The Rise, Fall and Future of the Jamaican Peasantry

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This article examines the crisis of the Jamaican peasantry. Jamaica’s peasants are struggling against pressures old and new, with the burden of their spatial inheritance magnified by a withering state, rising food imports following trade liberalisation, and oft-conflictive social relations. It begins by examining the historical formation of the peasantry after Emancipation, emphasising the unevenness of the landscape and the tensions between individualism and cooperation, before describing the protracted process of de-peasantisation, which has sped under structural adjustment reforms. Current conditions and future prospects are assessed through the insights and experiences of peasant farmers situated on the periphery of a plantation landscape. Ultimately, the future of peasant farming in Jamaica is seen to be bound up foremost in the struggle for land reform, and it is hoped that the current de-stabilisation of the plantation system will provide a new window for historic change.

Caribbean peasantries have a relatively short history and a precarious future. Peasants emerged rapidly following Emancipation in the 19th century, despite marginal positions in very uneven landscapes, to become the foundations of most Caribbean societies. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, however, industrial and tourist development and the growth of a massive migratory culture steadily eroded their relative size, to the point of near extinction in some island nations (e.g. Puerto Rico). Today, trade liberalisation is compounding peasants’ colonial inheritance throughout much of the region, as they are forced to compete against rising food imports from their position on small, often poor quality lands, with limited infrastructure and virtually no support from the state (Cuba, of course, stands out as a notable regional exception [Funes et al., 2002]). At the same time, liberalisation is
also destroying the viability of traditional exports sugar and bananas, as the dismantling of preferential trade agreements – which had long insulated uncompetitive production – is undermining the viability of regional plantations. Émile Zola [1980: 458] could well have been describing contemporary Jamaica and not 19th-century provincial France when he wrote that: ‘Catastrophe was looming round the corner to put an end to the age-old struggle between the smallholder and the big landlord by destroying them both.’

Although Jamaica’s peasant population has shrank significantly, especially since the late 1970s when World Bank and IMF dictated structural adjustment effectively cast it as being irrelevant, peasant farming remains a critical source of employment in a stagnant and job-scarce economy. Together, peasant and plantation agriculture constitute the single largest direct source of employment in Jamaica (22 per cent of the workforce), and peasant agriculture represents a key source of import substitution in the face of a rising and unsustainable trade deficit.

Without any obvious prospects for employment generating economic activity on the horizon, or the development of productive sectors with the capacity for import substitution or export competitiveness, the continued erosion of the peasantry can only occur at a great social and economic cost to Jamaica. As the economy becomes ever more dependent on the growth of its tourism industry, remittance economy and informal sector (including that associated with the nacro-trade), while trade imbalances continue to expand, the Jamaican government is struggling mightily to manage its enormous debt burden (debt service now consumes two-thirds of all government expenditure) and contain the social fallout attendant to the lack of opportunities for the poor. Meanwhile, the mindset that ‘there is no alternative’ to Washington Consensus reforms – i.e. liberalisation, a shrinking state, export-led growth, etc. – remains dominant [Weis, 2005].

It is important to confront this ideological hegemony with the articulation of alternatives, because they are both possible and urgent. Historic possibilities could be opening for Jamaica’s peasants, who are still largely confined to the rugged interior, as the declining viability of sugar and bananas potentially de-stabilises the colonial land regime in which four per cent of landholders still control roughly 65 per cent of all agricultural land, including most of the fertile coastal plains. In this prospect lies the potential for a more economically viable, socially equitable, and ecologically rational agricultural landscape, dignified labour absorption (with pressing and broad social implications, including poverty reduction and decreased rural-urban migration), and enhanced food security. Unfortunately, at the same time as there is a need and possible opening to revitalise agriculture, many young people in rural areas are rejecting farming and there are some very destructive social currents at work, weakening the pressure for change.
This article begins by historicising the marginality and social relations of the Jamaican peasantry, before exploring current problems and future possibilities based on interviews with peasant farmers. This approach reflects a belief that peasant interpretations are foundational to theorising and advocating for change.

THE PLANTATION LANDSCAPE AND THE RISE OF THE PEASANTRY

The Jamaican peasantry was, as Beckford and Witter [1991: 42] suggest, ‘born struggling for land’. Contemporary biophysical constraints were implanted by the incomplete process of Emancipation, and contemporary social relations have important roots in the period that followed. After Emancipation, planters not only continued to monopolise the fertile coastal plains but were compensated for their ‘loss of property’. In contrast, ex-slaves received no assistance, and were left to either move into dependent relationships with estates, as wage labourers or tenant farmers, or to pursue a gruelling freedom in Jamaica’s rugged interior, carving out small plots from the largely undeveloped hillside forests. Plantations were a colossal constraint on this newly constituted peasantry, with planters seeking to block peasant independence to ensure a labour surplus and depress wages. The basic interplay and conflict between plantations and peasants was the major dynamic driving Jamaican history for more than a century following Emancipation [Beckford and Witter, 1991].

In addition to the daunting obstacles set by the planters and the colonial government, the emergent peasantry also began its struggle without developed agricultural traditions as the brutality, acculturation and slave-owners’ precautionary policy of mixing different ethnic groups on plantations had severed slaves from much of their African heritage. While there was some syncretism of African cultures, the cropping patterns (combining indigenous and colonial root crops, vegetables, and fruits) and skills (judging soil quality, selecting seed, harvesting, and food preparation) of Caribbean peasants are largely identified with the experience of working slave provision grounds – what Mintz [1985] calls the proto-peasantry. The elusive Maroons also contributed to this developing peasant culture [Beckford, 1985; Mintz, 1985].

With no infrastructural support from the colonial state, cooperation was critical in clearing land and in establishing farms, communities and rudimentary roads in the interior. Cooperative labour took different forms such as day-for-day (partners exchange equal days of labour), morning sport (a group works to complete a task by lunch with recreation planned for the afternoon), and the digging match (which some linked to the dôkpwé of the Dahomey of West Africa). Basic cooperative banking and credit systems were also established as the money economy expanded, and the Jamaican Agricultural Society (JAS) was formed as the peasantry grew to help disseminate technical information and promote peasants’ interests [Girvan, 1993].
Their unique history gave Caribbean peasants a heightened degree of market dependence relative to other peasanthries around the world [Mintz, 1973], and there has never been any exit option apart from the Maroon experience. Rather, from their inception as a class they were always closely connected to market systems, farming for both subsistence needs and commercial sale. The slavery-era Sunday Market was the forerunner of the peasant marketing system, with women ‘higglers’ (petty traders) taking the responsibility for marketing the surplus from men after Emancipation.

Yet although peasants were able to construct an alternative system of production and marketing, at the same time as sugar production fell precipitously in the decades following Emancipation, the peasantry was never entirely independent of the plantation system – serving as a reservoir of seasonal labour, providing basic foodstuffs for estates and domestic markets, and using the plantation marketing infrastructure to cultivate export crops. Tensions from the continuing injustice of the landscape erupted in the peasant-led Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865, which was violently suppressed by the colonial government and brought only a few cosmetic changes and no substantive land distribution.

Beginning in the 1870s, the plantation institution was reinvigorated by the rise of bananas, which developed into a major export in the late 19th century. This development was entwined with the growth of the United Fruit Company (UFC) – the biggest landowner in Jamaica by the early 20th century – and a land policy that distributed land mostly in large blocks and favoured US capital. This colonial land policy served to ‘reinforce concentration of land holdings in fewer hands, and as a consequence retarded peasant expansion’ [Satchell 1992: 36; Robotham, 1977].

THE POVERTY OF LAND DISTRIBUTIONS AND CRUMBLING COOPERATION TRADITIONS

The colonial government began selling and leasing Crown lands in smaller parcels in 1895, but the quality and quantity of what was left to distribute was limited. Additionally, much of this did not end up in the hands of poor peasants or plantation workers, but contributed to a growing stratification of rural landholding, as medium-size farms emerged when some peasants and professionals were able to profit from the banana trade and capitalise, like the estates, on the cheap labour the landscape produced [Robotham, 1977]. Competition for land was further increased by the expansion of cattle ranching and later by the revival of the sugar industry when the First World War destroyed Europe’s sugar beet industry.

