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How a Huckster Becomes a Custodian of Market Morality: Traditions of Flexibility in Exchange in Dominica

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Since 1995, Dominica has endured a massive economic downturn following a series of World Trade Organization decisions that have devastated the banana industry, its major export earner. Yet the trade decisions have not been the subject of much anxiety or debate. At the same time, their second largest contributors to foreign exchange earnings (hucksters) are seldom the subject of public discussion. I suggest in this article that these omissions have to do with the manner in which flexibility is culturally conceptualized. Rather than a recent adaptation to the physiopsychological disciplining of a post-Fordian or "globalized" economy, I argue that in Dominica, flexibility is historically constituted through a much longer engagement with capitalism in the formation of the Caribbean as a cultural area over the last five centuries. The entrepreneurial savvy found among hucksters is autochthonous to Dominica's trade culture.

Key Words: Caribbean, political economy, flexibility, traders, markets

A Dominica National Gender Symposium held on 19 October 2000 conspicuously omitted any discussion of the extra-household economic activities of women. With only one intervention by a prominent Dominican anthropologist, the symposium stubbornly ignored the important role that the small-scale predominately female traders in agricultural produce (known locally as "hucksters") have played economically and socially for 250 years. It should be mentioned that this is a particularly odd omission. At the time of that panel, the trade routes over which hucksters are the principal exporters accounted for the second largest contribution to export earnings. As I show in this article, such an exclusion is illustrative of long-established Dominican cultural attitudes about the ordinary nature of flexibility in exchange practice, as well as the central role hucksters have played therein.

Dominica's primary export earning industry is worth mentioning as well, because it is also evidentiary of a general cultural attitude among Dominicans to the ordinary nature of flexibility and economic struggle, processes which reflect a culture of flexibility for which the

huckster is emblematic. Beginning in the 1950s through the mid-1990s, Dominica's economy thrived on the production of bananas, largely by small-scale farmers working private lands averaging only a few acres. Bananas were sold through a national banana corporation for exclusive sale to British consumers (Baker 1994; Trouillot 1988). Rolph Trouillot (1988) has documented exhaustively the cultural importance of this area for rural Dominicans, and the industry's contribution to the formation of a rural middle class of prosperous and educated "banana children," the descendants of farmers who benefited substantively from the industry during its boom years.

That industry experienced a major economic crisis in the late 1990s. The elimination of preferential licenses for Eastern Caribbean banana producers under a multination complaint to the World Trade Organization (WTO) has devastated Dominica's economy. Small farmers thrived only because of their protection. The three major multinational banana producers—Chiquita, Dole and Del Monte—control the vast majority of the world's banana economy. Although these large-scale "dollar banana" producers with vast land holdings in Latin America are able to use cheap labor, industrialize operations, shift cultivation, and vertically integrate technologies and distribution channels, Caribbean farmers typically have small holdings on terrain too rough to mechanize, face comparatively high costs of living, and endure costly agricultural inputs during production. The resulting economy of scale yields roughly twice the production costs of their multinational competitors. Without the protective licenses that gave them a proportion of the European Union (EU) market (still a small minority share compared to the dollar banana producers), they are literally priced out of open markets. Arguably then, "free trade" (at least as the WTO understands it) has dealt a decisive and tragic economic blow to a once vibrant niche economy.

One would think that the devastation of the industry would be at the forefront of public debate and discussion in Dominica. It has not. There was a striking absence of media coverage during the decade-long banana trade war. For instance, in the year prior to the final WTO decision in 2001, I counted less than a dozen articles, editorials, or letters to the editor analyzing the WTO decision and its implication among Dominica's four major print newspapers; local radio and television were generally silent on the subject as well. What I would discover is that this silence was indicative of a larger cultural process at work, in which Dominicans had long-established and naturalized methods of negotiating such crises. Such attitudes about the unexceptional nature of hucksters or the banana industry are demonstrative of a concept of flexibility inherent to Dominica history and culture.

Accommodating change through flexible cultural economic practices is not, by Dominican standards, exceptional; rather, adaptation was ordinary, and the WTO was merely another step in a long historical process through which Dominicans have become accustomed.

