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MENTAL HEALTH AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

Some Reflections On The West Indian
Historical Experience

I was more than a little surprised when I received your invitation to open your Seminar on Mental Health and Industrial Relations. I didn't quite know what useful comments I could make to psychiatrists on this question, until, in discussion with Dr. Moses, I was made to understand that the particular interest I have had in this subject in terms of the West Indian historical experience might have some value for those participating in the Seminar, especially if you share with me my conviction, that makes so many people in the West Indies very angry, that you cannot deal with West Indian problems of the present except in terms of that historical experience.

I want this morning merely to indicate, with some emphasis, a few outstanding aspects of past industrial relations patterns and their known relations to mental health as a guide to your discussions of the contemporary situation.

As you all know, the Caribbean economy has traditionally been based on the production of plantation crops, particularly sugar, by unfree labour - first African slaves, second Asian indentured workers principally from India but also from China. Conditions of labour were harsh and would not have been tolerated by free workers. It was essentially a society of violence, and the ultimate sanction in respect of industrial relations was the whip of slavery and the goal of the indentured system. I select two principal features of past industrial relations patterns for emphasis this morning in respect of mental health.

The first is the position of the family in the society, with particular emphasis on the role of women. The slave could own nothing, any children were the property of the slave owner, and such considerations as marriage, family life, and the rights of the mother were totally unknown. What the sugar economy required was robust workers, and males were preferred to females. A good example of this pattern is the

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instruction of a leading planter in British Guiana to his eastern agents in 1836 that in the provision of Indian workers under indenture "one female to nine or ten males for cooking and washing is enough". The Protector of immigrants in Fiji in 1902 attributed the disparity between the sexes among Indian workers "to a system which treats an imperative law of nature as subordinate to the exigencies of the sugar industry". The record of Indian immigration into a large number of sugar colonies is full of complaints from Indian public opinion that Indian indentured immigration was a smokescreen for large-scale prostitution of Indian women.

The slave planter society of the Caribbean was not in any way peculiar in the world in respect of its violence and exploitation. One has only to read the detailed expose by Karl Marx of conditions of women and children in British factories in the early years of the Industrial Revolution. Or one has only to read of the almost incredible horrors of the Irish famine in 1846 and the coffin ships which took so many of the Irish population to America. One has only to recall the harsh conditions of life and punishment in the Navy and the Public Schools of the early 19th century. One has only to recall the harsh exploitation of women and its antecedents from the preceding feudal system.

What distinguished the West Indian society was not that its economy was based on the exploitation of slaves or indentured workers. It was that the exploitation was associated with and dominated by the special fact of the blackness of the worker. The entire society was built up and its industrial relations predicated upon theories and practices of racial inferiority. By law the African slaves were forbidden to take white names and were required to take African names or names associated with occupations. The professions were closed to blacks and, wherever there was an abundance of poor whites, as in the Southern States of the United States, blacks were debarred from certain jobs. For the most part the disability extended to the ownership of land by non-whites. The open and publicly stated aim was **what** colour was wedded to slavery and that never at any time should the black feel himself to be the equal of the white.

The most vitriolic propaganda was reserved for miscegenation and the mixture of black and white. Fortified by the dubious scientific theories of the day, seeking sustenance in biased interpretations of the Bible, the doctrine of what we would today know as apartheid was made respectable by eminent political figures, from Thomas Jefferson right down to Abraham Lincoln among the Presidents of the United States. Colonial legislation prescribed inferior dress and jewelry for mulatto women or free women of colour. And all the exploitation of the slave society and the frustrations

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and indignities imposed on blacks were brought out in the famous Brazilian proverb: "white woman for marriage, mulatto woman for fornication, black woman for work" (the work not infrequently involving bedroom service).

The repercussions in terms of the mental health of the society were formidable. It is your West Indian colleague, the psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon of Martinique, who, fortified by his experience in the Algerian War of Independence, has left us on the one hand his prescription for violence and on the other hand his analysis of the self-hate of the blacks, their cultural identity destroyed by slavery, forbidden under the greatest humiliations ever to aspire to equality in the society imposed by their masters.

And we have, Fanon apart, the best evidence we might require in terms of the statistics of suicide. It began with the Amerindians; many of the existing records testify to the prevalence of abortion and infanticide among Amerindian women to prevent the enslavement of their children by the Spaniards. Among the African slaves, the belief persisted that at their death, their spirit would return to their ancestral home, and suicide was particularly prevalent and always a danger to be apprehended on the slave ships in the Middle Passage. Among the plantation slaves in the Caribbean, it was generally considered that the Ibos were particularly prone to suicide.