One response to the shortage of land in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the beginning of urban and external migration,
release valves which lessened but did not entirely prevent social tensions from building up. Not until the 1930s was anything close to a peasant land settlement programme implemented, as the government began buying land and selling it in small plots [Stolberg, 1992]. But the entrenched inequalities limited most of the distribution to forested lands in the hills and mountains or the least viable plantation lands the state had come to control, and these efforts were not adequately supported with infrastructure, credit or extension [McBain, 1992; Beckford, 1985].

Given the limited approaches to land distribution, social conditions in Jamaica in the 1930s remained desperate for many: an estimated three-quarters of the rural population was mired in acute poverty, faced with limited health and educational services, widespread illiteracy and malnutrition, and poor housing [Girvan, 1993]. By end of the decade, frustrations were again boiling over, culminating in the 1938 riots, the most widespread uprising in Jamaican history. Although different social groups became involved, land was a central factor [Robotham, 1996; Stolberg, 1992]. The Moyne Commission, formed in the wake of the riots, concluded that ‘the hillside peasants had been the driving force . . . and were the potential source of future social unrest’, and argued that an urgent ‘reorganization of the agricultural sector’ was central to improving social and economic conditions [Stolberg, 1992: 52, 54]. Again, however, while intensified land settlements were proposed, the Commission did not challenge the sacrosanct plantation institution, suggesting only that estates be diversified. This limited view of reform contributed to only minor improvements for peasants.

Around the same time as land distribution initiatives were floundering and social stratification was increasing, other efforts were being made to facilitate peasant development and invigorate cooperative traditions. During the 1940s and 1950s, Jamaica Welfare Limited fostered cooperative projects that were rooted in community-based problem analysis, shared ownership and decision-making control, and the use of profits for social ends. Cooperatives were framed ‘as a means of transforming and democratising the social and economic relations of a capitalistic society’ and combating individualism. This goal was related to the peasant experience in coordinated social action and voluntarism, and the localised ‘traditions of mutual self-help, such as ‘day-for-day’ and ‘morning sport’’ that had evolved, in the expressed hope that the ‘formation of cooperatives would carry these traditions to a higher level, by facilitating collective capital accumulation, investment in social amenities, and expansion over a wide range of business activities (buying, marketing, producing, farming)’ [Girvan, 1993: 69–70].

Yet despite the effort to build on existing traditions, cooperative efforts were going against strong and rising antisocial currents.6 Although peasant cooperative strategies had developed in the collective struggle for survival,
the hierarchy and authoritarianism of the plantation institution had also created cultural tendencies that debilitated mutual aid [Beckford, 1972; Mintz, 1971], and these intensified as new classes emerged and differentiated. The result was that Jamaican society was becoming ‘permeated by individualism, ‘dog-eat-dog-ism’ and racial self-contempt’ [Girvan, 1993: 78].

So while the 1938 riots reflected a spontaneous revolt of the poor against different forms of injustice, the fragmentation of peasant society was also producing less constructive, even regressive, social responses to injustice. For instance, a British Colonial report at the time identified praedial larceny (farm theft) as a major problem in the region [EACCNCE, 1939], and often this was not a subversive strike against large-holders but pitted poor against poor. In short, atomised social ethics had taken firm root, and in 1961 one of the leaders of Jamaica Welfare (by then called the Social Welfare Commission) posed a question that echoes today: ‘We need to ask ourselves: At what stage did we become less united, less tolerant, less confident in our friends, in ourselves, and in our future?’ (cited in Girvan [1993: 407]).

DE-PEASANTISATION AND A FLEETING REVIVAL

In 1950, Jamaica was still a classic plantation economy, with high import dependence and an extremely narrow export base. Sugar again accounted for most of Jamaica’s export earnings, and was increasingly important for small peasants and mid-size farmers as well as plantations. The chronic neglect of peasants was made worse in the 1950s by emerging bauxite and tourism interests; huge North American-based mining companies came to control one-fifth of all arable lands, getting as much land from the government as was distributed in all of the land settlement schemes between 1929 and 1970, and causing widespread deforestation and displacement of farmers [Stolberg, 1992].

These new industries coupled with the rise of ‘branch plant’ manufacturing to bring high levels of economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s. Dramatic social change was also occurring, including rapid urbanisation, the widening of the middle class, and the intensification of external migratory patterns. Amidst this diversification, agriculture quickly lost its central place in the Jamaican economy, falling from 31 per cent of GDP in 1950 to 13.4 per cent in 1960 to 7.1 per cent in 1970 [Anderson and Witter, 1994]. Nevertheless, sugar exporting continued to thrive in the 1950s thanks to protected markets in Britain, and estates retained their control over the best lands while mechanisation was allowing them to cut labour.

During this so-called ‘golden age’ of growth, 0.2 per cent of farms (roughly 300–350 large estates) controlled approximately two-fifths of all farmland, primarily in sugar and pasture, while 15 per cent of the farmland was operated by 70 per cent of the total farming population, the small
peasants [Robotham, 1977]. And because there was not an expansion of opportunities to match the economic growth, even with rising external migration a large labour surplus remained [Anderson and Witter, 1994; Stolberg, 1992]. In short, small peasants and farm workers retained their historic place at the bottom of Jamaica’s social ladder, while the relative size of the peasantry had begun declining.

By the late 1960s, sugar production started a prolonged decline from which it has not recovered, and Jamaica’s agro-trade surplus was ebbing – though the agro-trade deficit did not erupt until the 1990s [Weis, 2004a]. Economic growth in general was also slowing down at this time, and when the Michael Manley government came to power in 1972 it was forced to reckon with recession, growing unemployment, and an exploding payments imbalance set off by the soaring cost of oil.

In the face of this downturn, the government moved progressively to the left, and as it did it viewed agriculture as having an important role to play both in tackling Jamaica’s growing unemployment problem and in mitigating payments deficits through improved food self-sufficiency and enhanced exports. As a result, the peasantry experienced a short-lived revival in the 1970s, as some land distribution (Project Land Lease9) and infrastructure development (e.g. microdams, electrification, rural roads) were aimed at the rural poor, peasants’ access to credit, research and extension services improved, and the state-owned Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC) was established to make marketing domestic production more consistent.

These programmes helped domestic agricultural production and employment grow significantly in the late 1970s, at the same time as overall economic output was declining [Anderson and Witter, 1994]. Yet while Land Lease improved access to some extent it still primarily distributed marginal lands, consistent with the historic pattern of land settlements [Augustin, 1992; McBain, 1992; Beckford and Witter, 1991]. A more radical vision of land reform was laid out in the plan for a socialist transition that was commissioned by Manley in January 1977, which placed agriculture at the centre of Jamaica’s transformation [Beckford et al., 1980; NPA, 1977]. This plan was the last time that agriculture was conceived as an engine of development in Jamaica, and in April 1977 the government rejected it in favour of a loan for balance of payments support from the IMF. The government’s fiscal crisis together with IMF conditionalities (which came with the loans taken out in 1977 and 1978) undermined its commitment to the poor [Weis, 2005].

AGRICULTURE’S DESCENT

The 1980s in Jamaica were characterised by IMF and World Bank-directed structural adjustment of the economy, and agriculture was relegated far
behind expanding tourism, export-processing, and financial service sectors in terms of state priorities. External migration also grew dramatically and the process of de-peasantisation picked up speed again. In the early period of adjustment, the programmes that had been established to support peasant agriculture in the 1970s were dismantled and Land Lease was dramatically reversed; the new land distribution policy aimed to sell public land in large blocks in the hope of promoting non-traditional agro-export growth on large commercial farms. Government spending on agricultural programmes shrank dramatically, and what little public expenditure remained after the early 1980s was firmly committed to large-scale commercial exporters, in line with the export emphasis of adjustment planners. This legacy persists for small peasants in the virtually non-existent role the state plays in their lives; in addition to the demise of the AMC, input and credit subsidies and extension services have all faced serious cuts.

