

Review: Five Decades of Anthropological Engagement in the Caribbean

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Source: *Anthropology Now*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (September 2011), pp. 78-83

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5816/anthropologynow.3.2.0078>

Accessed: 27-06-2016 06:42 UTC

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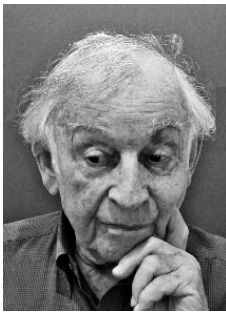
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Five Decades of Anthropological Engagement in the Caribbean

Mark Schuller



Courtesy of Sidney Mintz

Sidney Mintz

Sidney Mintz. 2010. *Three Ancient Colonies: Caribbean Themes and Variations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 257 pp.

Sidney Mintz, one of anthropology's most respected scholars, has written a new book that distills 50 years of his pioneering research in three Caribbean plantation societies: Jamaica, Haiti, and Puerto Rico. Along with others, such as Eric Wolf and Richard and Sally Price, Mintz forged a critical anthropological engagement with Caribbean studies, rekindling interest in a region that previous scholars had set aside based on their view that few indigenous people remained there and that years of colonization and slavery had created identities too "hybrid" to be worthy of study.

As Eric Wolf noted in *Europe and the People without History* (1997), his own work bore the marks of discussions with Mintz some 30 years earlier on the dialectic between plantations and peasantries, as well as their shared attempts to wed anthropological concepts of culture to historical materialist scholarship.

Mintz's engagement with history also shaped the work of later Caribbeanists, such as anthropologist-historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who also noted that the Caribbean was an "open frontier" for anthropological theory (1992).

Mintz has challenged and inspired generations of anthropologists with his engaging work. *Sweetness and Power* (1985) is his most widely known. In this text, Mintz pioneers a study of sugar, depicting it as both a "commodity chain" and a "social history," an approach such anthropologists as Arjun Appadurai popularized. Mintz also challenged a disparaging slight in Marxian studies that dismissed slavery's importance as mere "primitive accumulation." Mintz argued instead that not only were slaves proletarians, but plantations also represented a cultural petri dish in which modernity grew at the same time as in Europe, or earlier (1977). In addition to "provincializing" Europe, Mintz also corrected anthropologist Herskovits's endless search for the continuities of African cultural traits. Mintz argued that the Caribbean could not be understood outside of the plantations, where a creole identity was formed that was to be the seed for future Caribbean peasantries (1984).

Three Ancient Colonies again throws down the gauntlet, challenging anthropologists, among others, to reconsider our un-

derstandings of “creole” and “creolization,” advocating respect for what Mintz views as the achievement of enslaved peoples against all odds to craft a new culture and cultural identity. “Creolization” is thus not a passive mix of local and received cultures, but the emergence of new forms of hybrid institution and cultural identity. Moreover, as other scholars are beginning to perceive, globalization is not a new phenomenon, and its emerging forms reveal unexpected creativity from regions once considered marginal.

Comparing the post-colonial trajectories of Puerto Rico, Haiti, and Jamaica, *Three Ancient Colonies* shows that the development of slave sugar plantations shaped contemporary race, class, and gender inequalities and ideas. Haiti and Jamaica, the crown jewels for their respective metropolises, France and Britain, provided them with great wealth: in capitalist terms large “surplus value.” Sugar, the main crop, “was fertilized with the blood of human beings” (2010a:184). Spain, by contrast, did not develop what Curtin called “the plantation complex” (Curtin 1990) until much later, although it dominated the region for a century following Columbian contact. The plantation complex began to emerge there following the Haitian Revolution in 1804 that triggered the British abolition of the slave trade and finally slavery, implemented in 1838. Sugar production in Puerto Rico was also less profitable. As a result, a less rigid complex arose, leading to emancipation and the conscripting of white

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labor. Racism in Puerto Rico was also less visible and less brutal.

