we are at fools dawn somewhere, because for example in the case of Trinidad, who were fortunate, well, I do not know if they were fortunate, but who discovered oil in their jurisdiction, have been able to move beyond oil into oil and gas related production. So that is if you like, the exception to the general rule. But the other countries are still locked into this kind of plantation mode.

That's the short story about where my interest comes from and where I think the relevance of dependency theory comes in. Of course, the arguments about foreign direct investments are important, of course they are. And of course, the whole way that the countries were inserted into world capitalism has been established, and of course those traditional relationships still matter today. But there are cultural, psychological, behavioural elements, which I see as being a kind of dependent behaviour.

Do you think that there was a shortcoming of dependency theory in the 1960s and 1970s, or maybe not a shortcoming, but a need for expansion?

Oh, I think a need for expansion, perhaps because it falls out of the ambit of the economist. Because I suppose at the end of the day, when you start to talk about behaviour, you are in the realms of psychology. I am just rereading Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*,²³ and the chapter on national consciousness is a great dependency theme. In fact, I am reading it because I am writing about South African elites, and I think, what more is there to say than this? Again it is an underexplored area, but I think partly because dependency was economic issue, and the aspect of it that fascinates me, or my emphasis is more on the political economy. I think if that could be expanded, deepened, I think it would be really useful. One of the ways of doing this is to do like Morales, who

²³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York Grove Press, 1963).

set up a school for Bolivians, where the Bolivians can learn to critique American foreign policy. So it is a question of reorienting people's world view. That is what it takes.

If you look at South Africa the big question is; during the struggle, what kind of struggle did they have? Were they anti-imperialist or were they anti-capitalist? You have to come down and say they were anti-imperialist and not anti-capitalist. Because what you see now is the sense that there is nothing wrong with capitalism. That is the group that has won out, that is the elite in the ANC that has won out. So the group, the Chris Hani inspired group, has given way to this neoliberal group, Ramaphosa for instance, that predominates.

What do you see as the political possibilities for breaking with patterns of dependency?

I am an optimist, and I think what we have is an unsustainable system, and I think if there could be a mobilization of resources, both human and material, in the interest of the people, then it is on. But the thing is, who is going to lead that mobilization? Because we do not have the CLR James's, we don't have the Walter Rodney's, (who provided intellectual leadership) at least not as far as I know. We do not have that breed of leader. The question is, where is the leadership going to come from? Because now, and I think rightly so, there is an anti-intellectualism, because so many intellectuals are so far removed from the masses, and like it that way. So, the question of mobilization is a big issue, because it relies on leadership, and I am not sure about where that leadership will come from. Now, I maintain that the Rastafarians in Jamaica are the conscience of society, and have always been so, but even that group is somewhat in retreat, and caught up, again because the lack of leadership.

So, although I am an optimist, I am not under any illusions. I find it very difficult to see where the leadership is going to come from. You need a cadre of people who will articulate the position on behalf of the people. And to be fair, what makes South Africa exciting is that people still talk that language.

What part of dependency theory, what strands, or what elements pertain most to plantation economies?

I think it is the total institution notion that comes from Beckford, which is the one that pertains most. Obviously the essential facets of the economy remain the same, we have probably now moved to tourism, but even if you think about tourism, it is a highly dependent industry that is a personification of dependency is it not? I think the total institution notion is useful, maybe because the places are small, but you get the sense that there is very little room for dissent. The small of size of the population, is it an

advantage or a disadvantage? I think on the one hand, it is an advantage, but on the other hand, I think it is a disadvantage, because everything has the sense of being so all-encompassing. One of the problems that we have is that history is not really taught. We know about English history, but Caribbean history. If I ask most kids today about a great figure from the past, I'm not sure a lot of them would be able to say much. If you ask kids, who was Walter Rodney, and what did he do, a lot of people would not know. So my sense is that there is not enough emphasis on the thought of the past, the political and economic thought of our theoreticians that were somehow swept to the side. You just become embroiled in a big neoliberal project, and what you would consider your brother or sister island is now your enemy, because you stand in toe-to-toe competition with them, and that works its way all the way down into society. So you have a society seemingly at war with itself. All this talk of unity, that is not on the cards unfortunately.

So the position of several Caribbean countries as tax havens, would you say that that's kind of a novel form of dependency?

It is new, it is newer, is it really novel? Not really, it is new. It is just the newest form of it. And I mean, the kind of model that suggests that we all become tax havens. Not everybody can be a tax haven, it is ridiculous. I saw an interview with Ha-Joon Chang, where he says, that would be the easiest thing to break, if there were the will to do it, of course there is none. In Barbados, the Caymans, all of these places, you know, living on this one activity, where the whole place becomes a tax haven. I am not sure it would be a good thing. I mean, it borders criminality, and in some cases it is outright criminal, and we have enough problems with drugs and money-laundering, so to add another one I think is just more madness.

I'm trying to understand more about Samir Amin's notion of delinking, and what that actually means in practice?