Although peasants were effectively abandoned again to the same basic institutional relations that had long prevailed, they were at least spared the liberalisation of most domestic markets until 1990, when a condition of the World Bank’s Agricultural Sector Adjustment Loan forced the government to initiate a strict programme of tariff and non-tariff reduction on agricultural imports. Declining state support combined with increasing openness has placed Jamaican peasants on a highly uneven playing field against the rising wave of imported food, much of it heavily subsidised US production.

Meanwhile, the liberalising pressures of the WTO have brought a devastating blow to the lifeline of Jamaica’s inefficient and high-cost plantation sector – its preferential European markets for sugar and bananas. The combination of stagnant and potentially collapsing exports, a torrent of imported food, and steadily decreasing public and private investment together threaten to make much agricultural production in Jamaica obsolete. The problems of Jamaica’s agricultural sector are reflected in a soaring agro-trade deficit; from a near balance in the early 1990s, agro-exports now equal only 60 per cent of agro-imports, with obvious implications for food security magnified by Jamaica’s heavy indebtedness and its large and growing aggregate trade deficit [Weis, 2004a]. Fortunately, latent in the decline of the plantation sector is the hope that an historic space for land reform could also be opening.

GROUNDINGS: LEARNING FROM PEASANTS IN ST. MARY

To better understand current conditions and future possibilities, qualitative interviews were pursued with the hope of exploring how peasant farmers interpret their social relations, productive constraints, land use planning, and marketing decisions in relation to their historic marginality and to the economic and social change occurring in Jamaica. Fieldwork was conducted
over 10 months in 2001–02 in the parish of St. Mary (north-eastern Jamaica) in six communities on the periphery of Annotto Bay’s (pop. 10,000) plantation landscape. I conducted qualitative interviews with 43 peasant farmers, who were purposively sampled to reflect the diversity of gender, age, and land issues (e.g. tenure, scale, slope) in the area, and relationships were strengthened through shared labour and multiple farm visits and discussions. Getting my hands dirty in farm work helped to build rapport and add confidence to the validity of interview findings, and ultimately deepened my appreciation of the landscape and its challenges.

Attempting to ‘give voice’ to the concerns of peasants obviously raises some difficult methodological issues, which are further complicated in the Caribbean by complex language debates. English is the official language, but the language of Jamaican working people is Patois/Patwa. While Patois has long been scorned by Caribbean elites as ‘pidgin English’, linguists argue that it is a distinct language rather than a dialect. However, given that English prevails in schools and in the media, those with Patois as their first language are able to communicate orally in English with varying proficiency (even if they are not always literate). In these cases, their use of English is typically infused with some patois grammar and phonetics. Quotations here are presented as close as possible to how they were given, in the belief that facile binaries between proper English/higher language and Patois-infused English/lower language should, where they exist, be challenged rather than accommodated. The different forms of English spoken reflect a different type of socialisation that should not be minimised, and I believe that to change the responses out of the form in which they were given to reflect the language conventions of the researcher would be unnecessary, overbearing, and would sound artificial.

The Annotto Bay region epitomises Jamaica’s current agrarian crisis, as a large banana estate controls most of the fertile lowlands but is in a protracted decline, while the peasants situated on its margins face new economic pressures that have exacerbated older constraints. The St. Mary landscape continues to reflect the scars of its history, with inequities closely mirroring those of Jamaica as a whole—96 per cent of landholders (including 8 per cent landless) in St. Mary control only 38 per cent of land in the parish, much of it steeply sloped, while 1 per cent of landholders control 53 per cent of the land. Most peasants are located on steep slopes with poor access to road and very limited irrigation potential, and few have access to a year-round gravity-fed irrigation source or can afford the investment in the necessary equipment (hosing, filtres, tanks, sprinklers, and drip line). Thus, production is planned around the rainy season between October and February, as well as a smaller precipitation peak in May.
The WTO’s termination of preferential European markets for bananas and the struggle to compete with Latin America production has led to major restructuring on the banana estates since 1998, with the number of jobs, wage levels, and benefits all cut. One peasant farmer encapsulates the essence of the plantation labour regime which has prevailed since Emancipation: because ‘de unemployment is so great, dey can even treat you in a bad way, fire you an de next man take de same position by even as you leaving de gates somebody reaching dat position already’. While some efficiency gains have been made, the estate land is now one-third empty, and it is unlikely it will be able to compete after the EU market protection is phased out in the coming years. Other smaller estates in the region have either collapsed or are restructuring.

Agriculture is still the region’s largest source of employment, but the cultivated landscape is in marked decline and few young people are willing to farm despite an acute shortage of jobs. As is common to most of the island, much ‘idling’ takes place, especially among the youth, and dependence upon the remittance economy is large and growing (very little of which gets invested in peasant farming or productive activities), pouring far more concrete for housing than agriculture and fashioning some of the other trappings of ‘development’ (e.g. satellite dishes, imported cars, and cellular phones). As a small minority approach North American lifestyles, most of their neighbours continue to live in another world, though even many of the poorest households have a television and, increasingly, US cable.

Peasant farming is widely held to be a residual vocation in St. Mary, as in much of Jamaica, a lifestyle of last resort that is relatively easy to enter or return to. However, strong stores of passion and pride about farming persist amongst older peasants who continue to work on the hillsides. And while most hold a generally pessimistic view of the future, the possibilities for transforming the landscape that are latent in the plantation decline could, it is argued in the conclusion, create a positive spiral to help turn around other negative dynamics currently conspiring against peasant agriculture. This potential is seen vividly in the research area in the places where retrenching estates have created new openings for peasants to access (either by lease or seizure) the flat, high quality lands with good irrigation potential, better infrastructure, and suitable for tractor tillage. These micro-‘land reformers’ are islands of dynamism in a sea of stagnation, and one of them was recently named Jamaica’s champion young farmer for two years.

THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION

There is an old momentum but a new intensity to the atomisation of social relations in peasant farming in Jamaica. Farmers repeatedly described how cooperative traditions have been badly damaged by individualism and an
extreme lack of trust, captured best by one farmer’s lament: ‘dem na organise, dem na cooperative . . . why, me cannot tell you my brother . . . Me come an try an show love an unity, but me na see it. Me na trust no one, is jus everyone for demselves’. Contemporary social ethics were often contrasted with those of the past. An old farmer put it simply: ‘people born diff’rent now – don’t have no love again, jus money, dem need an injection a love . . . dem na cooperate. If ya have no love, you ca’an [can’t] cooperate’. Another insisted that ‘people was livin’ in a more united way first time [in the past], people was more united. People were more concerned ‘bout one another . . . But now, people of today dem concerned ‘bout dem own wealth’.

Cooperative labour forms are decaying. Day-for-day has become very rare, while larger group efforts like morning sport and the digging match are dead in the research area. The day-for-day spirit of reciprocity has been widely sullied, with sour attitudes and experiences recounted time and again, reflected in comments such as: ‘Never again! . . . You go an work for dem an get nutin’ back’, and ‘me used to work day-fi-day wit some, but it na work out good, some a dem, when dem get your time, dem na interested to come back wit you’. One farmer noted how he used to work in groups to help clear and till land, ‘but dat change a good while now. Since dis younger generation comin’ up from de ‘70s, everythin’ change a lot, because mos of dose elderly people who use to do dat dem dead out, an dese young people . . . dem don’t have de unity fi dat’. The prevailing attitude is that ‘we don’t get a fair exchange, so derefore, whatever we can do we do it alone’. One farmer in her fifties described group efforts when she was a child:

First time, inna my mother days . . . if me have food an say Sonny na have no food, an me a go work wit Sonny now, me carry what food we have like ground food, anyting you have an you carry, an den jus whole heap a people an dem sing an work . . . maybe sometime dey say morning work or sometime a whole day work . . . Dey drink rum too ya know, afterward, an dem sing an dem boil chocolate tea . . . But since me a grow up here now me na see de young generation na gwan wit it . . . You na see dat again.

She regretted the loss of such camaraderie and insisted that collective work was more productive.

