
WILSON CENTER PAPERS

Summaries of key reports given at recent Wilson Center meetings

"From Plantations to Peasantries in the Caribbean."

A paper by Sidney W. Mintz, one of 11 pamphlets in the Focus Caribbean series, published by the Wilson Center's Latin American Program.

Beyond the beaches and modern hotels that beckon American tourists to the 15 island-nations and 17 dependent territories of the Caribbean lie endangered rural peasant societies.

On their reinvigoration, says Mintz, a Johns Hopkins anthropologist, may depend the political health of the islands themselves.

In an unusual way, the Caribbean's peasants are products of European colonialism. European settlers began arriving "within a year of Columbus's arrival" and maintained their rule for an extraordinarily long time. The Dominican Republic won its freedom from Spain in 1821; Barbados did not gain independence from Britain until 1966; French Guyana, Martinique, and Guadeloupe remain to this day *départements* of France.

The aboriginal inhabitants of the islands (and their culture) were long ago swallowed up by disease, war, and intermarriage. But Europeans never settled in great numbers. Today's peasants are descendants of the Central American Indian and African slaves imported by the Europeans and of the Asians and others who later came as contract workers to the vast plantations.

By the middle of the 16th century, all the colonial powers in the Caribbean—Britain, France, Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain—had established plantation economies based on slave labor. Sugar, tobacco, and coffee were the chief crops. The strength of those economies varied greatly over time and from island to island. For example, the Spanish sugar colonies (Cuba,

Puerto Rico, and Santo Domingo) declined after the end of the 16th century; only in the late 18th century did they revive.

Mintz likens the Caribbean's peasants to "blades of grass pushing up between bricks." Descended from runaway slaves and freedmen, they took root in the crevices of their societies, surviving with the sufferance of the European rulers.

Frequently, "proto-peasantries" developed alongside slavery. In Jamaica, for example, black slaves were allowed to cultivate small plots of land for themselves. Gradually, they began supplying much of the island's food out of their surpluses. After emancipation in 1838, the ex-slaves were well prepared to run their own small farms. Later, contract laborers, mostly from India, made similar adaptations.

Although peasant farmers developed the islands' social and cultural life through most of the 19th century, plantations dominated most local economies. Neither European rulers nor the islands' postindependence elite saw much point in aiding the small farms. Years of neglect have left them in poor shape. Yet, with plantation agriculture on the wane today, the small farms are more important than ever before. Apart from the tourist industry, jobs in the cities of the Caribbean are scarce. Emigration is the chief safety valve. Revitalizing the small farms through government aid and peasant education, Mintz suggests, may be the best way to avoid bloody revolution in the Caribbean.

“Retreat from Power: Europe and Military Intervention in the Third World.”

A paper presented by Christopher Coker at a seminar sponsored by the Wilson Center's International Security Studies Program on December 6, 1984.

“The Korean War was probably the last time the Europeans were prepared to fight . . . under American leadership in a theatre of operations outside Europe,” notes Coker, editor of the *Atlantic Quarterly* and a political scientist at the London School of Economics.

Since 1973, when Washington backed Israel in the Yom Kippur War and the Europeans favored the Arabs, U.S. and European interests around the world have diverged sharply. Indeed, thanks to increased U.S. military activism in the Third World—the Mideast, Grenada, Central America—Americans and Europeans are bound to find themselves at odds.

Why? Most West European governments are now reluctant to endorse the use of military force in foreign affairs, believing that “diplomacy, development and trade policies will usually have a greater contribution to make,” as a 1980 British Defense white paper put it. Such policies do not always win friends. Thus, Botswana's foreign minister recently complained that the Europeans failed to back their “pious” pledges of support with military grants to aid in his nation's struggles with South Africa.

American activism abroad also frequently undermines European diplomacy. Thus, the Europeans are often “stuck with American policies and America's allies.” Against their will, the Europeans are often identified by the Third World with both Israel and South Africa.

Former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing has proposed creating a joint European rapid deployment force to intervene independently of the United States in the Third World. But the smaller nations, such

as Denmark, are unlikely to go along. Apart from its conviction that it can best defend its interests “by its example, not its exertions,” Denmark believes that its influence overseas is enhanced precisely because it rattles no sabers.

If the European nations cannot really go it alone, Coker says, neither can they do much to help out the United States. The only powers with pretensions to worldwide influence are Great Britain and France. But budget cuts are forcing the British to pull back. Since formally abandoning commitments “east of Suez” in 1968, London has quietly withdrawn forces from the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, and the Near East.

France has been more assertive overseas, notably in West Africa. Paris maintains an 18-nation trading bloc, the French African Community, and 200,000 French civilians work in Francophone Africa. In recent years, French forces have been dispatched to prop up governments in Zaire and Chad. To some observers, this French activism seems a boon to the United States. But Coker believes that Washington could pay a high price. Paris could become overcommitted on the turbulent continent, or its forces could come into conflict with Libyan, Cuban, or East German troops. In either case, U.S. help might be required. Meanwhile, more French troops in Africa mean fewer in Europe, where they are badly needed.

Because some lack political will and others military power, Coker says, the nations of Western Europe are poorly suited to joining Washington in protecting Western interests in the Third World. Often, he concludes, the United States will have to act alone.