Mintz moves beyond this well-rehearsed argument, articulated earlier by Tannenbaum (1947), focusing on the process of creolization. The word “creole” once denoted something of the Old World borne in the New and “the movement of people and things to the Americas.” The more common usage today “usually carries the idea of mixing or blending” (2010a:188), which conflates biology and culture. Moreover, the term “creolization” has drifted beyond its Caribbean roots, particularly following the work of Ulf Hannerz. However, Mintz writes that to speak of creolization only as “hybridization, mixing, exchange, or trading, is to diminish the genuinely reconstructive, creative, synthesizing aspect of these processes” (201); the earlier formulation, once called acculturation, obscures peoples’ desires and aspirations and their attempts to solve immediate problems. An alternative definition of the term would recognize the “cultural synthesis undertaken primarily by the slaves, interacting with each other and with free people, including the ‘master class,’ to forge new social institutions and cultural meanings that provide a basis for cultural growth” (190). The absence of a Spanish creole language is significant, suggesting that social conditions and the policy of emancipation (resulting from a lack of profitability, not Spanish planters’ moral superiority) led to freed people playing an important role in bridging the social

spheres of the enslaved and free whites. While he claims not to be engaged in building anthropological theory, Mintz does suggest that understanding this phenomenon of creolization would contribute to the anthropological study of culture theory (205).

Three Ancient Colonies continues to promote the intersection of history and ethnography. The book is dedicated to three families, Tazo Zayas and Eli Villarronga in Puerto Rico, Tom and Leah Belnavis in Jamaica, and Nana and Jis Adrien in Haiti, friends from the 1940s and 1950s. Reflecting recently on the year and a half he spent living in Haiti, Mintz notes: "I cannot turn a page of my field notes without the persons on those pages coming to life for me" (2010b). All have since passed, but their poignant life histories provide a lens through which to view the transformation from plantation to peasantry, and how the stain of slavery still blots the social landscape in the three countries. These lively, engaged, sometimes romanticized narratives nevertheless portray remarkable, resilient, and "ordinary" people who opened the way for Mintz's pursuit of regional studies.

First presented as a series of lectures at Harvard to honor W.E.B. Du Bois, the book begins with an account of Du Bois's Caribbean roots and his journey of self-discovery while visiting the Jamaica of Marcus Garvey. Here, for the first time, Du Bois was not confronted with what he called "double consciousness" or "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (1995:3) because people who would have been deemed "black" in the United States, based on the "one drop" rule, were the clear majority and in positions of power.

The introduction also summarizes his earlier work that depicted the realities of plantation life and the forced labor that kept the capitalist mills producing cane juice around the clock. Plantation owners also encouraged slaves to grow their own food rather than give rations, their garden plots becoming the birthplace of the future peasantries. Since they produced more than necessary for sustenance, slaves began to participate in the market economy. This orientation toward cash crops was to have a heavy imprint on Caribbean post-emancipation societies, and many scholars have built on Mintz's discussion of the importance of the "higgler" in the informal Caribbean marketplace (e.g., Browne 2004; Ulysse 2008).

Mintz devotes a chapter to Jamaica, first colonized by a Spain more interested in extracting wealth in the form of precious metals. Jamaica was largely a backwater until the English seized control following a 1655 naval assault. The "church villages" established by faith leaders after emancipation attracted communities of followers. Mintz conducted research in one such village, Sturge Town, and it is here that we meet Tom Belnavis and learn about what are said to be core peasant values and worldviews. Despite oppressive conditions, slaves

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carved out and defended niches of autonomy, developing an attachment to the independence and individualism that would characterize Jamaica's peasantry. Land ownership was key to both peasant values, and hence a primary goal. All men worked the land, and even apprentices saved to buy their parcels of economic freedom or to educate their children. Politically they had little interaction with the state. Common-law marriage and an honor code thus became *de facto* law in rural Jamaica. Mintz recalls meeting a comparatively well-off, light-skinned landowner who had shot a peasant for stealing his mangoes, spewing racism that is familiar in North American society where, ironically, they both would be "black."