Similar stories abounded, with the general sense that forms of labour once seen as productive and enjoyable are today disregarded in the expectation that there will not be a fair exchange. Such fears are partly rooted in a perception that people envy the success of others, and are therefore reluctant to put in an effort close to what they would do for themselves; ‘a dark system dis’, is how one farmer put it. Resounding loudly in such interpretations is Beckford’s
[1972] analysis that social cohesion within very hierarchical and seemingly unstable plantation society is maintained, in significant part, through intra-class rivalry.

The breakdown of mutual aid is aggravated by the nature of wage labour arrangements, which are similarly influenced by a lack of trust. Some insist that poor workers will often refuse to work for poor farmers for fear of ‘building them up’, as one farmer put it. Farm workers also generally exact significantly higher daily wage demands from peasants than they can get from an estate. One farmer explained that ‘you hafi pay more fi get [workers], simple as dat’, and notes that poor workers not only would ‘radder go wit de big man’ but will ‘gi him a better day work den you’.

THE UNEVEN LANDSCAPE AND PLANNING PRODUCTION

Peasants’ historical inheritance (both in terms of levels of ownership and topography) is central to how production is planned. Insecure tenure greatly shortens the length of farmers’ planning horizons, and hence their willingness to invest in economically and environmentally beneficial tree crops and employ other forms of soil conservation, while biophysical limitations – principally water and slope – constrict farmers’ flexibility with the range and timing of crops. Land tenure does not, however, determine whether livestock is kept, as few peasants devote owned or leased farmland to pasture (tending to move cattle and goats around on common property, while pigs and common fowl are raised around the house). Most peasants who rear livestock do so as an element of diversification rather than as a focus of their energies, as larger scale operations demand land and substantial capital, especially given the imported feed demands of pigs and broiler and layer hens.

As noted, Jamaican peasants have always been strongly market-oriented, and while most plant for household consumption in a ‘kitchen garden’, basic staples like rice (and now beans), flour, cornmeal, and fish are all purchased, and the large majority of energy and farm space are focused on producing marketable crops, often not more than two or three at a time. Tree crops (e.g. coffee, pimento, orange, grapefruit, avocado, mango, coconut, ackee) are viewed as a long-term investment and a stable source of income, and being less labour intensive they act as a form of old age planning. They also hold the soil, which is especially important on steep hillsides. However, insecure tenure limits fruit tree production, as peasants will generally only invest in tree crops where they own the land or have a very secure lease.

Peasant cultivation is highly seasonal, characterised by periods of gluts and shortage for both ‘staple’ (or semi-permanent) and ‘short’ (or ‘quick’) crops – as one farmer explained it, ‘when time de season come an rain a fall an everybody can plant, dem time no price na good, cuz everybody have it’.
Staple crops are those that have a long growing season (e.g. cane, banana, plantain, pineapple, yams, coco, dasheens), either above or below ground, and endure drought better than short crops. Short crops (e.g. cabbage, callalou, pak choy, tomatoes, carrots, potatoes, string beans, corn, onion, peas, peppers, okra, pumpkin, watermelon, cucumber) take much less time to grow and reap than staple crops, and have the potential for quicker and higher profits per acre where irrigation can be accessed.\(^\text{16}\)

In the absence of irrigation, however, farmers cultivating short crops are dependent upon the seasonal rains and cannot take advantage of the faster crop cycles, and thus staple crops dominate for much of the year on hillsides. One farmer with a steep, non-irrigable plot notes that ‘wit’out water, ya need long crop like plantain, coco, yam, but not like vegetables’. Another explains that because ‘de plantain can stand up to de drought . . . is why we mostly farm plantain back up here’. Plantain also has a consistent if cheap domestic market and is hardy and transports well over bumpy roads. Its greatest drawback, like that of some other staple crops, is its vulnerability to theft (discussed later).

Throughout most of the research area, short crop production goes in seasonal waves, producing market gluts (and hence falling prices and spoilage) in-season and shortages and soaring prices out-of-season. Reflecting this, many participants identified water as the key environmental constraint on production. One explained that ‘because you na no water . . . you ca’an put in a crop dat you really want to put in’, while another described the lack of water as his ‘biggest problem . . . if you have de water you can go a long way . . . could produce inna de sun [dry season], could produce right tru [year-round]’.

Access to water – and hence access to more lucrative out-of-season markets and the ability to avoid gluts – is obviously rooted in the landscape, as one farmer suggested: ‘If you have de land, if it level an you even can get water an ting, you can have better production. But when like we are now, upon all dem type a land here now [hillside], mos time, when it dry, we na get nuting, you ca’an [can’t] get water fi carry dem plant’. In the research area, a small number of participants have access to irrigation, principally the ‘land reformers’ on the flat, former estate land, who can use gravity-fed streams from the hills. Each of these farmers identified irrigation as a critical advantage. One noted that ‘water a de key ting in farming’, because it allows you to ‘get it ready for de market faster, otherwise we only have dis season to plant an . . . fi jus come in with 500 pounds one time, dat na good business. You hafi keep your supply right tru’. The champion young farmer insisted that to be successful in farming today ‘you need de level land an de water’.

In addition to limiting irrigation potential, the hillsides make soil erosion a serious problem. On owned land, tree crops are planted widely not only to provide a form of pension and an inheritance for children, but also to hold the soil. However, low levels of ownership amongst participants and the sense
that other hillside land is there to be cleared limit the time and money (i.e. purchased labour) farmers devote to soil conservation. On leased land, especially when it is insecure, only limited soil conservation measures are employed to maintain the land’s short-term productivity and protect against flooding, as it is seen to be easier to abandon land when it loses fertility. One explained that: ‘You see mosly our soil now is hillside, so it run down very easily, you ca’an keep it one place too long’.17

Steeply sloping land also affects the efficiency of labour. Farming on flat land is understood to be much easier and faster than on hillsides, primarily because it allows for gruelling (or expensive, with workers) manual land preparation to be replaced by tractor tillage. One farmer explained this well: ‘Our biggest problem is land room because you ca’an do much farmin’ on de hillside. It much easier on de flat, because you can get tractor to help you . . . [But] no tractor can plough up on dese hills. So you hafi use your fork, an pay labourers’. The general view that ‘farmin’ ca’an be profitable on dis likkle land with no machinery’ was voiced often. A very strong farmer in his early forties explained the rigours of farming his steep five acre plot: ‘It hard fi use your hand ya know, an your body strength, it really hard. Chop a land wit a cutlass, fork it, it never easy ya know, you hafi have nerves ya know. An you hafi cut dis trench, an bend down your back, it hard. An cut down plantain an carry dem up a yard dere from way down de gully dere’. He noted wistfully that ‘me wan a piece on de level, where me can like hire a tractor, an den you plough it up, you go fast an plant, you can put in a lotta crop’. A few extended the correlation between slope, tillage and efficiency in vegetable production to the ability to compete against rising imports.

The perceived advantage of flatter land also relates to improved road access, as the poor quality of most rural roads is partly blamed for the shortage of marketing options that many face.

MARKETING: PERSISTENT FAILURES AND NEW PRESSURES

Jamaican peasants must also contend with a disorganised marketing system that frequently fails them, and new market pressures emanating from a highly asymmetrical global food economy. One farmer noted that despite all of the productive constraints, ‘what all of us would say is that we could grow more, is jus dat we don’t have de market’. Understanding persistent marketing failures and the challenge posed by new import patterns provides additional insight into the descent of peasant agriculture’s, as well as into how potential land reform would have to be supported.

Jamaican peasants have a strong, if often vague sense of the unevenness of new market pressures, and the rising imported competition following liberalisation is also constricting how production options are conceived. One farmer,
who has been selling the produce from her and her husband’s farm in Kingston’s Coronation Market (Jamaica’s largest wholesale fresh market) for 12 years, described how there is ‘tonnes a stuff come in from America . . . more an more an more an more’, with the result that ‘you sit dere all day wit your Jamaican stuff an you na sellin’, an you see whole heap a foreign stuff, cuz plenty higgler now turn to de foreign stuff . . . because its cheaper’.

