

COMMENTARY

The representation of ‘Caribbean families’ found in the United Kingdom’s AQA-GCSE 9-1 sociology textbook presents a dense tangle of issues of colonialism, racist discourse, and public policy. As the authors in this forum point out, the region has always had to contend with the colonizers’ assertions of morality and family vis-à-vis sexuality, and some of this representation has been shaped by anthropological discussions of the matrifocal household, namely, a household in which the father is absent.

The essays here challenge this traditional anthropological concept by shifting the focus in two ways. First, they suggest that people in the Caribbean forge kinship and social networks that extend well beyond the household, and with all such networks, men are present. Second, they do not privilege the narrow role of father. Together, these points undermine the hegemonic privileging of the nuclear family household that is implicit in many early social scientific studies of the Caribbean and which have been unfortunately reproduced in a current sociology textbook.

To frame my commentary on these articles, I want to refer to three important texts relevant to the region: the West India Royal Commission Report of 1945 (often referred to as the Moyne Commission), Sir W. Arthur Lewis’ seminal article ‘Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour’ (1954), and C. L. R. James’ *Beyond a Boundary* (1993). The first two of these refer to issues of public policy related to decolonization, but do so in a way in which family and marriage appear as important issues. C. L. R. James’ book is a classic anti-colonial, anti-racist text written by an intellectual caught

in the tensions between European constructions of respectability and his own experiences in the Caribbean and as an emigrant to Europe. It is my hope that weaving together these texts will help to contextualize infelicitous descriptions of Caribbean families as a symptom of larger issues that not only plague representations of the Caribbean kinship, clearly a goal of the three essays here, but are latent in public policy, as well. This latter point is most clearly raised by Adom Philogene Heron’s essay, which quotes President Obama of the United States and Prime Minister Skerrit of Dominica as seeing the absence of fathers from families as social problems.

The issue is not just the representation of Caribbean households as fatherless, but of Caribbean families as dysfunctional. Harkening back to an earlier perspective in anthropology in which functionalism and structural-functionalism were popular theories, the sociology textbook seems to allude to a region formed by dysfunction in which dysfunction is perpetuated by family structure. All three essays here challenge the perpetuation of dysfunction by expanding their perspective beyond ideas of what a family should be to on the ground realities of what kinship networks are and do. Moreover, all three essays challenge the connection drawn between patriarchy and morality that privileges the nuclear family household and which is found in the representation of female-headed households. The essays by Härkönen and Heron provide ethnographic images of kinship networks forged by women that connect multiple households. The essay by Forde notes the emergence of respectability politics in which respectability was originally meant to

convey European ideas of the moral marriage, but where in the criticisms of the sociology textbook, the variety of family arrangements found in the Caribbean and Caribbean diaspora are embraced as respectable.

What Forde only hints at with the reference to the Moynihan report is the extent to which such social scientific thinking becomes embedded in public policy. In this regard, I wish she had chosen the Moyne Report rather than the Moynihan report to discuss. The Moyne Report was commissioned after the labor unrest in the British West Indian colonies in 1937, and it was meant to provide a guide for implementing internal self-rule and eventually independence. In a chapter titled 'Other Social Needs and Services', the report raises the issue of 'social welfare work' as important in addressing the social conditions of the West Indies (1945: 215). One of these social conditions it labeled as the 'Lack of family life': 'This lack of family life as a bearing on every aspect of the social conditions in the West Indies' (1945: 220). To address this lack of family life: 'Perhaps the most important step, apart from a general raising of the standard of life, which could be taken in an attempt to bring about reform in this matter would be an organised campaign against the social, moral and economic evils of promiscuity' (1945: 222).

In many ways, the Moyne Commission's argument parallels the sociology textbook, the difference being that the Moyne Commission report provided the outline to achieving independence rather than educating school children. What this suggests is that the distorted view of Caribbean families has been ingrained in governmental views for a long time, whether it be the review and approval of textbooks or the review and approval of independence movements. With this historical legacy of viewing matrifocality as a threat to governing

effectively, one can understand the resistance to the essentializing portrayal of Caribbean families as having absent fathers and emphasizing child-shifting as not merely a threat to identity, but a threat to empowerment—a challenge to the latent assertion that if a society cannot even produce morally-structured families, it cannot be trusted to govern itself.

Maybe the need for a family conceptualized as a patriarchal nuclear family has additional utility for the exploitation of non-Europeans. The St. Lucian economist W. Arthur Lewis created an economic development model for newly decolonized nations. He suggested that in developing economies 'The price of labour (...) is a wage at the subsistence level. The supply of labour is therefor "unlimited" so long as the supply of labour at this price exceeds the demand' (1954: 142). He implicitly assumes that the wage earner in a household is male, so to increase the supply of labor so that it exceeds demand, he suggests that 'The transfer of women's work from the household to commercial employment is one of the most notable features of economic development' (1954: 143). Putting his argument in rather crude terms, if the household could have more than one breadwinner, then the wages of each breadwinner could be lower and the household still meets its subsistence demands. Such low wages would be attractive to external capital seeking a cheap industrial workforce. Such a model assumes households as the fundamental economic unit with an adult male as the primary wage earner. For Lewis' model to work and wages to decrease in order to attract foreign capital, the women of the household must enter the wage-earning workforce. Such wisdom resulted in Lewis being knighted, and in his winning the Nobel Prize in economics.

The representation of Caribbean families found in the sociology textbook that privileges

patriarchy and the nuclear family household, not only reinforces an implicit view that those from a Caribbean background cannot govern themselves, but cannot provide a stable labor force that is attractive to capital investment. From this ideological perspective, the stakes are high, and they pivot on whether there is a father in the household.

This is where I want to turn to C. L. R. James, whose work intersects with the articles in this discussion forum. Both James and the articles in this discussion forum recognize the existence of European hegemony, and both advocate a strategic appropriation of elements of that hegemony to create a distinctive anti-colonial and subversive Caribbean sense of self. James' focus was on the game of cricket—a highly respectable game. But James suggested that the West Indian style of play that included fast-bowling and intimidating the batsmen was a means of anti-colonial resistance, particularly since it eventually led to the West Indian team triumphing over the English team. Even more recently, it led to many cricket teams adopting elements of the West Indian style of play.

James prefaces his book with the comment, 'What do those of cricket know who only cricket know?' What the three articles here demonstrate that there is more to Caribbean families than traditional European images of the nuclear family household. 'Family' is a node in a network. As Härkönen suggests, it is adaptive to changing conditions. As Forde suggests, discourses of respectability can be

appropriated to apply to the various forms of Caribbean kinship and family based on the respectability of those who come from a Caribbean background. As Heron points out, embracing the diversity and pragmatic elements of Caribbean family relations is important for overcoming the pathologized representations of diasporic populations. These views that expand the focus beyond the nuclear family household to include how women play key roles in forging kinship networks that transcend households is important for the acceptance of the diversity of household forms in relationship to kinship, and how such networks of kin, partners, and friends are a constructive response to globalization and the challenges of neo-colonialism.

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