This article is concerned with how economic processes are morally and culturally naturalized into the ethos and everyday lives of Dominican people, as well as the historical processes through which they become embedded. Trade in Dominica is conditioned by a long history of engagement between local and global cultural and economic processes. One is reminded once again of Rolph Trouillot's ethnography on the experience of banana farmers in Northeast Dominica, and their reluctance to grow anything else in response to changing world prices for bananas (Trouillot 1988). "I can always eat my fig [banana]" was their cultural economic rationale, a reference to the fact that green bananas (boiled as a starch, rather than ripened and eaten as a fruit) are a carbohydrate staple in the local diet. Supply cuts, rejected stock, or fluctuations in price do not obviate the product's utility. Accordingly, it underscores an inchoate notion of flexibility to global processes, through assimilating overstock into households, or relying on hucksters to peddle rejected fruit elsewhere.

Such adaptations to global capitalist processes are not a recent reaction to "globalization" or its antecedent "modernization." Rather, flexibility is an internalized cultural trait coeval with the constitution of the Caribbean as a modern creation beginning in the late fifteenth century and the concomitant capitalist expropriation that accompanied its development. Historically, flexibility inheres for Caribbean people notions of the creative, autonomous subject struggling against the adversity of colonial control. Hucksters' creative marketing ventures are likewise an extension of this paramount cultural identity.

As I use it here, flexibility differs from other commonly evoked usages of the term in the social science of late modernity, where flexibility connotes a kind of simultaneously physiopsychological disciplining as well as response to late capitalist development (Harvey 1990; Martin 1994). What I suggest here is that in Dominica, by contrast, flexibility is a culturally autochthonous process that has emerged through a much longer engagement with capitalism in the Caribbean, in the sense that others have noted capitalism's growth on the backs of the slave economies of the Americas (Mintz 1985; Williams 1994 [1944]). Hucksters are savvy entrepreneurs who know how to broker economic needs and cultural values. More importantly, they are representative of how Dominicans more broadly have deployed cultural processes as a flexible response to global processes and accordingly

fomented a cultural identity that constitutes itself as a form of resistance to historically dominant political economic powers. I turn first to a cultural analysis of exchange practices in Dominica society and the cultural values that are embedded in ideas about the importance of marketing "residue" and sourcing flexible adaptations to everyday socio-economic struggles. I then discuss how this process emerged in its relationship to historic struggles in plantation production, slavery, and the development of capitalism, so that the practice comes to be constitutive of flexibility under conditions of extraordinary physical and economic limitations. Specifically, I discuss how the practice is understood to embody ideals of autonomy, perseverance, and personal expressiveness that have been heralded in a resistance to capitalist discipline.

The social context of huckstering: The contradiction of gender in exchange

Marketing has always stood out as a public socio-economic activity historically performed largely by Caribbean women (Lagro 1990; Lagro and Plotkin 1990; Locher 1975; Mintz 1955, 1964, 1967, 1971a, 1974; Ulysse 1999; Underwood 1960). Huckstering likewise has historically been a female vocation. Today, about 80 percent of persons with huckster licenses are women. Regardless of the changes the profession has undergone in the past 250 years for which there are available historical data on huckstering, the term has consistently characterized small-scale traders in agricultural products specifically for purposes of export from Dominica. They are distinct from "market vendors," also a female-dominated vocation, who sell goods at a centralized market location.[1] Traders who sell in these domestic markets tend not to be involved in exporting, and although some may aspire to, the transition of marketplace vendors to hucksters for a sustained period of time is uncommon. There are a few vendors with such goods in the market, but their appearance is sporadic and commonly they are family members of hucksters.

Huckstering is importantly a household-based enterprise, which generates its livelihood principally from revenues gained overseas through agricultural exporting. Typically, hucksters collect and organize the shipment of agricultural goods from their homes in Dominica, relying on the contributions of their immediate relatives or on the cheap physical labor of underemployed youth in the community. Their scale has always been quite small, but hucksters' numbers have shrunk precipitously in recent years for myriad reasons. Labor shortages commonly mitigate the growth of the vocation. Social progress

seems to have taken a toll as well: in recent years, the decline of practitioners is due largely to the attainment of higher education by an increasing number of hucksters' daughters. Long a matrilineal vocation, in which marketing skills were passed from mother to daughter, huckstering has increasingly ebbed from the ports to the classroom. That larger numbers of rural children have since the 1960s begun to obtain employment abroad has also been a decisive factor in the decline of the practice. Still, there are several hundred committed hucksters (on an island of about 69,000 persons) who regularly sell their produce abroad.