I said I was an optimist, but I have not heard or read anything that fills me with any kind of optimism on delinking. I am more and more leaning towards Patrick Bond's interpretation, where he talks about BRIC-countries and their orientation. The thesis on sub-imperialism is more correct than wrong. It has taken me a long time to make up my mind, but I am beginning to see that. So, I do not think it is going to come from there, which is what a number of theorists have been saying. In the case of the African continent, it is clear that the Africans prefer to do business with the Chinese. What I see as the best thing that they could do is almost a return to an East-West bipolarity, where you play one side against the other side, instead of a unipolar world where all you have is the US and Western Europe. So I see that perhaps as a way, since the Chinese are not going to go away. But Chinese investments in Africa and Latin America are patchy. It really depends on where it is, and how they go about their business. The Chinese seem

to be extremely pragmatic, you know, what works best, and whatever works best, that is what we are going to do. And if we don't have to do anything, then we won't do anything. So it is not like they have a mission other than to serve their own ends, that is their mission. I mean, Malaysia has emerged as a bigger player than it was in Africa, India, Brazil, but you know, are these countries really qualitatively different in their operations? It would be a brave man who would say that they are.

And you are not even going back to the issues of land grabs. If you look at who is involved in that, it does not fill you with confidence. I would be interested to hear and see what Amin is saying on delinking, because I do not know how that can be done. I have problems with nationalism taken to the extreme, I think it is counter-productive. I think I am probably influenced by what I am reading at the moment, which is Fanon, and I do have problems with nationalism.

In the Caribbean, there is the economics of it, and there are the social relations of it. The social relations in the Caribbean context are permeated by race. And race in a funny way, with all spectrums involved, with everybody fulfilling their historical mission. So you have the Chinese and the Syrians as a business class, you have blacks providing the labour for it, and you have whites as the kind of captains of industry, and then you have Indians in the rural areas. So it remains a melting pot for all these various groups, and I am not sure that the traditional relations of it have changed in any significant manner. That is the thing that needs to change. There is very little done on this, I can name the people. There is Lou Anne Barclay, who wrote *Sharks and Sardines*²⁴, which is a book on business in Trinidad. There is very little done on race of a meaningful kind, and the uninformed see a homogeneous group, although it certainly pulls in all directions. What I do think though, is that the racism we will see here is a bit different in the Caribbean. To my mind, there is an anti-blackness kind of racialism, we are generally quite welcoming to the outsider, that is not an issue. But internally there is a stigma connected with black skin, and that is highly problematic, given that a lot of the population is black. The higher up you go, the paler the complexions.

So very classic Fanon?

Very much so. But nobody is going to teach Fanon in schools, which is unfortunate. Again it is the education system. We need to teach people, disseminate these ideas, the only way that happens is an inquiring mind, to learn, but he or she will not find it in school, only if one devotes some time and effort to it. It is a sad situation. You know, I

²⁴ Selwyn and Lou Anne Barclay Ryan, *Sharks and Sardines: Blacks in Business in Trinidad and Tobago* (Kingston: I.S.E.R University of the West Indies, 1992).

said I am an optimist, rather I want to be an optimist. I am a little frightened by a whole region that has been left behind. Here is the thing. They say that what the region lacks is innovation. When I am there, there is plenty of innovation, but it is repressed. You are not going to get a loan for a business idea if you are not well-connected. The Jamaican case is probably the most interesting. Apparently, there were 21 notable families in Jamaica in the 1960s, 1970s. If we were to do an analysis today, we would find that 17 or 18 would be the same names.

When I was in Jamaica I worked as a banker, and a few things happened to me that I just found uncanny. I remember going to a party, and in Kingston, Jamaica, I was the only black person. I remember going to a party in Johannesburg and I was the only black person. What on earth? And I was only there, in both cases, because in inverted commas I was English. So I was not exactly like everybody else, I had a funny accent. Insane. So it is more that I would like to be an optimist, more than being an optimist now, because it is a pretty dark place. I am not sure how we are going to come out of it, given the vacuum of leadership.

In the realm of dependency theory, on the one hand, the argument is that development in the West has always actively created underdevelopment in the South. On the other hand, there seems to be a certain strand of dependency theory that argues that you need industrialisation and to move up the value-chain. But those two might be in contradiction, since you are still basing development on a capitalist system?

That is the question, every book and paper I have read discusses the need for industrialisation. I have now just accepted it, I do not think you can skip through stages, you need to build through industrialising. Does one have to industrialize along capitalist lines? That is the question. I think the answer is that you do not. I still believe that there is room for state-directed industrialisation, I still believe that, to a certain point, yes. I suppose what we are talking about here is industrial policy and how the industrial policy is framed and how the balance of power works among those institutions. It is for instance the case that I think if Chris Hani had lived, he would have had a very different style, he would have had a very different style in South Africa. So that would be the issue. I think because it always has been this way, it does not mean that it always will be, it is not immutable. I do not think you necessarily have to develop along capitalism's lines.