Caribbean Peasants in Comparative Historical Perspective

When one thinks of world peasants, the Caribbean is hardly the first that comes to mind. In fact, if most students of peasantries were asked to locate and describe the world’s chief “peasant zones”, the Caribbean would probably not be among the top ten on any of the lists. Long defined by European and North American imperial powers as an area notably suitable for large-scale export agriculture, organized largely on the basis of imported working populations, the islands of the West Indies and the surrounding tropical lowlands are among the foremost agro-industrial areas spawned by European expansion. As Sidney Mintz reminds us, the manufacture of sugar from the juice of the cane was among the most sophisticated mechanical and chemical processes invented before the era of steam. Because sugar so thoroughly dominated Caribbean history until the middle of the twentieth century, and because the laboring populations recruited for sugar-making were chiefly slaves brought from Africa, it would appear that there was little room left in Caribbean history for the development of peasantries.

Yet, in actuality, few world areas have appeared as suitable for the study of processes leading into and out of “peasantness” as the West Indies. Several of the most useful and popular concepts for the study of these transitions have been derived from observations of Caribbean societies: Wolf’s classification of “closed corporate” and “open” peasant communities, for example, and Mintz’s construct of the “rural proletariat” as an identifiable social type quite distinct from peasants and urban workers. Moreover, in few cases where the “nation” is defined by the presence of a large class of rural smallholders have the complex, interdependent forces of race, class, gender, and external control been so palpably central to the historical process as in Haiti since its independence in 1804. Finally, Caribbean migration to the United States and Europe has recently introduced into these regions populations whose customs, mentalities, and cultural orientations are definitely no less rural than those of the Eastern European or Italian migrants of an earlier time.

What does it mean to be a peasant in the Caribbean setting today, and what has it meant over the long stretch of more than five centuries? What commonalities have existed between such peasantries and those of Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America? How have they arisen, and how can one characterize their relations with dominant forms of production, such as the plantation, and with the various kinds of states that have arisen historically across the region? If peasants, by their putative temperament, resist outside domination and control, what forms has this resistance taken in the Caribbean and why?

These are some of the questions that will concern us in this seminar. In order to tackle the problems they raise, we will look at some of the conceptual foundations of peasant studies and will sample the ways in which peasantries have been looked at by analysts. We will also read selectively from the historical, anthropological, and sociological literature on Caribbean peasantries. The intent, however, is not to cover any one problem in depth but to survey the breadth of issues which peasantries and “peasantness” pose, especially in the Caribbean context. Seminar work will concentrate instead on
research leading to a substantial paper, which each student will present to the seminar in one of the latter sessions of the semester.

**Requirements**

A) **Paper:** Seminar members will write a substantive, article-length (20-25 pp. long) paper on a topic she/he will select in consultation with the instructor. The paper should examine a problem in the history or contemporary situation of one or more Caribbean peasant formations. It may focus on only one Caribbean society if it lies within the insular Caribbean. It may also bring in a comparative Latin American case into dialogue with the Caribbean literature and/or its theoretical or conceptual explorations.

The semester paper is intended to be a “research piece;” that is, it should be substantially steeped in primary sources. While the writer should strive for thoroughness in the bibliographic coverage, she/he should accord priority to the substantive, analytical issues raised by the question or questions posed from the beginning as a guide to the investigation. It should definitely not be a historiographic paper or a “review of the literature.”

Papers are due on Friday, December 2, at 4 P.M. via email to Professor Scarano, who will convert them into PDFs (if not already in that format) and post them on Mywebspace for reading online or printing. All papers will be the subject of a short discussion during the last two class sessions (November 29 and December 6 and 13), which we will hold outside of the Humanities building at a place TBA. A schedule of presentations will be drawn early in the semester so that seminar members will know when it will be their turn to explain and discussed their findings.

B) **Presentations of weekly readings:** In addition to the paper presentation at the end of the semester, each seminar participant will make at least one, and perhaps two, brief presentation(s) that give(s) a critical overview of (a) particular week(s)’s readings. When it is your turn for this presentation, you will bring a two-page (maximum) written summary of the main points you wish to raise in dialogue with the readings; please bring copies for all seminar members, as we will spend the first few minutes of each section familiarizing ourselves with the tenor of your presentation. A schedule of presentations will be drawn up at the first seminar meeting.

The presentations will provide a synthesis and critique of the weekly readings. They should not only concentrate on the reading(s)’ contents, but also inform the seminar about the historiographical or disciplinary context within which the author(s)’ are writing. In so doing, they will lay the groundwork for the ensuing discussions during the seminar period. It is expected that the presenter will assume a leading role in seminar deliberations on the day of her/his presentation.

**Books to be read in their entirety**


SCHEDULE AND READINGS
(* = digitally available, most through course page on Mywebspace)

Week 1 (Sept. 6) -- Peasant Studies and Caribbean studies (orientation session)


Week 2 (Sept. 13) -- The Caribbean as a Problem in Atlantic History

Reading:


Week 3 (Sept. 20) -- Peasantries in the Scholarly Imagination

Readings:


Week 4 (Sept. 27) Peasant Reconstitutions: An Introduction

Readings:

Week 5 (Oct. 4) Caribbean Hinterlands of Atlantic Capitalism: The Spanish Islands

Readings:


Week 6 (Oct. 11) Peasant/Slaves in a Colonial Mining Frontier: Cuba’s El Cobre

Reading:


Week 7 (Oct. 18) Proto-peasantries in Slave Plantation Societies

Reading:


Week 8 (Oct. 25) Forced Labor, “Peonization,” and the Struggle Against Peasant Independence

Readings:


Week 9 (Nov. 1) SEMINAR RECESS

Week 10 (Nov. 8) Peasants in Rebellions and Revolutions

Readings:


Week 11 (Nov. 15) Populism and “its” Peasantry: A View from the Dominican Republic

Reading:

Turits, *Foundations of Despotism*, chs. 3-end.
Week 12 (Nov. 22) Migration and the Transnationalized Peasantry

Reading:


Weeks 13-15 (Nov. 29, Dec 6 & 13)

*Research presentations* (place TBA).
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following is a sample of recent writings in general peasant studies and on the peasantry in the Caribbean and Latin America. It reflects the instructor’s reading of the literature and does not purport to be comprehensive.

Peasants and Peasant Societies.

General and Comparative


Firth, Raymond, and B. S. Yamey, eds. *Capital, Saving and Credit in Peasant Societies: Studies from Asia, Oceania, the Caribbean and Middle America*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1964.


The Caribbean


______. “Campesinado y plantación en el Caribe.” *Del Caribe* VI, no. 16-17 (1990): 44-49.

“Campesinado y plantación en el Caribe.” *Del Caribe* VI, no. 16-17 (1990): 44-49.


“Caimito: una comunidad negra y mulata libre al margen de las haciendas azucareras.” *Del Caribe* VI, no. 16-17 (1990): 51-57.


Rodríguez Juliá, Edgardo. “Semblanza de un estadista radical, mi padre y el 1898.” In Los arcos de la memoria: el ‘98 de los pueblos puertorriqueños, edited by Silvia Alvarez Curbelo, Mary Frances Gallart, and Carmen I. Raffucci, 11-15. San Juan: Oficina del Presidente de la UPR; Comité del Centenario de 1898; Asociación Puertorriqueña de Historiadores; Postdata, 1998.


Latin America