Hucksters collect a variety of goods often from several small farmers and arrange the shipping and sale of these products to neighboring islands. Just to the north of Dominica, Guadeloupe and its dependencies are overwhelmingly the most frequented destination for hucksters' products, followed by Antigua, St. Kitts, St. Martin, and the Virgin Islands. Generally, hucksters prefer to travel with their cargo during the one- to three-day journeys. Trips commonly follow a particular temporal pattern, usually around a fortnight (two-week period), corresponding to the nautical cycles of the seafarers who transport hucksters. Viable export markets are not arbitrary; they are forged through personal and preferential relationships between traders and distributors. For instance, despite the proximity and population density of its southern neighbor, there has historically been very little export activity to Martinique (although import activity and smuggling are common), principally because traders from St. Lucia have historically dominated its small-scale agricultural markets. The trade itself is a physically arduous and economically risky venture. There is widespread rotting of produce, if not in transit then while on the docks of the port destinations waiting to be cleared by customs. It is common to lose cargo at sea or for supplies to be destroyed by mishandling and exposure to the sun. None of the ships that transport hucksters and their produce contain refrigeration. Cargoes are poorly handled and boxed, and hucksters themselves endure massive sleep deprivation during shipment.

Typically, hucksters are autonomous and have very limited if any economic interaction with other hucksters. As Dominicans typically do, they share gossip, and this may include rumors about the markets in neighboring islands, but seldom do they share market intelligence or trade secrets. Indeed, the idea of working in concert with other hucksters is antithetical to the concept of huckstering as an individuated occupation, although the historically and sociologically typical huckster has increasingly encountered government efforts to regulate and formalize the trade, particularly in recent years as government

accounting has begun to more accurately measure the contribution of hucksters to trade earnings.

Indeed, "exporter" and huckster as official terms of classification and economic analysis have to some extent become increasingly synonymous in recent years, due largely to the licensing of all regional export activity through a Dominica Hucksters Association (DHA) beginning in the early 1980s. Following this trend in legal formalization of the industry, Dominican laws have construed the term "huckster" broadly enough that most regional exporting activity has come to fall under the umbrella of this peri-governmental organization. Prior to the formation of the DHA, the distinction between the more formal exporter (the "merchant," as Dominicans call them) and the huckster was much clearer. Because the DHA has become a government clearinghouse for the approval and distribution of regional trade visas, the official distinction has been blurred. Nonetheless, despite recent increases in the participation of men and other historically atypical demographic categories of "hucksters" in regional exporting, there remains the huckster archetype: the unmarried woman who relies on sourcing produce from several farmers to eke out a livelihood for herself and her family.

Thus two important factors frame the huckstering in Dominica as a simultaneously cultural and economic activity in which its participants set themselves apart from other activities and processes in Dominican society. First, hucksters identify themselves as autonomous agents working outside the rubric of (and in fact often in spite of or even against) the state. Indeed, even the DHA is seen by many hucksters as an intrusion of the state into a private economic matter. One informant in Anse de Mai once told me her sentiments concerning the promulgation of state programs designed to aid hucksters and how she saw it ironically as infringing on her autonomy: "I like to go by myself, my own load. Take my boat, if I gain, thank you Jesus. If I loss, o.k. My own thing I doing. I buy, I take my boat on my own, and nothing light … I do not follow orders … [The Government] can't tell me what to do." Huckster disdain for the Dominican state and its functionaries, while not ubiquitous, can certainly be said to be a generality. Most hucksters see themselves as wardens of a system that has functioned well for several generations in serving the basic economic needs of female-headed, matrifocal households. State intervention (and importantly not just by the Dominican government but also as we shall see in the conclusion, by other states, such as the European Union) is regarded as merely an attempt to provide favoritism and advantage to upper-class urban merchant (the *gwo boug*, or urban bourgeoisie, as Dominicans call them) competitors who moved in the

twentieth century from plantation agriculture into import/export ventures, while exacting taxes on the hard-earned profits of struggling hucksters.

Second, household autonomy and the economic decision-making power of hucksters draw on traditional gender roles in Dominican society. As a former trade minister turned huckster once told me:

> Woman are managers and this is a tradition. If you go to the market, and there are more women in the huckster trade … you will find more women in the market than men. This is the culture—this is the pattern—that the men will produce and the women will sell. They handle the money better; they handle the family. And the men know that too. Men spend it with the boys.