Statistical evidence in respect of suicides is more readily available for Indian indentured workers than for African slaves. About the middle of the 19th century it was generally considered that the suicide rate in India varied from 46 per million in Madras to 54 per million in the United Provinces. Among indentured Indians in Natal, South Africa, it was 640 per million, and in Mauritius in 1869 1,000 per million. In Fiji the figure was 780 per million rising in 1910 to 831 per million, which the Governor attributed to "the monotonous and unattractive" life of the Indian workers. This mortality fanned the flames of Indian resentment against indenture which led to its abolition a few years later.

But the pièce de résistance in respect of suicides among indentured workers comes from Cuba in the middle of the 19th century in relation to the Chinese. The statistics here speak for themselves. In 25 years from 1848 the number of Chinese workers who left for Cuba under contract was 141,391. Of these 12% died in the Middle Passage. In 1877 only 46,835 remained - that is to say two out of three who arrived were unaccounted for. One of the principal explanations was suicide. Around the middle of the 19th century the suicide rate in Europe varied from 57 per million for Belgium to 108 per million for Prussia. For the whole of Cuba with 1½ million people it was 340 per million; for the so-called white Cubans numbering about half the population, the figure was 57 per million. For the people

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of African ancestry including slaves it was 350 per million. For the Chinese population the suicide rate was a monstrous 5,000 per million.

I suggest to your Seminar that this historical experience, which on the one hand subordinated technology to manual labour, and which on the other hand, from the standpoint of what you would today call management, took the view (as expressed by one planter) that one could not understand why some people were so concerned about getting canes which yielded 20 tons to the acre when they had good canes at the time yielding two tons, is absolutely basic to any discussion on industrial relations in the present day. It reminds us of those entrepreneurs today who are totally unconcerned about exports and remain satisfied with their profits in our limited domestic market.

This experience will only be fortified and aggravated by contemporary developments - the resistance of the established trade union movement in Europe to migrant workers many of whom are non-whites; the ghetto riots of the United States in the 1960's; South African apartheid and the deliberate degradation of the black worker, the total separation of the races with savage penalties for miscegenation, and the exclusion from the towns as white areas of all blacks except those who have jobs in the towns - even the wives of those being allowed in the towns for specific periods only and for specific approved reasons, for example, the desire to conceive.

If there are people in the West Indies who wish to think that all this is history and of no importance at all to us, they are free to do so. But the history is very much alive elsewhere, and I should like to say something to you about this in so far as the United States is concerned. It simply cannot be a coincidence that so much work has been produced in the last quarter of a century on this whole question of slavery and race relations with particular reference to industrial relations. For present purposes I shall identify for you five main lines of argument which have so far been developed:

- (1) That North American slavery was more brutal and more exploitative than slavery in Latin America.
- (2) That estimates of the depopulation of Africa by the slave trade have been grossly exaggerated.
- (3) That the large increase in the black population of the United States where slave imports were banned in 1807 suggests that slaves in the United States were better treated than in other countries.
- (4) That there is some analogy between the stereotype of the happy-go-lucky Sambo of American slavery and the childlike inmates of Hitler's concentration camps patterning their behaviour and attitudes on those of their gaolers.
- (5) That the so-called Brazilian racial democracy is a myth, and that

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comparison of race relations between Brazil and the United States does not necessarily give the advantage to Brazil.

Suddenly this year a new doctrine has emerged, based on the **introduction** of the computer into historical analysis. According to the new analysis the agricultural slave in Southern America was more efficient than the family farm hand in northern parts of the country; the slave was a more efficient worker than the free white worker the family was the basic unit under slavery; the slave received 90% of the income he produced; the nutritional content of the slave diet was quite high, its energy value exceeding the diet of free workers; slave housing was superior to the housing of workers in New York City half a century later; excellent care was taken of pregnant slave mothers; there was a lower suicide rate among slaves than among whites.

We may have to modify Mark Twain's famous jibe and say that there are lies, damned lies, and computers. Voltaire was supposed to have said when he read Rousseau's Social Contract that it made him itch to go on all fours. The computer history might be designed to get people to resume the balls and chains of slavery and perhaps to indicate that South African apartheid is not so bad after all. Certainly with the computer history one cannot help wondering why on earth the slaves fought for independence in Haiti or why it was that the American Civil War was fought at all. One must now hope that the computer will soon provide for us the "evidence" on one major matter which appears to have been overlooked so far; that the black ~~male~~ slave had freedom of access to and freedom of movement in his white mistress' bedroom.

I hope that this Seminar will be the beginning of a serious and continuing juxtaposition of industrial relations and mental health. I hope that I have said something that might indicate to you that your concern is not new and the past may have some lessons to teach you in relations to problems of the present and projections for the future. I wish your Seminar all success and I take great pleasure in formally declaring it open.
