Creole Economics: Caribbean Cunning Under the French Flag

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Announcement: New Book

*Creole Economics: Caribbean Cunning Under the French Flag.*
Katherine E. Browne
University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas. 291 pp., 19 halftones, 24 line drawings, 3 figures, 1 map. 2004.

Promotional announcement from the author --

"In this innovative work, Browne pierces the silence that has hidden the world of creole economics in the literature on the Antilles. The men's social world of creoleness has been much written about. But the ways that creoleness infuses everyday economic life, the ways that these practices that were built up in resistance (first to slavery, later to colonialism) actually operate, has never before been laid bare. A fine example of how anthropology still has something original to teach us." -- Richard Price, Dittman Professor of American Studies, Anthropology, and History at the College of William & Mary.

Creole Economics is as basic to slave adaptations as creole languages, religions, and music.

What do the trickster Rabbit, slave descendants, off-the-books economies, and French citizens have to do with each other? Plenty, says Katherine Browne in her anthropological investigation of the informal economy in the Caribbean island of Martinique. She begins with a question: Why, after more than three hundred years as colonial subjects of France, did the residents of Martinique opt in 1946 to integrate fully with France, the very nation that had enslaved their ancestors? The author suggests that the choice to decline sovereignty reflects the same clear-headed opportunism that defines successful, crafty, and illicit entrepreneurs who work off the books in Martinique today.

Browne draws on a decade of ethnographic fieldwork and interview data from all socioeconomic sectors to question the common understanding of informal economies as culture-free, survival strategies of the poor. Anchoring her own insights to longer historical and literary views, the author shows how adaptations of cunning have been reinforced since the days of plantation slavery. These adaptations occur, not in spite of French economic and political control, but rather because of it. Powered by the "essential tensions" of maintaining French and Creole identities, the practice of creole economics provides both assertion of and refuge from the difficulties of being dark-skinned and French.
This powerful ethnographic study shows how local economic meanings and plural identities help explain work off the books. Like creole language and music, creole economics expresses an irreducibly complex blend of historical, contemporary, and cultural influences.