One farmer who sells directly at the market noted how ‘10 year ago you wouldn’t see a foreign onion, and right now no you ca’an find local onion any time. Irish potato de same ting’. Another stated that ‘many a tings we could plant, it needless, we can’t do it anymore, because it come inna Jamaica from United States in big bulk, much cheaper . . . [when] we hafi use fork to stir our soil . . . it don’t make sense to plant all dem tings, don’t make sense . . . it cause we to reverse’. Certain crops like Irish potato, onion, and red peas, have been made virtually obsolete in the past decade, while other vegetables, such as tomatoes, carrots, and cabbage, are seen to be endangered.\(^\text{19}\)

But so far the most pronounced impact of rising agro-imports has been on the rearing of cattle. Historically seen as an investment by rural households, the decline of Jamaica’s domestic beef and dairy industries in the face of cheaper imports has destroyed all incentive, and every single participant still raising cattle had recently downsized their herds and will stop entirely as soon as they can sell what they have. While peasants generally continue attending to their cattle in the wake of this market collapse, it has nevertheless produced one of the more unexpected outcomes of liberalisation: a bovine plague (discussed later), as many rural people have simply walked away from cattle rather than spending the energy on tending them.

Given the dramatic impacts of liberalisation in the past decade, Jamaican peasants have an ominous sense of the threat posed by imports, evident in quotes such as: ‘de foreign people sucking out alla de substance outta dis country wit deir crops’, and ‘all a dem some’in we a import come inna de country an kill we’. After describing his sense of the uneven playing field, one farmer appealed to me: ‘so you could a make USA know, what de small farmers dem a feel’.

The majority of participants, as is the norm throughout Jamaica, remain dependent upon higglers to market their produce. The trusting relationship between farmer and higgler that Katzin (1971) identified, in which higglers are viewed as fair and responsible, is the exception rather than the rule.\(^\text{20}\) While a few participants have stable, long-term relationships with higglers and are satisfied with the arrangements, for most farmers dependence upon higglers leads to unpredictability and spoilage, encapsulated in the comment that: ‘sometimes you see dem, sometimes you don’t . . . some time a whole heap a it spoil’. Higglers often cannot take the volume that farmers expect, and many will ‘trust’ the farmers’ loads, with a promise to pay contingent on their fortunes.
at the market. This is a source of much acrimony for farmers who, constrained by the perishability of their produce, feel abused by such arrangements. One farmer described her basic expectation: ‘when you sell to de higgler, you will lose 20 to 50 on dat amount’. Frustrations with higgles are a major reason why more than a third of the participants sell directly to market vendors or at various markets themselves, chartering transport or taking buses.

At the same time as many farmers seek to improve their margins through individualistic strategies, finding their own way to markets, there is a widespread desire for a more consistent and organized marketing system. Virtually all participants who were farming in the 1970s hearken back to the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (which, as noted, was ‘SAPed’ in the 1980s) as being a much better system, allowing them to sell regularly and in bulk. As one farmer put it: ‘It was cheap, but you did sure of dem comin’ to buy . . . [and you] can sell nuff quantity’, in contrast to ‘today, you na sure where you gonna sell’. Another described how ‘in dat time, people usually plant a lot in dis area, you know . . . because when de people know dat dey have de market, dem more impressed to plant, more den when dey don’t know whom him goin’ a sell to, how it goin’ to sell an all dem tings’.

Yet while many long for more regularity and profess their willingness to trade-off some price for consistency, the atomization and seasonality of peasant production is a serious impediment to cooperatively organized marketing initiatives. This can be seen clearly in the challenges of marketing cooperatives that have been working in parts of the research area for roughly a decade. The cooperatives, which share a centralized marketing effort, experienced a flurry of enthusiasm and participation at the outset, reflected in rising memberships and volumes sold, necessitating a search for more markets. To maintain these markets it then required more consistent supply from farmers, both in terms of quality and volume. This consistency has proved somewhat elusive, partly as a result of the productive constraints described earlier, and also because farmers frustrated with the cooperatives’ low prices and enforced rationing have often turned to different outlets. For the cooperatives, unpredictable production and support from farmers have made it difficult to find and satisfy (and hence maintain) consistent purchasing commitments. Rising import competition for certain crops has further complicated the marketing challenge, as a cooperative representative noted: ‘We are competing with Miami – our buyers tell us this’.

But the cooperatives began to weather the inconsistency of many small and sporadic suppliers as a group of core farmers (primarily the ‘land reformers’) emerged which could produce on a relatively larger scale and with a regularity to meet commitments better. The ability of these farmers to expand their scale of operations was, in turn, dependent on having an agent that could handle this greater volume. In other words, a mutually beneficial marketing
relationship between the cooperatives and the core farmers emerged; the cooperatives have been integral to these micro-land reform successes, giving the farmers a stable outlet for their increased volume, while these core farmers have provided the cooperatives with a measure of stability that subsequently allowed other smaller and less consistent farmers to periodically ‘hitch on’ to the cooperatives’ markets. This experience illustrates how the heightened production capabilities of those who have gained access to flat, irrigable land demand some form of organised marketing.

THE IMPLODING COUNTRYSIDE

Nobody want to plant di corn
Everybody want to raid di barn.

Anthony B, Jamaican reggae star, in ‘Raid The Barn’

Another serious deterrent to peasant production in Jamaica is the problem of praedial larceny. Although, as noted, this has an earlier momentum, there is general consensus that praedial larceny is ‘worse now den ever before’, in the words of one farmer. 22 Any discussion of contemporary peasant problems and alternatives must appreciate the dynamics of this corrosive force deterring investment, frustrating planning and bleeding the spirit of farmers and would-be farmers.

The scale of the problem is hard to exaggerate; not only does it rank high on the concerns of government officials and agricultural organisations like the JAS, but it has even infused popular culture as the lyrics at the outset of this section reflect. More than two-thirds of the participants cited problems with thieves, many identifying this as their biggest concern, and most of those who are not often raided take precautionary measures (a peasant is a much easier target than an estate, where guard dogs range and guards have been known to shoot to kill).

One farmer argued that theft is a major ‘reason why you see plenty people hafi trow down . . . sometimes de people dem jus get dishearted, an move fi shut down’. During one particularly hard workday a strong old farmer stopped for a moment, looked over, and noted with an infuriated, almost incredulous tone: ‘see how hard it is fi work de land – an still dem tief it!’ 23 With the poor robbing the poor, peasants operate in a general climate of mistrust and suspicion, and many recounted how thieves had driven them off of their land in search of a less vulnerable location. With higglers often complicit in the theft (knowingly accepting cheaper goods from suspicious sources to increase their margins) and the police seen to be incapable of dealing with the problem, the pervasive sense is that, as one farmer put it, ‘you hafi police de land youself’.
While some believe they simply must plant extra for thieves – a common guideline is a quarter of one’s field – others are less fatalistic, as one young farmer exemplifies: ‘Me usually hear de people talk say, you hafi plant fi tiefs, an you hafi plant fi gi ‘way, an you hafi plant fi spoil. Me believe inna plant fi give ‘way, an plant fi bird fi eat, an plant fi spoil, but me na believe in plant fi tief!’ Most participants described intimidation and violent confrontation as the only practical defence against theft. Some are very reclusive and cultivate an intimidating image as part of their defence. During reaping periods, peasants routinely camp on their farms, prepared for violent confrontation. A number of fights between machete-welding combatants were recounted, and the aftermath of one witnessed. In the face of this danger, farmers are emboldened by a combination of righteous anger (‘dem na mad like how me mad!’ as one put it) and the sense there is no other choice. Perhaps the best illustration of the scale of this problem is how the subject can transform kind and humble men and women to the sort of anger where they could so commonly and casually speak about the need for violence.

Most of the participants who have been able to control theft live on or very near to the land they farm; while not always enough, this is a key deterrent. Another advantage is to be situated amongst other farms, providing some security in numbers. One farmer who left an isolated plot to move to a more vigorous area also described how he feels more confident being surrounded by other farmers: ‘all a us de ‘pon one block a land, an dem a know say . . . if a man see dem cross a man’s place, dey have whole a we fi deal wit’. The type of crops planted also affects vulnerability to theft, with hillside staple crops like plantain most vulnerable as bunches can be quickly cut and moved (especially if the field was scouted and marked). Other crops popular with thieves are papaya and pineapple and vines such as pumpkin and watermelon, where heavy weight can be taken quickly. Conversely, small vegetables, leafy greens and tubers are more difficult to steal quickly and in volume.