Because women are regarded as savers and men as consumers, exchange activities are seen by many Dominicans as viable only when they are run by women. Indeed, there are historically few opportunities for women to conspicuously consume and still maintain what Wilson (1973) referred to as “respectability”: it is socially taboo for women to drink publicly or smoke; living alone can prompt accusations of prostitution, moral uncleanliness, and even sorcery; there is blatant gender discrimination that precludes comparable worth and occupational access for women in many professional vocations.

Thus, the huckster represents a very interesting case for the exercise of economic power and cultural agency on the part of Dominican women. As Blackwood (2005) has recently discussed, the presence of matrifocal households has been met with the presumption of some “pathology” about the “missing male,” to which there is ample anthropological evidence to suggest otherwise. In the cultural and historical context of the huckster, Dominican women’s involvement in trade, and by extension their autonomy in these ventures, is seen as complementary to the economic management of households. That hucksters are able to bring sums, sometimes vast sums of hard currency to circulate within Dominica’s economy, makes them culturally esteemed as virtuous anchors of Dominican families.

The embeddedness of flexibility in huckstering

Economic relationships between hucksters and local farmers of agricultural products are generally not governed by simple rational choice or formal maximization logics. Social and economic behavior here closely resembles the personalized forms of exchange behavior found in the many other informal market arrangements found throughout

Caribbean economic culture. Haitian *pratik* as discussed by Mintz (1967) is an excellent analog, because it demonstrates similarly a tendency toward market personalization over income optimization, owing to the small economies of scale of Caribbean markets as well as to the extreme volatility of the markets for those products in which small-scale Caribbean traders engage.

Accordingly, producers who sell to hucksters typically exhibit behaviors that demonstrate an intuitive understanding of the difficulties encountered and flexibility required in sourcing these sketchy off-island agricultural markets. They readily extend credit to hucksters. Complaints that this kind of huckster may have about poor sales, loss of cargo, spoilage, and so forth, when failing to provide a farmer with a cash return on his produce are believed and, while subject to protracted discussion, are generally not contested. I often asked farmers who complained at length about having made no money from selling to hucksters in months whether they thought the huckster might be cheating him. They generally responded that although this was possible, it was unlikely and were quick to point out that the huckster had no conspicuous signs of wealth or consumptive behavior to suggest subterfuge.

It is of interest that reciprocities are seldom negative: I found no pattern of hucksters cheating farmers, despite the enormous faith that is placed in them in terms of credit extension. The reasons for this level of trust are indicative of deep-seated Dominican cultural values. As I explain below, hucksters are, in the strictest cultural terms, peddlers of otherwise unmarketable products. In this spirit, despite its obviation of at local gender symposia and in other public forums, huckstering is now generally recognized as a major economic contributor and something on which the rural base of the population relies, particularly with the decline of the banana industry in the 1990s.

Huckstering's flexibility can be explained by examining how it has historically operated as a release valve for agricultural products: products that cannot be marketed through a formal established market (e.g., bananas rejected by the banana-exporting company) or produce abundant in Dominica but without a major distributor, such as citrus and ground provisions (yams, dasheen, tania)—that agricultural "residue" of products that otherwise would just fall to the ground and rot—are appropriated by hucksters and marketed externally. The disposable yet venerated nature of such products I think suggests "residue" to be a better explanatory term for the process than "surplus." The best way to understand this context of huckster products is perhaps by juxtaposing it to milieus of formal products (principally bananas, but this is also true of the coconut, bay leaf, and citrus juice-processing

industries as well) produced for export. Bananas, for instance, are meticulously cultivated, mostly by farmers on small parcels of land, over a seven- to nine-month agricultural cycle. Great emphasis is placed on maximizing quality at every stage of the production process (indeed, their cultivation is commonly compared to the gestation period of a human child). At their distribution point, the acceptance and rejection process that each box of bananas produced for export endures is symbolically potent; such acts convey varying degrees of meaning on the value and integrity of the producer. Inspections at the ports where farmers transport their produce for sale are spectacles; and such evaluations say something publicly about the standards and individual character of each farmer and the value of his or her work.

