FOREIGN SOCIAL SCIENTISTS LOOK AT TRINIDAD AT INDEPENDENCE

UNDERSTANDING CREOLISATION AND ASSIMILATION

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After governing St Kitts and Barbados with one set of political institutions, one language and one established religion, Trinidad in 1797 appeared too poly-ethnic, poly-religious and polyglot to be considered worthy of British institutions. Crown Colony, it was said, was the best they deserved and, indeed, that is what they got. It just might be that it was precisely this polymorphic culture which upon independence attracted so many foreign social scientists to ask the question: can such a society be made into a nation? Among these were Vera Rubin, Daniel Crowley, Gordon Lewis, M.G. Smith, Harry Hoetink, Yogendra Malik, Morton Klass, and Ivar Oxaal. In Trinidad, Lloyd Braithwaite had already published his classical study of the island's stratification system.

At the centre of gravity of all this theorising was a study done in East Asia by a British Civil Servant, J.S. Furnivall. In his 1948 book, *Colonial Policy and Practice,* Furnivall described societies which he called "plural" or "segmented," in other words, societies composed of multiple ethnic groups each holding on to their own religion, culture and ways of life. As Furnivall put it, "they mix but do not combine." They meet and interact only in the market place and even there, there is a division of labour along ethnic lines. What kept such a society together was the Metropolitan government with its umbrella of colonial institutions. Could these plural societies hold together once that colonial over-lordship was removed? It was this "plural society" model which caught the imagination of many a social scientist and Trinidad seemed to fit the description. Even V.S. Naipaul made use of it in those books which had Trinidad as his setting. In his 1962 travelogue commissioned by the-then Premier Eric Williams, *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul describes Trinidad as a place without a community. "We were of various races, religions, sets and cliques … Nothing bound us together except this common residence … [and]

our Britishness, our belonging to the British Empire which gave us our identity." (p43) Naipaul develops this theme of segmentation even more strikingly in his essay, *The Baker's Story* in his 1967 anthology, *A Flag on the Island*. In that story race defines function to such an extent that even an enterprising Afro-Trinidadian baker has to hire a Chinese-Trinidadian to man the front office.

This interpretation was pursued by those social scientists who argued that Trinidad was characterised by a social and cultural pluralism based on institutional divergences where groups of differing race and religion look inward for their strengths and orientations at the expense of the whole. This cultural segmentation existed even while these groups lived in close economic and demographic interdependence. Because there was no consensus on norms, it was illusory to believe that the society was moving towards a national community through a process called "creolisation." Clearly the most significant theoretician of this school was the Jamaican M.G. Smith whose many writings on the subject became available in 1965 under one cover, *The Plural Society in the British West Indies*. It was also very much the theme of anthropologists who studied primarily Indian Trinidad. The American Morton Klass' 1961 book, *East Indians in Trinidad: A Study in Cultural Persistence* and the Indian Yogendra K. Malik's, *East Indians in Trinidad* (1971) were two of the better studies on the island's cultural pluralism.

Many others, however, belonged to the "consensus" school and argued that there was a process of homogenisation taking place in Trinidad and Tobago as in the West Indies. They hewed close to the theoretical premise (a major one in Western sociology) that all societies are held together by certain "functional prerequisites" arguably the most important of which is the sharing of common values and goals. Without this consensus on norms and values the society would atomise and destroy

itself. To this group the trend in Trinidad was toward the "creolisation" of society, defined as an expanding reserve of values increasingly being tapped by and serving all members of the society regardless of race or religion.

Major exponents of this interpretation in one form or another were R.T. Smith (British Guiana, 1962) and Vera Rubin, Daniel Crowley and Lloyd Braithwaite, all in Vera Rubin (ed), *Social and Cultural Pluralism in the Caribbean in Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Vol 83 (1960). Rubin would do a path-breaking study of youthful attitudes which revealed how differences in social class engendered differences in plans for the future. Rubin's study was published in 1969 as *We Wish to be Looked Upon*. Quite a different approach to social homogenisation in the area was advanced by Dutch sociologist H. Hoetink who argued that there was a growing consensus on the physical characteristics (the "phenotype") acceptable to those in the society; thus, more of a colour than a racial homogenisation. Hoetink's essays were later collected in his 1967 book, *Caribbean Race Relations: The Two Variants*.

The cultural homogenisation or "creolisation" thesis found strong support in the work of an accomplished British historian, Donald Wood. His 1968 book, *Trinidad in Transition,* revealed his support for the creolisation thesis:

"If neither the East Indian nor the Negro Creole was ever greatly attracted to the culture of the other, yet it is also true that neither felt that the other way of life was oppressive or a danger to their own values. Indeed, as time went on, the **process of creolisation** which had caught in its toils all settlers in the Caribbean … began to mould even the Indians." (p301, Emphasis added).

This theme of "creolisation" as a process of shared tolerance and peaceful coexistence was picked up by an American, Ivar Oxaal, in a truly important work, *Black Intellectuals Come to Power* (1968). To Oxaal there were two societal

processes occurring simultaneously in Trinidad. With Daniel Crowley and the "consensus school" he believed that there existed in Trinidad a social process he called "plural acculturation" which explained why and how the conglomeration of racial and cultural mixtures had learned to appreciate the way of life of several other groups so that a "fluid yet stable system of inter-group relations is maintained." Part of this process was the belief in that slow but inevitable "creolisation" of the whole population. Interestingly, Oxaal, who calls this a major ingredient in **middle class Creole** ideology, appears to have understood that he might be overstating his case. He hastily turns to describe another process which he feels should not be lost sight of:

"At least equally important as plural acculturation in keeping Trinidad society at a relatively low pitch of inter-group conflict is a pervasive state of mind which might be called **plural disassociation**, which is characterised by the attitude – a cardinal tenet in the philosophy of the Trinidadian – that each should attend to his own affairs and not go 'interfering' in the business of other groups." (p23-24)

Taken together, these descriptions of Trinidad society underscore the fact that by the date of Independence the island had experienced a process of **assimilation** which may or may not have included total creolisation. The critical centre of gravity of the assimilation process is the acquisition of **citizenship**, in other words, becoming a full member of the national community. One does not have to "creolise," or acculturate to every aspect of another's culture, in order to respect everyone's social and political rights and freedoms. The social science debate over pluralism vs creolisation which began 50 years ago should continue. We should not lose sight, however, of that on-going process which was launched 50 years ago – that of becoming full members of a national community of citizens. It is the strong bond of shared citizenship which holds the plural society together. ▪

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