Youth Employment: Stubbs

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Introduction

Since the beginning of European colonization, the economy of St. Vincent has been based primarily on agriculture and, consequently, it has been this sector which traditionally has provided the greatest employment opportunities for young men entering the job market. With virtually no manufacturing industries on the island, and with a paucity of businesses offering goods or services, other employment opportunities are restricted. However, today there is a widespread aversion towards agricultural labor by Vincentian youths due to at least three inter-related factors: 1) the historical influence of slavery and the value placed on white-collar work; 2) migration and familial ties as forces disaffecting youths toward employment, and 3) a leisure ethic which counterpoises the Protestant ethic towards work. The purpose of this paper is to introduce each of these factors in order to elucidate the behavior of the youths in regard to employment.

Field data for this study were gathered over a six-week period in the village of Stubbs, which is located along the south Windward coast of St. Vincent, eight miles from the capital of Kingstown. This rural community has a population of approximately five hundred persons, virtually all of whom are Negro. Although small-scale farming is pursued in the village, many of the older men are employed as tradesmen who leave Stubbs daily to work on building projects in other parts of the island. However, at least one tenth of the population are males in their late teens or early twenties who are unemployed. This study focuses on these youths. I obtained information about them through formal interviews with a dozen young men and through informal daily discussions and observations of about thirty others, as well as through interviews with older members of the community and with government officials. In addition to these data, reference is made in the paper to other relevant publications.

Historical Influences and Work Preferences

In many developing countries, researchers have revealed an overriding preference among young people to attain white-collar employment. However, because in each case this preference is dependent on particular historical factors, it is necessary to understand the peculiar historical dimensions of the West Indies as they touch on this problem.

In the West Indies, the societies that emerged after 1700 were those of slaves and masters. The operation of these societies depended upon the exploitation of the slave as an item of capital equipment by
the combined forces of the planter and the merchant. For many generations, life for the slave meant forced labor on the vast estates of the white, European aristocracy. Moreover, the formal emancipation of the slaves in the nineteenth century did not free them from the bonds of servitude in any real sense. As Lewis stated it, emancipation merely replaced the whip of slavery with the prison of low-cost agricultural 'free' labor. The ex-slave became, even at his most fortunate, a petit propriétaire growing tropical commodities -- cotton, rice, coffee, tobacco -- the demand for which was controlled in the world market by economic forces beyond his control" (1968:50). Today, this tradition of subjugation of the masses to non-rewarding agricultural labor has left its mark on the young throughout the West Indies: "The classic heritage of slavery -- the identification of manual labor with a status of social degradation -- has managed still to survive, so that the region's agricultural industries continue to suffer from occupational preferences for white-collar jobs" (Lewis 1968: 66).

In St. Vincent, this "classic heritage of slavery" appears to be primarily an unconscious, or at least unstated, force, for none of the youths interviewed made specific reference to this "slave status" phenomenon when questioned about their occupational preferences. However, other informants felt that Vincentian history had to be considered a vital force in explaining the behavior of the modern Vincentian youth. For example, one government agricultural official stated that Vincentian youths "were unwilling to work the farms because agricultural labor has a stigma resulting from the historical fact of slavery." A primary school teacher in Stubbs went further by stating that the resentment towards agricultural labor resulting from the slavery stigma had reached such grave proportions that the youths "would not even lead a sheep from its pen to a grazing area."

Whether this historical dimension is a strong factor or not may be a moot point, for the idea of an occupational preference has reinforcement in the modern educational process. All of the youths interviewed in Stubbs had attended primary school and, although only a few had continued through the secondary levels, the education that they did receive apparently influenced their behavior in at least one important manner. An instructor at the Teacher's College in Kingstown cogently summarized this force when he stated that for many years the emphasis in education "has been toward the goal of building a background to obtain white-collar employment and, as a corollary, that blue-collar work is less desirable." (In this context, "blue-collar" work does not refer to the formal technical trades, but rather to manual labor which does not require formal training. Working as a tradesman is desirable, although it is less prestigious than office work.) That education may be a critical enculturative influence turning youths away from the manual occupations gains credence through examination of the primary school curriculum: social studies, general science, health education, mathematics, English, music, art, and physical education. No courses are taught to provide the student with training in scientific farming techniques or in the technical trades.
As in many developing countries, this problem is aggravated further by the limited education that the youths do receive and by the small number of white-collar jobs that are available. Thus, youths who have attended just primary school are not qualified to hold the jobs that they aspire to because of a deficiency in their educational training. Also, with a lack of industries which can provide such occupations as the youths are seeking, there simply are not enough white-collar jobs to go around and competition for what is available is very great. So, the aspirations of the youths for white-collar work cannot be fulfilled and, alternatively, as noted, although employment is available in agricultural work, this same population refuses this labor because it is below their aspirations.