Residual products, by contrast, are haphazardly trucked to the equivalent of off-island agricultural flea markets. Hucksters try to obtain as much quality as possible in what they obtain from farmers, but largely they truck in volumes of products that are recognizably perishable with the hope that they can unload enough to make the interisland trip worth their while. Economically, the costs of putting a box of produce on a boat and the expected value at market are narrowly margined. Heat and moisture take their toll during transport; spoilage and rotting are common; boxes rupture. The hucksters who have the best relations with farmers and tend by extension to be most economically stable are the ones that, as one farmer once put it to me, will market “anyone’s rubbish.” Although there are exceptions, the bulk of huckster products are socially seen by Dominicans as detritus. However, the denigrated cultural value of this agricultural residue does not make it culturally or symbolically arbitrary. Compared with other Caribbean Islands, Dominica is agriculturally gifted with fertile, volcanic soil and nearly daily precipitation in the rain forest interior. The residuals of that gift are not trifled.

Residue is a central concept among rural Dominicans who rationalize Dominica’s incredibly abundant natural wealth in agricultural and natural resources as a divine gift. A reverent Dominican sees it as his or her personal responsibility to make use of these earthly manifestations of divine will, to not waste what God has given. Accordingly, exporting surplus becomes the principal method of actualizing that will. So embedded are the concepts of residue and salvage into marketing culture that many hucksters actually trust offshore intermediaries’ discretion with respect to leftovers (those products they couldn’t sell before they had to return to Dominica). For example, I asked an informant who left with a Guadeloupean acquaintance (an intermediary who sold to grocery stores) several hundred dollars worth of unspoiled (and fairly high quality) dasheen and citrus she could not

sell whether she expected to recover any of her loss. She shrugged off my concerns: "somebody will take care of it … they sell it for me. Before it spoil I say give it to the animals or take it." Of course, I queried whether she expected to gain something intangible from this relationship (perhaps future reciprocity for the favor, or maybe some kind of social capital, etc.), and although she acknowledged that there were some who would have such expectations, she denied that she thought much about it. It would be "a sin," she said, to bring the produce home to rot or to throw it out in the market.

A general pan-religious cultural prohibition on waste as a degradation of the sacred is ubiquitous, but there are contestations as to which way it should augur Dominica's economic future. In overemphasizing this point, one informant once suggested to me that the future of Dominica's economy was in "resource extraction" (by which he meant the harvesting of natural resources such as water and mineable ores for export) and that farming was "a thing of the past." He was using what in a Dominican social context was an inflammatory vernacular to make a point. In my garbled reaction, I began to point out how ironic it was that he would embrace a process that had such an infamous history through the Americas,[2] when he preempted me: "Dominicans have these resources, and can supply the rest of the Caribbean with them. Our future is not in the resort, or in the international airport … Our future is in our ability to convert these resources into product that we can sell." Dominicans had always sold something, he remarked, and water, minerals or fruit juices are really no different than bananas or limes. When I pressed the notion of extraction—indicating that growing and selling bananas was different from mining or pumping water, he chimed, "bananas you can't sell or eat go to waste. Water you don't drink goes into the sea." In other words, Dominican flexibility is contingent not on ascetic values in the diligent and productive use of God's land but, rather, on the sourcing of practical solutions to everyday economic struggles.[3]

This is an excellent metaphor for the Dominican ethos concerning land usage. The renewability of the landscape connoted in this particular statement may be contested, but the Dominican emphasis on exporting is not. In this predominately Catholic country, any activity that engages in the distribution of goods that would otherwise go to waste is in some manner divinely sanctioned as an appropriately moral use of God's resources. Huckstering is an activity that capitalizes precisely on this sort of moral accounting of economic practices.[4] Its value as a profession engaged in moral marketing emerges from its historical development as a practice associated with autonomy from, and resistance to, political economic and physical control and

manipulation. The flexibility with which it is associated has intrinsic cultural value independent of the flexibility to post-Fordian capitalism, which has been the subject of more recent social scientific discussion.

In the next section, I turn to the historical and cultural contexts and meanings on which huckstering is based, not just as a household-based vocation performed largely by women but as a social activity embedded in larger cultural values about the significance of autonomy and flexibility in Dominican social life. The historical examples should be seen as more than mere parallels to the meanings obtained from huckstering today but, rather, as a tradition with which such contemporary activities and values are continuous.

The historical and cultural significance of flexibility in regional trade

Much like occupational multiplicity (Comitas 1964), or migration (Thomas-Hope 1992), market ventures by hucksters—both in terms of identifying markets, as well as sourcing growers of agricultural produce—are based on an inchoate notion of flexibility, that is, "the building of multiple options" (Carnegie 1980: 5). Accordingly, flexibility in huckstering is a necessary quality. The Eastern Caribbean trader generally and the Dominica huckster specifically are inherently "transnational," in the sense that trade between islands usually involves the crossing of one or more national boundaries. And more importantly, hucksters have always been transnational.