Clearly praedial larceny is an important one of an array of factors impeding the viability of peasant agriculture, as having to expend so much energy on security – both physically and emotionally – makes farming more difficult and less attractive to enter. One young farmer pointed to part of the solution: ‘maybe if dem yout dem did plant, we na have so much tief’. Another suggested that containing theft is linked to access to flat land: ‘you see if I could get a tractor, an me have money fi plough up de bottom land an plant someting dey ca’an tief so quick’.

In addition to thieves, peasants in some areas are increasingly vulnerable to another marauder – cattle. As noted earlier, the decimation of beef and dairy markets following trade liberalisation led many rural people to abandon rather than tend their cattle. The result, explained one farmer who has been devastated by strays, is that ‘de cows dem turn wild, an you ca’an catch it
again’, as they become ‘fierce an move in packs’. One farmer noted how ‘it come like a cow dem a move like tief wit me now’, while another likened them to ‘a plague. De cows make me go hungry’. The broader context is described clearly by a farmer who, as a result of stray cattle, was forced to carve out a new plot on worse land:

It cuz cows na sell, cuz tru de imported beef come in cheap, an de small farmer ca’an get no market for de cow dem, cuz de butcher, an de Burger King, an de supermarket dem can get beef from overseas… an so de market, everybody stop buy [Jamaican] beef, so everybody start let go de cow dem, an cow start destroy farmer, destroy farm. People stop carin’ fi dem, people na buy wire no more, na make no more pasture, cuz cow na sell an it na pay. Jus let it go, cuz cow get so cheap.

Farmers’ most basic defence against cattle is to fence their land with barbed wire, which can be relatively very costly, and wild and hungry cattle will still occasionally bowl the fencing over. In some cases, cattle owners will deliberately cut the fencing – it is not only unwitting negligence that has created this problem. A few participants identified repeated incursions of mid-size ranchers who, having lost the incentive to maintain or enhance their pasture or move their cattle to graze in an orderly fashion, are instead invading peasant farms in deliberate ways. Here again, while economic factors are partly at root, the problem is also connected to anti-social behaviour. As with thieves, violence is often seen as the only recourse. Challenging the owners legally is seen as an exercise in futility, as one farmer who is surrounded by cattlemen noted with a wry laugh: ‘nobody have no cow… dem gonna say dem na own it, cuz if dem own it dem hafi pay fi de damage’. Thus, the response is that ‘you jus hafi see if you can catch dem an find a way to kill dem’, though trying to kill a wild bull with a machete is a dangerous and grisly confrontation and generally cannot approach the scale of the problem. Like the thieving problem, defence against cattle can be abetted by strength in numbers; that is, sporadic farms are more vulnerable than are those located in more vibrant farming areas, which possess more eyes, ears and cutlasses. In other words, part of the solution is rooted in the deep question of how to reinvigorate the countryside.

A DYING WAY OF LIFE?

I look around here an I see nutin’ gwan, too many people idling – de yout need fi start plantin’ some’in!

Peasant farmer in St. Mary, age 47
Once upon a time, it wasn’t like dis. But de older folks die out an de younger one sit back an do nuting, so de place keep goin’ down... farmin’ goin’ down, down, down.

A peasant farmer in St. Mary, age 40

The hard-working peasants who continue to farm the St. Mary hillsides in the face of so many constraints carry a tradition of great resilience. But the agricultural landscape in the hills has but a shadow of its former vitality, and most of the participants themselves, however proud they are of their work, feel like anachronisms bearing witness to the decline of peasant farming as a way of life. To describe the demise of the farming culture, one farmer noted simply that: ‘mos young people don’t know de moon no more’ [i.e. how the lunar cycle guides planting]. To discuss possible changes it became evident that it was necessary to assess the widely held frustrations with the attitudes and behaviour of younger generations.

Many participants blamed young people’s rejection of farming on their ‘laziness’ and lack of work ethic. This perspective is summarised best by one old farmer in his assertion that ‘young people in Jamaica don’t love to farm – dem lazy, sit on de road an talk all dat bullshit... all what is breaking down Jamaica – young man jus stay aside an make himself like a log. Dem weak, an full of violence... laziness is a disease’.25 Cynicism with this perceived lethargy also relates, as this remark suggests, to the climate of rising banditry, as the ‘idling’ youth are widely conflated with praedial larceny. The intensity of these sentiments is seen comments such as: ‘young men don’t want to work, just sit by de road an steal... dem lazy an grudgeful’, and ‘dey don’t do any farming, dey jus go on de street, play domino all day, drink rum, dey trow insult on you because you is a farmer... an tief you when you are asleep’.

Most participants also identified a negative generational disposition towards agriculture – as though, as one farmer suggested, ‘dem see jus a ting for old people, dirty work’. Younger generations are widely seen by farmers, both young and old, as being impatient, unwilling to invest their time and labour for a long-term payoff, and more eager to find a source of what is referred to as ‘quick’ or ‘ready money’.26 Part of this impatience and the growing reluctance of young people to farm undoubtedly relates to the fact that so much of the wealth in rural areas now comes in spurts from abroad, in wire transfers and barrel parcels, as well as from drugs and patronage politics (either direct handouts or labour contracts). Some peasants link the remittance economy to the indolence they see in youth. As one farmer put it: ‘some of dem have what we call a foreign mind. Might have de mother overseas or de brother, dey only depend on a get de money from Western Union. So dey only sit everyday on de roadside an look out, an one a de ting wit dem is dey don’t want to touch de soil an alla dat’.
The growth of the migratory culture and the remittance economy has also fed, together with the penetration of US media, the increasingly foreign (and commodified) aspirations of young Jamaicans. One farmer explained how ‘too many people dem depend too much ‘pon overseas resource. No one wan fi plant, everyone jus wan fi plan go foreign’. One old farmer described the exasperation amongst his peers: ‘Every day practically you hear we talk ‘bout de same ting: how Jamaica a gwan go when young generation don’t want to work? We don’t know wha dem want, but dem don’t wanna work. We don’t know wha dem headed for’. The only thing he can discern is that ‘America dey wan fi go’. One farmer, whose teenage son’s eyebrows were shaved in the Nike swoosh, described how the material expectations of that generation seem unattainable from a small farm: ‘de money dat dey want dey na goin’ to get it, not from farming, I don’t know from what. Because de farmer will go an him plant him tings an him wait till it come an him get it fi sell. All dis young man is tinking about is 5000 (*US$100) fi one pair a boot, an how much thousand fi a name brand suit, when you go inna bush now you don’t have no time fi tink ‘bout dat . . . you na run down name brand. But is jus pure name brand dem tinkin’ ‘bout, so dem jus want de ready cash’.

Given these various frustrations, it is little wonder that pessimism prevails about the future of peasant agriculture, reflected in statements like: ‘It’s dying out’; ‘It can die’; and ‘It done [and] it na come back’. While the youth rejection of farming is hardly unique to Jamaica, its impact is made particularly severe by the speed of the process, the fact that some are not only rejecting the soil but assaulting its tillers, and the shortage of other opportunities to absorb this decline, reflected in extremely high youth unemployment levels. One farmer contrasted the lack of opportunity, apart from emigration for some, with the fact that ‘a lotta pickney [children] come outta school now an can hardly sign dem name’, asking pensively: ‘What in de world fi dem? What dem gonna do out dere?’