Migration and Familial Ties

If the historical fact of slavery and the present-day educational process direct young men away from choosing employment in the agricultural sector, other factors exist which allow the youths to make such a choice. One of these is that young men in St. Vincent, as in other parts of the West Indies, do not usually marry until their late twenties or early thirties. They tend, rather, to remain attached "to their parental families, living with them or at least taking meals and money from them, and to accept short periods of casual employment until they reach the age to settle down" (Cumper 1960: 175). In other words, the social pressure to find employment is minimized because parents regard their sons as their responsibility until they have married. As one woman said: "The youths do not have a care in the world when they go home there is always supper on the table. Parents must not deny their sons a subsistence."

The reasons behind this particular aspect of parental care are undoubtedly varied. Several informants claimed that parents tended to discourage a son from marrying if the parents would then lose the money he gives them when working. This is important because many of the youths do find casual employment -- usually as unskilled laborers on building projects -- for at least a few months out of the year. During this time, these youths will assist in meeting the total family's financial obligations, at least to some extent. Other informants noted that, if a son marries and does not have steady employment, his parents may be forced to spend money not only on the son, but also on his wife and children. Furthermore, as noted in the Laufer paper, there are often very close ties between a son and his mother and this may be reflected in the parental responsibility to a son. In any event, the youths recognize their favorable position vis-a-vis their parents and, in the terminology of F. G. Bailey (1969), the youths make a strategic choice to maximize their interests. This is evidenced by the youths themselves who say that a man is "crazy" to marry young because it forces responsibilities on him which are unnecessary to accept at this time.
This kin solidarity expressed by familial responsibility is also extended to relatives living abroad. Every youth that was interviewed had at least one relative -- father, brother, sister, uncle, cousin -- who resided in some other country and periodically sent money back to the remaining family members, and often to the youth himself. With food and shelter assured, these contributions can and do provide the youths with money for clothes and entertainment. One effect of the combination of familial responsibility and assistance is to allow the youths to be complacent. One informant put it this way: "The youths always have a pleasing look on their faces because they are content. They get a subsistence easily and they usually can get some money from abroad." Since the basic biological needs of food, shelter and clothing are satisfied without working, there is no great pressure to fulfill these needs by the medium of employment.

Also, in regard to the establishment of each youth's family of procreation there are strong pressures exerted on the young men to avoid agricultural labor. Two young women whom I interviewed stated that they would "prefer not to have anything to do with boys who work on farms. These boys are usually very ignorant because they dropped out of school after barely learning how to write their names. They also beat their girls up in the street." The accuracy of this judgment is irrelevant from a cognitive perspective because it is widely believed ... as evidenced by the fact that these same sentiments were echoed to researchers in other villages (personal communication with D. Laufer and C. Toran). The two young women further stated that they preferred "to go out with men who worked in offices or in the trades rather than the men who worked in the field."

Another point which is closely connected to the relationship between a young man, his family, and the prospect of attaining full-time employment in any occupation, is the possibility of migration. However, as with the earlier discussion of slavery, it is necessary to understand the historical significance of migration to West Indians prior to understanding the present influence of migration on the occupational aspirations of the youths.

After the boom in sugar production in the eighteenth century, when the West Indies were Britain's prize possessions, the population growth of the islands far outstripped the ability of the indigenous economy alone to support it. In the economic situation extant in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "migration has been an unalloyed blessing, draining away surplus labor which had no hope of finding employment" (Davison 1962: 78). The potential of emigration has, therefore, traditionally offered an avenue of hope to the peoples of the islands to economically better their situation. Today, despite the fact that emigration has always depleted "that part of the labor force which is valuable in the strengthening of the economic life of the islands" (Erickson 1962: 39), the possibility of emigrating is still highly valued by the West Indian. Unfortunately for the young people of the West Indies, the probability of being able to migrate is becoming less and less due to the constant lowering of the emigration quotas by such countries as England, Canada, and the United States.
However, the lowering of the emigration quotas is a relatively new phenomenon, and a phenomenon which has not as yet fully penetrated the countryside of St. Vincent nor, probably, of other West Indian countries. The available statistics indicate, in fact, that migration has been increasing annually. Thus, the total net emigration from the West Indies went from 15,998 in 1958 to 46,449 in 1960 (Davison 1952: 7). On St. Vincent, from 1961 through 1964 there was a net out-migration of 5,668 persons -- nearly 7% of the total population (O'Loughlin 1966: 5).