The huckster practice precedes the abolition of slavery, although its integral aspect of regional movement (or I should say, its perception as a profession of traders) comes with emancipation. Prior to emancipation, it was not uncommon for slaves to cultivate gardens, often on remote land not used by slave owners, for the production of ground provisions (Gaspar 1991; Mintz 1955, 1978a, 1978b, 1995). Surplus from these gardens was commonly sold in slave markets, including many off-island markets. But the available historical record seldom acknowledges the logical fact that slaves involved in such exchange practices were in a strict sense internationally mobile. This is not surprising, and the provision ground discussions are excellent precedent; the idea of slaves producing their own food (in some cases, the bulk of their own food) and even products which they sold creates conceptual problems given the productive limitations presumed under plantation slavery, in which slaves by definition are anything but economic agents (Mintz 1978a, 1978b, 1995). Similarly, so too could one expect international travel among hucksters to contradict the physical constraints organically associated with slavery or the market limitations

of colonial trade. Nonetheless, the intermediary role between producers (whether plantation owners in the valleys or the black peasantry on the mountain ridges) seems to have been established quite early in Dominica. A late eighteenth-century soldier's diary discusses his perception of the emergent profession:

> I should have observed that the planters or managers of estates or plantations send their fruits and roots not to the market but to a trusty negro wench who is kept in Roseau permanently to act as huxter or retailer of such fruits and roots as she receives and when the working negroes cannot sell what they have brought to the market, they are constrained to bargain with the black resident woman who, as huxter, makes a respectable living and appearance by buying cheap and selling dear (Aytoun 1984: 22).

This observation is interesting for several reasons. First, it establishes that from a very early stage, informal marketing practices were oriented around the appropriation and redistribution of residue. Clearly huckstering from its inception was very risky and required a high degree of speculation. Second, Aytoun presumes hucksters, his haggling "wenches," to be local retailers. They are perceived as stationary characters, located principally in the market. In doing so, this gives us some indication as to the origin of the term, especially because huckster, a term of self-identification among these traders, is not a derogatory term in contemporary Dominican society. Lastly, Aytoun does not know where the huckster is then selling the produce. And although he keenly observes their suspicious consumption habits, he does not make the conceptual leap necessary to categorize these women as arbiters of trade:

> Steady women slaves pay their owners by agreement a sum per week. I do not know how much. These women betake themselves to hawking check shirts, check in the web, syrup beer and a country drink called mawbey, and they manage somehow or other to appear in a respectable manner and pay their owners weekly and punctually. I would be writing at random were I to say what they paid their owners but I heard that they paid one and a half dollars a week, none less, some more (Aytoun 1984: 28).

What is interesting in this soldier's entry is his expression of surprise at the ability of these women (presumably the same traders) to meet this astronomically large sum. Obviously though, the idea that such slave women could be involved in the trade necessary to obtain these items was completely unthinkable by late eighteenth-century

standards.[5] Hucksters as traders is an idea, in any historically interpretable sense, that would have to come at least after abolition, although the people living it surely knew it. And only gradually could it be recognized that such persons had been secretly trading these items for quite some time. By then, regional Caribbean markets were decisively Caribbean-controlled. Colonists stuck to what they were good at: managing "global" interaction between the colony and metropole, whether in shaky ventures at plantation production of coffee and sugar, or later limes and vanilla. Not until the 1920s and 1930s was London concerned with supplying basic foodstuffs to Dominica at all.

The proclivity to trade informally as a way to reproduce that informal rural exchange practice was important to the rural population at large. It gave them an identifiably distinct economic process, which was under their control and management. In their journal entry from December 1836, two visitors note:

> At present all the money which the negros acquire, is earned by taking the surplus produce of their grounds to Roseau, and the other markets. Sometimes they offer the salt fish, which is so injudiciously forced upon them, for sale or barter at the shops. Of their privilege of attending market they are so jealous, that they will scarcely sell their poultry or other produce on their own estate or on the road, even at a higher price (Sturge and Harvey 1968: 101).