Some of the participants had turned to peasant agriculture to escape Kingston’s wretched and violent conditions, and a few suggested that the deterioration of Jamaica’s economy could drive youth back to the land – a ‘re-peasantisation’ out of desperation. For instance, one farmer suggested that ‘when time get harder an harder, dem hafi run inna da bush’. Another argued that the economy is ‘gonna force people fi come back to de farm, cuz tings gettin’ real hard an nuting for dem fi do’. However, as one farmer pointed out, new economic processes are also making such a return less viable: ‘say some a dem decide dat agriculture is a last resort, when dey cannot find anyting else you jus rush an say agriculture, ‘I’m a farmer’, well dat type a farming is outdated . . . you hafi do farming diff’rent nowadays, with dem new tings dat have been set in place overseas’. Indeed, it seems apparent that while a shortage of opportunities might drive some back to the land, only radical
change can make peasant farming a source of stable growth and dignified work – rather than merely a weak safety net – in the research area, and in landscapes like it throughout Jamaica.

LOOKING DOWN ‘PON DE FLAT’: FRUSTRATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

This article has sought to demonstrate that the competitive challenges posed by adjustment and liberalisation must be understood in the context of a highly uneven landscape and with respect to evolving social relations and cultural change. New market pressures (rising imports) and old market failures (the higgler system) interact with the productive constraints of the peasant landscape – the lack of irrigation potential; the challenges of soil conservation; the inefficiencies associated with farming steep hillside lands; and the poor condition of infrastructure – to restrict farmers’ range of production options. While hillside peasants are forced to mainly concentrate on ‘long crops’, these are also most susceptible to theft, the severity of which is, in turn, part of the atomisation of social ethics that has roots in the plantation economy but is also connected to a highly competitive, opportunity-scarce economic climate. Thus, while there are cultural forces behind why farming is perceived so negatively by rural youth in Jamaica, from the spread of cable TV to the growing dependence upon remittances, there are also clear material foundations for this. This harkens back to Beckford’s [1972] insistence that it is critical to consider how people’s motivation is stifled by the plantation institution, and how it can be unleashed.

The possibility of changing the negative perceptions of farming and engaging youth in agriculture was linked by some participants to the need for land reform and a degree of mechanisation, primarily for tillage. One young farmer insisted that most rural youth have only ever seen farming through the lens of watching parents and grandparents struggle without access to ‘good land and modern technology, an depend ‘pon like de seasonal crops, an dem cannot turn over certain amount a money, so you hear dem say ‘no money inna farming’’. Another young farmer who described land as the crux of the negative views of peasant farming insisted that rejuvenation will only be possible ‘if who a do de farming here now can do it a right way, wit land dat tractor can plough, we can influence young people fi come inna it. But otherwise, it gonna breed more poverty, an more crime, an more violence’.28 The research area provides a good example of both scenarios this farmer suggests. On the hillsides, the diligence of the old peasant culture still exists in pockets, but it is being replaced by a frustrated angst and idleness amongst the younger generations, many of who imagine their future elsewhere. Meanwhile, the optimism and energy of the small number of young and
middle-aged farmers on the former estate lands points towards how the landscape could be transformed.

Land reform would give peasants a better ability to compete amidst the uneven competition trade liberalisation has brought, enhancing irrigation possibilities, reducing soil loss, allowing farmers to use tractors in preparing land (and generally making farm labour more efficient and less arduous than it is on hillsides), and allowing access to a far superior and more easily maintained network of roads. In addition, the problems of thieves and cattle could be more easily contained in a vibrant, productive landscape populated by peasant farmers than is possible with disparate farms spread across rugged hillsides [Weis, 2004b].

To be successful, any land reform must of course go beyond redistribution and involve a series of supports (e.g. marketing, credit, inputs, extension) that enhance recipients’ productive capabilities. While the Jamaican state has been ravaged by debt and adjustment, there is space for improvements if priorities are re-interpreted. To take only the most obvious example, agriculture receives a fraction of the expenditure devoted to police and military forces, which are struggling to contain the social implosion that is entwined with the lack of opportunities in Jamaica [Weis, 2005].

In the face of heavily subsidised import competition, there is also a need for the Jamaican government to use its remaining flexibility under the WTO, as agricultural tariffs are generally enforced far below upper levels that were bound under the Agreement on Agriculture [Weis, 2004a]. As one farmer cogently summarised it: ‘Dere is a lot de American government do so dat deir farmers can sell it at such a cheap price…So de government need do some’in to cut out de importation a some a dese stuff so our price can go up. If it don’t even subsidise de fertilisers an de chemicals per se now, level de playin’ field so we can sell fi higher prices!’

There is much urgency to the land question. If reforms are envisioned, aspects of the resilient peasant culture could still vitalise an agrarian transformation. But, as a representative of an agricultural NGO in Jamaica suggested, if the skills, knowledge, and passion of peasant farming are lost, this could soon reach a point, a generational chasm, from which ‘it cannot bounce back’. The form that the reforms take would have to consider the atomisation of social ethics discussed in this article, as the breakdown of cooperation implies that land reform must – at least initially – focus on individual family farmers for it to resonate with peasants at the present moment, with cooperatives more likely at the level of marketing.29

Unfortunately, the durability of plantations throughout Jamaica’s history continues to obscure the current opportunity for land reform. Even with their deep understanding of the contradictions of the landscape, peasant farmers do not seem poised to aggressively challenge property relations at this moment,
and the aging demographics threaten to further weaken their already muted voice. At the same time, farmers have little or no faith that the state is prepared to act in their interests. The first point implies that the state would have to take a leading role in initiating change. But the second suggests that such a call is at odds with the expectations and de-politicisation of farmers, and could be criticised for vesting too much confidence in an unlikely hope that the state could move beyond its historical class straightjacket that continues to be bound tightly.

At this juncture, then, it is incumbent on peasants, organisers, agronomists, and scholars to work at re-kindling radical imaginations about what a re-constructed agricultural landscape could look like.

NOTES

1 On a per capita level, Jamaica’s remittance earnings are the largest in the Americas.
2 A phrase coined by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s.
3 The plantation landscape forces many Jamaican peasants to clear and cultivate steep, unstable and highly erodible slopes. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, Jamaica had one of the highest annual rates of deforestation in the world, with severe soil and water conservation problems as a result [Weis, 2000].
4 In addition to their control of the best land, planters were aided by: debt peonage; laws restricting the survey, partition and sale of land to ex-slaves; a regressive system of land taxation; and an exclusionary political system which ensured their dominance of public expenditure and access to capital and credit.
5 The dôkpwê was a cooperative work group mobilised for agriculture and other tasks. It was a source of pleasure and pride, with work treated as recreation and interwoven with contests, singing, and feasting [Herskovits, 1967].
6 Thomas [1996] also blames the paternalism of the bourgeois leadership from above for the lack of support.
7 Some exploited areas were eventually recovered for cattle pastures, while others were simply left as the toxic red mud lakes that still dot Jamaica’s interior.
8 In 1965, sugar production peaked at 520,000 tonnes; since the 1970s, it has averaged less than 40 per cent of that level.
9 In contrast to previous land settlement efforts where land could be purchased, only a leasehold model of distribution was pursued. To get idle lands in production the state leased land from private owners for 5–10 years (serving idle land orders that it must be brought into production or leased, either to the government or independently), and in turn leased these to peasants at low interest rates, who were also supported by credit in kind (e.g. fertiliser, seeds, herbicides, or insecticides) and extension service. From 1973 to 1980, Land Lease distributed nearly 30,000 ha (70,000 acres) to 36,000 farmers (most, who were formerly landless) on short, medium and long-term leases with extendable terms. The leasehold model was chosen for a variety of reasons: so poor farmers’ limited capital would be used for on-farm investments; so the state would have leverage to promote necessary productive policies; and to inhibit land speculation, fragmentation, and under-cultivation [Augustin, 1992].
10 Weis [2004a] examines the impacts of structural adjustment on Jamaica’s agricultural sector in more detail.
11 Patois developed as planters, as a precaution against organising, sought to maintain slave populations on their estates that came from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in West Africa. Slaves used and modified pieces of English as a common ground to facilitate communication, typically piecing them together with the syntax of their native languages in a
fusion that evolved orally over centuries and served as the first (and often only) language of rural blacks.