The chapter about Haiti provides a long, theoretically dense account of the Haitian Revolution and its significance. Mintz discusses the critical role that free *gens du couleur*—mixed-race people—played in toppling the delicate balance, as well as the heroism of Haiti's black revolutionary leaders. In securing their freedom and independence, victorious Haitians also paved the way for U.S. hegemony, as Napoleon Bonaparte relinquished his ambitions in Louisiana after losing the "pearl of the Antilles." In addition to this well-rehearsed *istwa* (Haitian Creole for "history" and "story"—see Schuller 2007), Mintz includes voices "from below" (Fick 1990). After whites fled in 1804, when Haiti gained independence, the black and mixed-race elite groups competed with one another for control of the state, but peasants mounted an effective resistance (Trouillot 1990).

Complementing this historical account of

the peasantry is Mintz's ethnography set in the early days of the Duvalier dictatorship, where we encounter Nana Adrien's family.

Mintz highlights a gendered division of labor in which men inherit and work the land, while women sell the surplus at market.

Poor peasant women's husbands granted them autonomy and respect. Market women traveled freely, unaccompanied by men, and had control over their own funds, which they used as capital to invest in buying merchandise. We contemplate the poignant image of Nana visiting the (then) calm and orderly Port-au-Prince, spending the night sleeping on her merchandise. Mintz hints that although the relations between market women and their husbands are "modern" in their egalitarianism, they might in fact stem from Africa. Mintz's discussion of Nana and Haiti's peasantry are particularly bittersweet given that "The peasantry, meanwhile, is greatly diminished" (Mintz 2010a 117). Today's Haiti, following decades of neoliberal policies, is far more urban than in the 1950s. Initiatives that aimed at promoting "free trade" to the benefit of foreign interests have destroyed the peasant economy. Impoverished and with few options, people like Nana swelled the cities, particularly the shantytowns in the capital, rendering Haiti more vulnerable to natural disasters.

Puerto Rico provides a striking contrast to the two large plantation societies. Puerto Rico never gained independence, and the plantation system remained undeveloped in a society where slaves constituted less than 12 percent of a population that was more racially diverse and whiter than Jamaica and

Colonized peoples struggle to have the last word on their own lives, making and remaking their own language as they go.

Haiti. Moreover, people retained strong cultural ties with Spain, the colonial power for 400 years. Although the planter class coerced resource-poor whites into forced labor, they failed occasionally to profit from their slaves who were incrementally granted freedom and integrated into the general society. With its many color categories—trigueño, moreno, and negro (wheat colored, mixed race, and black, respectively)—a nonwhite identity does not guarantee social solidarity. Unlike Jamaican peasants such as Belnavis (who were forced occasionally to sell their labor), Taso Zayas represents a proletarian population. As in Jamaica, however, “no one went to church” (165), common-law marriage was widely practiced, and the honor code and vengeance were the laws of the land. In Puerto Rico, men sometimes controlled their wives with the fist. Mintz points out that race and gender ideologies, noted 50 years earlier, persist, and this is “at least as important as changes” (173).

Three Ancient Colonies sounds the call for Caribbeanists to conduct a systematic comparison of cultures and to explore and reclaim the concepts of creole and creolization. Future scholars may well challenge the over-simplified comparison of the French, English, and Spanish, which Mintz acknowledges. Simmons (2009) observes that Span-

ish Caribbean nations do have powerful ideologies of racism. Cuba and the Dominican Republic thus offer useful contrasts. Mintz also fails to note that Stuart Hall, as well as Beckles, Higman, and Nettleford, to name several Caribbean scholars, have engaged in serious examination of the creolization of Caribbean popular culture: food, religion, and music. One might wish for greater dialogue with comparativists, such as Tannenbaum, or with scholars writing about “ethnogenesis,” which has roots in Caribbean archaeology.

As a single offering, however, *Three Ancient Colonies* builds on a lifetime of historical and ethnographic work. It is unparalleled in its scope, its humanity, and its insistence that while colonial patterns still matter powerfully in a post-colonial world, colonized peoples struggle to have the last word on their own lives, making and remaking their own language as they go. This is Mintz at his most passionate and personal.

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