By the end of the nineteenth century, it was so clear that informal, small-scale trade was the primary route for selling regionally produced items, few others bothered to compete. Hucksters even gained the attention of a prominent English benefactor, who bequeathed them the means to build a covered market (now the Roseau Old Market) for their benefit in 1895 (Honychurch n.d.: 2). Thus, hucksters controlled the bulk of regional trade through much of the historical period. Concerns about overreliance on hucksters and the implications of their market dominance began to emerge in the nineteenth century. One observer, writing about the immediate years following emancipation remarked:

> Strange as it may seem, these vegetable products ordinarily fetched very high prices on the market. One reason for that was the large-scale exportation of yams, for instance, to the larger and more populous islands such as Trinidad and Barbados, where the soil was less favourable for their growth. But the general and obvious reason *was that, as in the days of slavery, no intermediate class of person existed for the purpose of supplying the markets*, and the country was always in that respect indebted to the precarious supplies of the slaves. So, *since emancipation*

> *the markets remained as before entirely dependent upon the casual supplies of the emancipated population*. By the sale of provisions quite a few field Negroes made what was to them a fortune (Leevy n.d.; emphasis supplied).

In the twentieth century huckster domination in regional trade begins to erode, as British governors began to take a greater interest in developing the physical infrastructure of the island. In the 1930s urban merchants from elite families drew on the political power and relations with colonial authority they had cultivated in the nineteenth century and entered into regional and international trading. Large economies of scale and landownership speed the transition, particularly with importing goods to Dominica. By the 1950s and 1960s, customs and importing restrictions favorable to the larger urban elite businesses are gradually attenuating the hucksters' control on local food markets. That antagonism stems from these historically formalized class/color positions (the elites referred to above are usually referred to as the descendants of the "mulatto ascendancy" in the nineteenth century, a sociologically distinct group from "black" Dominicans, who had worked on plantations), particularly as decolonization vested urban merchants with the use of the new state apparatus to enforce these entitlements (Mantz 2002, 2003).

Huckstering's legacy: The social values of autonomy, creativity, and resistance

Prior to the ascendancy of an urban elite in the retail export/import sector, however, huckster markets existed largely free of restriction. As we have seen, as early as the late eighteenth century, hucksters were a formidable economic presence, even in distant off-island markets during the period of slavery. As Caribbean historian Hillary Beckles has documented, hucksters dominated the markets in Barbados, and the historical record suggests that even as "fettered entrepreneurs they made inroads into the colony's internal economy" (1991: 35). Decades before emancipation, huckstering afforded all the tangible and symbolic benefits of free enterprise, long before colonial economies were opened to non-exclusive participation:

> Huckstering afforded slaves the opportunity to improve the quantity and quality of their nutrition in environments where malnutrition was the norm. It allowed them to possess and later own property, which in itself represented an important symbolic offensive against the established order. It enabled them to make profitable use of their leisure

> time. And it afforded them the chance to travel and normalize their social lives as much as possible under highly restrictive circumstances (Beckles 1991: 32).

The emphasis on African creativity is important. If there were a reason to heed anthropologist Andrew Apter's recent warnings against "jettisoning [the concept of origins] altogether, and assimilat[ing] all retrievable African pasts to the ideologies and discourses in which they are expressed" (2002: 253; see also Apter 1991), it would endure in a deep analysis of the remarkable economic structure of huckstering. Although the Caribbean's introduction to "capitalism," however that might be defined with respect to the European and North American historical epoch which profited off of slave labor (Mintz 1985; Williams 1944 [1944]), may be the subject of some debate, one thing is certain: entrepreneurship has *never* been a European-derived feature in the context of Dominica. It would seem counterintuitive to offer entrepreneurship as "anti-capitalist," in the sense that it operated against formalization historically, both on the plantation and later in state-sponsored market ventures by larger urban (*gwo boug*) merchants. But indeed, the economic and personal autonomy expressed in this culture of exchange is a marked feature of these African-descended societies that since their kidnapping and relocation to the Caribbean have been negotiating the constraints and discipline of a massive colonial capitalist machine.

This observer sees it no different in form than the practices of Vodoun or Obeah as a creative confrontation of the colonial plantation system (Genovese 1979; James 1963; Laguerre 1989; Moorish 1982; Patterson 1967). Sidney Mintz and Richard Price (1992) have emphasized that slavery and colonialism should not be construed in a binary manner in which accommodation and resistance constitute polar responses. Retentions, syncretisms, and reinterpretation of African practices (Herskovits 1990 [1941]) form a complex and socio-historically constituted continuum. Mintz's influential caveat on the concept of resistance proves useful in this respect: "the house slave who poisoned her master's family by putting ground glass in the food had first to become the family cook … And the slaves who plotted armed revolts in the marketplaces had first to produce for the market, and to gain permission to carry their produce there" (Mintz 1971b: 321).

