

ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE CARIBBEAN: CULTURE STRUCTURE CONJUNCTURE

Selwyn Ryan

What was the most critical factor in the business success of Europeans, Indians, Chinese and Syrian Lebanese in the Caribbean: culture, structure or conjuncture? The above book, soon to be released by ISER, St. Augustine (eds. Selwyn Ryan and Taimoon Stewart), seeks to provide answers to this question. Clearly, all three factors were involved, and it may well be difficult to attribute decisiveness to any one variable. Yet there are those who do. In a critique of a study done on business elements in Trinidad and Tobago, and which was published in *Sharks and Sardines* (Ryan and Barclay 1993) Brian Alleyne, then a post-graduate student at the Consortium Graduate School U.W.I., Mona argued that its weakness lay in the "failure of the authors to ground their analysis in full structural (and dare I say it in these post-Cold War times-materialist) framework of any of the constituent groups". Implied here is a view that the business successes of the minority groups and the generally poorer performance of black business elements has more to do with the dynamics of plantation and post plantation society in the Caribbean which imprisoned Africans, than with the intrinsic cultural attributes of any of the constituent groups.

In this context, some argue that Africans in the Caribbean were denied access to critical factors of production such as land, capital and market opportunities. Whereas Europeans and Indians were allocated lands, either gratuitously or as settlement for contracts of indenture, Africans received no reparations for having been enslaved. Following emancipation, they were starved of bank and other forms of credit, denied state patronage and in various other ways economically and politically peripheralised. In sum, emancipation did not lead to economic empowerment. Instead, the structures of the plantation,

even as they evolved, retained their essential character, and continued rewarding those ruling elements which enjoyed hegemony when sugar production was at its apogee.

There are those who accept the broad outlines of this class argument, but would reinforce it by asserting that the windfall gains and superior strategic positioning which accrued to the white ruling class by reason of their relationship to the colonial economic and bureaucratic system served to better prepare them to seize those opportunities which became available in the post emancipation era. Using land as a productive resource or as collateral for bank credit, they branched out into the import/export business, retail and wholesale distribution, manufacturing, banking, insurance and into other niches in the service sector. As the economy became more closely linked with European and North American capital, they were recruited as junior partners, progressively widening the gap between themselves and the black under class. Class and colour thus became interlocked to produce a caste like social system which had the grand "white whites" at the top of the pyramid, lesser whites and mixed elements in the middle, and the blacks and Indians at the bottom.

The system had its reflection in the business sector. Creole whites owned those areas of the economy not controlled by international capital, or functioned as junior managers and operatives in both the national and foreign owned high capital sectors leaving the middle and pedestrian levels of the economy to the mixed elements, blacks, Indians Chinese and more recent immigrants such as the Syrian Lebanese. Structure and conjuncture thus combined to keep the descendants of slavery and indenture at the peon margins of the economic system. In

this perspective, Africans and Indians were victims of the system, condemned forever to perpetual pauperisation and marginalisation.

These arguments, as persuasive and emotionally satisfying as they are to some, do not however do justice to reality, since it does not explain how the Indians, the Chinese and the Syrian-Lebanese managed to vault the existing structural hurdles to take advantage of conjunctural opportunities that became available as the economy became transformed. The basic argument of the forthcoming book is that the Indians, Chinese and the Syrian-Lebanese were able to use ethnically derived cultural support systems more successfully than were Africans to burrow into the prevailing structure in an almost termite like fashion, to a point where today only the basic architectural framework of the old colonial edifices remain.

In the case of the Chinese, they quickly abandoned the plantation and established market gardens, laundries, convenience stores, restaurants and other related undertakings. The Syrian-Lebanese, like the Chinese, were not beneficiaries of land grants. On arrival in the region, they turned to itinerant hawking and higgling, and drew on the resources of those who had come before for goods, information and credit. Both communities were well served by ethnic associations and clubs which functioned as information and credit banks, which allowed them to secure niches in various wholesale and retail markets which were later expanded to include the production of commodities, particularly food and textiles.

The Indians, some of whom had land which could be used for food production, quickly emerged as providers of processed and unprocessed food to the urbanised population. They also became involved in trade and commerce in the villages and towns surrounding the plantation, catering to co-ethnics and to the wider population alike. Unlike the Africans, they also took advantage of their position on the plantation to become involved in the transport sector, graduating from cartermen who transported cane using animal drawn vehicles to providers of passenger and of heavy transport to the sugar and other industries and to the general public.

The process by which this branching out took place are detailed in the case studies in the book.

What remains to be dealt with is the basic questions as to why Indians, Chinese, Syrian Lebanese and the Portuguese (who were not considered white by the established whites) were able to escape the thralldom of the plantation and emerge as successful business elites while the Africans were not. Our argument is that the role of the family and kin was crucial. Collective family and kin effort was the engine which drove and supported entrepreneurial ambition. Families pooled rather than divided their material and human resources which served to compensate for that which was not available from mainstream organisations. Indeed, in many cases, would be entrepreneurs turned first to family and ethnic associations for such credit. These elements also worked hard and painfully saved and re-invested their meager savings, by-products of self and family exploitation. Consumption was postponed.

Exclusion from mainstream social institutions and values also facilitated bonding, the development of attitudes of self help, group self sufficiency and mutualism. In the case of Indians, for example, restriction of access to the bureaucracy encouraged assertive elements to seek out opportunities for self employment which in turn led to the establishment of sole proprietorships or family firms. And unlike what happened in the African descended community, these establishments were patronised by co-ethnics and the wider society as well.

The critical point being made here is not so much that these cultures were in themselves the only factor which fertilised the spirit of entrepreneurship, but that rigidities in the prevailing structures helped to nurture those values and habits which pre disposed towards entrepreneurial achievement in the area of business as opposed to other areas. By contrast, the established structures had the opposite effect on African cultural inheritances. Many more Africans were able to become well off materially after emancipation than is generally accepted. Many owned land and had skills which were in high demand. Many turned to trade and craft activity and prospered in the process. These platforms of opportunity were however not built upon. There

was no sustainability or intergenerational transfer of resources. Opportunities were squandered and resources consumed rather than saved for productive activity. The pursuit of leisure, status, ostentation and education took precedence over the pursuit of capital accumulation. The book also notes that much the same occurred in Africa, and argues further that slavery, colonialism, capitalism, and racism cannot bear the full burden of blame for what occurred in the Caribbean and in the Caribbean diaspora.

Caribbean blacks have nevertheless achieved a great deal in other spheres of activity. They invested heavily in education and are among the best educated people in the world. They have made enormous contributions in the fields of law, art, culture, sport, science and technology and in public administration. Many have built entrepreneurial mini-fiefdoms in these sectors and nothing in the analysis is to be taken to mean that these achievements count for any less than success in capitalistic type business activity. Indeed as the service sector becomes more and more important in the economy, the platforms of excellence achieved in these areas may well

enable them to compete more effectively with others more entrenched in the traditional manufacturing and commercial sectors.

The burden of our argument in the book is that it is necessary to de-construct the conventional explanations which are offered to explain the failure of black businesses. It is our view that the pre-migration characteristics and value orientations of the African descended population - the value which is put on leisure, on sharing and distribution of family resources - are important variables which have to be factored into the analysis. If anything, slavery and life on and around the plantation served to reinforce social habits and life styles that were of African provenience and which survived the crossing. These social habits persisted in spite of the determined efforts of officials, planters and Christian imperialists to "cleanse" the enslaved culturally, and came to inform the responses of the latter to the opportunities which were available in their new environment. Obstacles which were viewed by others as niche opportunities, were regarded by them as insuperable barriers.