Moreover, although no statistics are available for St. Vincent, there are informative figures from other Caribbean islands which indicate which segments are most apt to emigrate. General comparisons can be made between these figures and statistics I gathered on the youths in Stubbs. In a 1961 study in Jamaica and Dominica, information was gained on the sex, age, marital status, educational level and occupation of persons emigrating between 1955 and 1960. These figures included both periodic or temporary emigration and permanent emigration. The former includes those persons who leave for limited periods to work as contracted laborers or for "holiday" on other islands or in other countries, such as the United States or Canada. These persons generally plan to return to their homeland. The latter includes those persons who leave without any intention of returning. Of the migrants, 59% were males, 70% were between the ages of 15 and 30, 76% were not legally married, 78% had completed only their elementary education or less, and only 9% could hold clerical or professional jobs (Davison 1962: 15-23).

In the case of the youths from Stubbs, all of the young men interviewed were between the ages of 18 and 23, none were married, 80% had completed only their elementary education or less, and none were trained to hold a clerical or professional position. Clearly, these youths fit the "mold" of those persons most likely to emigrate but, of course, this does not demonstrate that such a mold is a valuable index.

A more cogent factor is that every youth expressed an interest in eventually leaving the island. Every youth acknowledged that he had either received or applied for a passport, and many of them openly, if vaguely, expressed their principal goal should they migrate. For example, one youth, who has relatives in Trinidad and Tortola, said he would like "to go to the United States or Canada to learn mason work"; a brother of his had recently returned from such a trip. Still another "would like to go to Canada, America or Sweden to work." These young men were merely waiting for their relatives to send for them, which is the usual manner of financing emigration. In the words of an older man of the village: "The youths are simply biding their time until they can leave the island." To these youths, the fact that the doors to other countries are closing rapidly is not really grasped. They wait for their turn, as the young men of the village have done for generations.
Leisure Ethic

In the previous paragraph, the statement "biding time" introduced the phenomenon of a "leisure ethic." This ethic or value, which is well-documented in the Caribbean literature, refers to the acceptance of leisure in the present as opposed to working and saving for leisure some time in the future. Erickson has defined several interlocking forces which may explain the historical development of this leisure ethic (1962: 66-69).

First, the dominant Protestant values about work have not greatly influenced the motivations of the West Indian workers for "they avoid an orientation toward ceaseless effort and rational conduct as an intrinsically moral form of behaviour" (p. 66). Erickson holds that the peasants simply do not abide by the ethic of salvation through hard work. Instead, if the world is wicked, the peasant would rather adapt to it than to try and transform it through conscientious work and effort in everyday life.

Second, the rejection of this work ethic is closely connected to slavery because this institution did not allow men to improve their lot through their labors. If anything, the historical processes discussed earlier left the workers with a negative work ethic because they were driven to work against their will, and because they realized that if more effort was expended, no additional reward was achieved. In the plantation regime, this negative work ethic expressed itself in a "go-slow" tactic which evolved as the slave's only defense mechanism, and this tactic has remained to condition modern West Indian attitudes towards work.

Of course, these explanations about the origin of the value placed on leisure in no way explain the continuance of this value in West Indian life. But, that such a value does exist was manifested in many ways, from one youth who stated flatly that he would not "bother with work that is very hard and pay that is very small" when such labors were basically unnecessary because he was assured a subsistence, to another youth who quit a job as a carpenter's assistant (two and one-half days after he started it) because he felt a need to spend a few days with his girl friend. Moreover, at almost any time of the day or night, groups of youths would pass hour upon hour by simply sitting around, "chatting," playing card games, or perhaps playing musical instruments and singing.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have isolated several factors which I found were relevant to understanding the behavior of Vincentian youths in the area of employment. However, none of the factors which I suggested to be relevant were clearly shown to be causal factors of the youth's behavior, and in the context of the subject matter of this paper, it remains for further research to prove that these, or other factors, are or are not relevant.