Similarly, the huckster profession, in marketing residue, is a morally sanctionable trade where flexibility, creativity, and autonomy are its expressed values. Others have discussed how *family land* symbolically provides a sense of security and freedom among rural peoples, indeed important cultural values of resistance against the history of

plantation production (Besson 1987; Clarke 1966: 64–68; Edwards 1961; Mintz 1974, 1977; Rubenstein 1975), in addition to the new forms of adaptation to capitalist disciplining of urban labor practices in the Caribbean (Freeman 2000; Safa 1995; Yelvington 1995). Similarly, huckstering represents a grab at sovereignty in a world haunted by the domination of capitalist exchange.

Implications for practice: The death of flexibility?

Guadeloupe, with its comparatively large population and high standard of living, has historically been the key market for hucksters: more than 70 percent of Dominica's "non-traditional" (non-banana) agricultural exports go to Guadeloupe (*Dominica Market News* 1997). Moreover, the proximity of Guadeloupe to Dominica's northern shores (where most huckstering activity originates) and the population size with respect to other Caribbean islands makes it one of the few markets with substantial growth potential. But French laws have increasingly eroded the Guadeloupean trade in recent years. Non-French nationals have been restricted from key markets, licensing procedures have been tightened, and it has become next to impossible to sell in Guadeloupe without permanent residency status.

Such barriers are indicative of a larger process of protectionism in the French Caribbean. Since Guadeloupe is part of the European Union (as a *department d'outre mer* of France), it benefits from metropolitan subsidies, technology, and infrastructural development. Hucksters are already at a serious competitive disadvantage in this market. The protections that have been placed on the free exchange and trade of goods in Guadeloupean markets is making the survival of huckstering increasingly difficult. Dominicans know well the force of international free trade laws: their rather marginal banana industry was decimated by the WTO. Unfortunately, although the market restrictions in Guadeloupe seem to be a clear violation of international trade law, Dominica is without the financial and legal resources to pursue a claim in the WTO courts.

I mention this because it suggests something about the effect that states and international administrative legal bodies such as the WTO have on the stimulus of entrepreneurial practice. The great irony is that these institutions, which purport to reign in a new era of free markets and progressive economic thinking, in fact actually threaten to destroy this centuries-old autochthonous entrepreneurial tradition by virtue of the economies of scale, which they inherently benefit. Today's so-called free trade policy appears to privilege the centrality and dominance of major producers and the wealthier nation-states in

which they are situated at the expense of established practices of flexibility in free enterprise in societies like Dominica, all while perpetuating a myth that flexibility and creativity are values of modern capitalism. There is nothing free about a trade regime that reproduces old exclusivities (and arguably re-mercantilizes the region) and eliminates the very entrepreneurial spirit on which entire regional economies are culturally based. With all due respect to the important contributions of political economy to the study of flexibility in late capitalism, perhaps it is time that we wrested the concept of flexibility from periodization as a post-Fordist phenomenon by recognizing those societies that have been living flexibly, under similar kinds of negotiations with capitalism, for centuries.

Notes

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1. Roseau has the largest such market, which is open most days of the week, but sales spike on Saturday mornings, "market day." Smaller markets are located in Portsmouth (Dominica's second largest "city," actually a large village), and Mahaut. There are fish markets located in several villages, including Fond St. Jean, Marigot, Soufriere, Thibaud, and Point Michel. And there are roadside vendors and grocery stores that operate as markets as well.
2. This particular informant (a very well educated man with experience in environmentally sustainable development) was performing, playing on information and ideas he knew I would have about the history of resource extraction in the Americas. For instance, we had previously discussed the problems of bauxite mining in Jamaica.
3. I am reminded here of Paul Stoller's (2002) discussion of the rationalization of pious Muslim West African traders who market items religiously considered idolatrous or obscene that "money has no smell".
4. Elsewhere, I have discussed the political economic thought underlying this conceptualization, drawing on the work of Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (2002), as a basis for understanding the more complex moral philosophy that underlies capitalist practice and the valorization of entrepreneurial activity, and distinguishing this from the global capitalist process which has emerged (Mantz 2003).
5. This is, of course, a subtle but significant form of silencing, to use Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (1995) term, with respect to colonial, ancillary class, race and gender predispositions.

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