12 Historically, the fertile coastal plains surrounding Annotto Bay were monopolised by sugar plantations while the small and medium-sized farms on the surrounding hillsides were significant producers of both domestic and export crops, predominantly bananas, but also sugar and cocoa. However, in the early 1980s the Grays Inn sugar factory closed, and the Jamaica Producers Group – an amalgam of Jamaican and foreign capital and the island’s largest banana growers – came to occupy most of the coastal lowlands with a long-term state lease. The land was subsequently transformed from sugar into the St. Mary Banana Estates. With plantations and large commercial farms coming to dominate banana exports in Jamaica during the 1980s, banana production was de-emphasised on peasant farms throughout the region. Peasants also ceased farming sugar cane commercially with the closure of the Grays Inn factory.

13 The demise of cooperative labour arrangements and the expense of hiring workers also have environmental ramifications. While many of the older farmers farm close to organically out of necessity or tradition, the use of agro-chemicals is increasing, especially amongst young farmers and those working on a larger scale, as it is much less labour intensive and longer lasting to spray gramazone than to clean weeds manually. So while the ‘green’ case for land reform is compelling, the rising chemical intensity of peasant agriculture has serious environmental health implications that must be accounted for when discussing alternatives [Weis, 2004b].

14 Common fowl are used for home consumption, while ‘broilers’ and ‘layers’ are raised commercially (from imported stock) and kept in coops.

15 Beans are one of a significant number of vegetables that were once primarily produced locally but are now being imported in greater volume, in some instances wiping out local production altogether.

16 Marijuana is a crop that is widely held to be Jamaica’s largest agro-export. However, unless directly involved in selling it to tourists, peasants do not profit much from its cultivation, as it sells very cheaply within Jamaica. Only those who can grow large quantities and have the means to export can reap significant profits. No participants cultivated marijuana on any more than a tiny scale, mostly for personal use. One farmer who noted that he ‘can make a little off it’, but felt he couldn’t plant enough to make much money without attract policing, described this peculiar suppression: ‘me na see why dem shouldn’t let it go, cuz it a bush…look here, rum worse den de ganja, an dem fine wit rum…make no sense…dem have helicopter drive over an search fi de ganja, foolishness’.

17 Land terracing in Jamaica is extremely rare outside of lucrative Blue Mountain coffee estates. The most common soil conservation strategy used by peasants is to dig trenches across the contours of the field, directing them into gullies to reduce the speed and volume of rainfall flowing over the land during the wet seasons. Another basic way some peasants protect soil in the short term is by cutting tall grass for mulch, or placing ‘trash’ from large foliage to hold the soil and its moisture. In contrast, others believe that however steep the land, it must be kept as ‘clean’ as possible to inhibit the spread of disease and pests and to reduce competition for nutrients, and thus leave barren ground between crops, with obvious impacts for erosion.

18 One farmer described how ‘when rain fall, you hafi swim ‘pon dem here road’.

19 The competitive squeeze for vegetables is intensified by the rising costs of production, as some vegetables are planted from hybrid rather than saved seeds, and expensive herbicides and pesticides are increasingly deemed necessary, since organic sprays or pest mitigating cropping strategies very rare.

20 In the past, higglers were largely dependent on public transport (trains and buses), but private vehicles are increasingly how produce now reaches markets. The rise in vehicle ownership is part of why higglering at the farm-gate has become an increasingly male activity, though selling at the market is still an overwhelmingly female vocation. Whether farmers perceive changing gender dynamics and trust at the farm-gate to be related was not explored.

21 Farmers dealing with relatively low volumes and high seasonal variability are extremely concerned with maximising per unit margins, and find that informal outlets or selling themselves provide higher returns for lower volumes, as the cooperatives pay for a truck-driver, an
administrator, and a marketing director, as well as the local selectors. Overlapping production between farmers when there are limited orders has often led to a rationing of the sales that farmers were anticipating, a source of much frustration.

22 The rise in combative, individualistic social ethics is no doubt linked at some level to the shortage of opportunities coupled with the fiercely competitive economic climate fostered by structural adjustment [Weis, 2005]. Praedial larceny epitomises the ‘anarchy that flows from “go it alone” ideology – not “public first, self second”’ that brings out the best in human nature, but ‘...must get rich first’ that brings out the worst’ [Hinton, 2000: 227–8].

23 The narratives of loss and frustration are often heart rending. The most agonising was that of one 65-year-old farmer, who described his ordeal a few years ago around Christmas: ‘It was a Friday night, de 15 of December, me an [a friend] come my yard an a we a talk about de tiefs dem, cuz him get a hard time by de tiefs dem too ya know ... So me an him talk ’bout de tiefs dat night, I tink it was a full moon too, jus like tonight. At de same time, dey’re tiefing me up ... because in de morning, de Sat’day morning, I carry de goats an go down to do some work, an when I come up to de top dere, de first plantain root you reach to, I see it cut out by de heart. I come down to de next one I see it now, an I come across here an I check, an its 12, so I go down dere to see if I see anybody making any move. So me tink its 12 dem tiefing me ... an when I go back up me find 7 more, say 19, an when me walk again an do some work, me find 13 more, 19 an 13 is 32, my god, it like dem stang an pull out 32 [his entire pre-Christmas harvest] ... 32 man. Had me a likkle Christmas because me did plan fi me to cut dem dat week dere you know’. A nearby farmer recounted how sad it was to witness this event: ‘You see dat likkle friendly man, him turn colour, like a sickness take him. When we see him walk ’pon de road, him tremble ... when it come ’pon Christmas ... him couldn’t even buy cake, because it only is dat him sell an make a market. How you feel mon? Good god you plant it, an when you go an look back you see a man go an cut it out. You don’t leave one ... im will turn you off a your nest like a mongoose will turn a fowl off a her nest’. One tall, imposing farmer epitomises this approach, as few see his equally large smile. His warm, friendly demeanour has been mostly kept from others since he moved to the district more than five years ago, reserved for choice private encounters. He avoids leaving his farm other than to buy basic supplies, sell his produce and fetch his water, ensuring his mysterious aura. He explained his relative immunity to theft laughing: ‘dem ‘fraid a me around here, ha fi talk tough ... Me na grudge, me na tief, me na hate ... me jus keep to meself’. Another farmer has taken a similar approach for three years since moving to his current community, explaining that: ‘like how I talk to you, I don’t talk to someone else, dem doesn’t know me ... de more people dem a see you, dem a have eye ’pon you ... If dem use to me it harder, dem doesn’t use to me, dey doesn’t know where me is, dey doesn’t know where me come from, dem doesn’t know my name or nuttin’, is only one an two people know my name’.

24 While many old farmers use marijuana to help them work, some see it as being part of the ‘lazy’, idling youth culture, as one farmer in his fifties explained: ‘when me smoke it, me sharpen me cutlass and me do a portion a work, an by de time me tired an look back nuff work me a do.’ He contrasted this with the youth: ‘Dem sit down an jus burn it an burn it...a ng e t weak. If you smoke it you hafi have someting a make your body spin, dat you can sweat.’ This is further evident in how many farming parents struggle to get their children to help them on the farm, even if they wouldn’t want them there in the long term. One old woman described how she can’t get her teenage grandson (whom she and her husband have raised) to climb their ackee and mango trees, forcing her husband in his late sixties to harvest their huge trees against her wishes: ‘me na like him to climb tree now, him na young ya know’. Another old farmer, trying desperately to get help from his children with no success, explained his frustration: ‘outta 7 sons, none goin’ to do what I’m doin, deir na goin’ to do nuting, no one ... what me take from me grandfather an father, me try to give to me children but dem na wanna tek it. Me daughters na want to sell because dem a high school girls now, and don’t want people to see dem on de street selling’.

25 Two polls from 2000 reflect how widespread these perceptions are: one found that ‘two-thirds of Jamaica’s over 18 population see no hope in the country for the island’s young people’, and describes a picture of ‘gloom and despair’ and ‘landscape of hopelessness’ [Observer,
2000a], while another found that two-thirds of Jamaicans would migrate immediately if they could [Observer, 2000b].

28 Many farmers similarly see the eroding viability of farming as being at the crux of Jamaica’s broader social and economic woes—‘what break down de economy of Jamaica’, as one put it.

29 Weis [2004b] develops the obstacles and technical issues surrounding land reform in Jamaica in more detail.

REFERENCES


