

The Political Economy of Colonial Violence in Interwar Jamaica

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By 1930 Jamaica was a colony already profoundly affected by the impact of the global depression. It was also one in which the correlation between collapsing commodity prices, falling wages, and chronic unemployment in the white-controlled sugar plantation economy provoked a deeper crisis of state control. The so-called 'labor rebellions' that convulsed the British Caribbean from 1935-39 were nowhere more acute than in Jamaica. Usually analyzed in relation to the consolidation of organized nationalist opposition and the emergence of a new generation of Jamaican political leaders such as Norman Manley and Alexander Bustamante, labor protest in late 1930s Jamaica also represented the severest test of British colonial rule on the island since the Morant Bay rebellion of 1864. As this paper tries to show, the political economy of this crisis is fundamental in understanding why high levels of state violence appeared logical, in the sense of politically defensible and instrumentally effective, to its organizers and perpetrators.

Why political economy?

Security force responses to labor unrest were the logical consequence of attitudinal formation and decision-making in a political economy dominated by European interest. A familiar argument connecting violence at an intrinsic level to the operation of the colonial state posits that colonizers threatened or used violence to compel indigenous subjects into acceptance of social, economic, or cultural changes alien to their way of life. In addition to army garrisons, strategic networks of interior communications, and draconian police powers, colonial security forces therefore resorted to exemplary communal punishment to overawe majority populations with little or no vested interest in the socio-political status quo.¹ Thereafter, the psychological violence of threatened punishment and the physical violence of coercive policing became habitual as imperial authorities upheld iniquitous social structures that privileged Europeans over colonial subjects.²

As William Beinart notes, 'Much public violence is part of an assertion of political power – either an attempt to monopolize coercion and control, or to break that monopoly.'³ The abhorrent violence described here was therefore logical in two senses. First, on the Jamaican side of the political divide, violent protest became popularly accepted as the only efficacious means to achieve short-term economic improvements. Second, retributive state repression was logical insofar as coercion was embedded in the relationships of political and economic power between the British colonial state, corporate and private plantation owners, and Jamaican colonial

subjects. To use Frantz Fanon's model of causation, the colonial state brought violence into the lives of its dependent population; its coercive authoritarianism could only be overthrown by 'absolute violence' such as that witnessed during Jamaica's labor rebellions.⁴ Ironically, on the British side of the divide, vast, exemplary repression was read similarly: as the quickest way to restore the state's inviolable right to regulate the economy in the interests of British imperialism. Underpinning such arguments is the fact that colonial rule both imposed stricter ethnic stratification and disrupted productive relations in predominantly agricultural societies with the result that inter-ethnic tensions crystallized around the central issues of political exclusion and economic privilege.⁵

If economic factors were so pivotal to colonial violence, in Jamaica and elsewhere, why has political economy not been used to explain it? One answer lies in the greater prominence of sociological or sociologically influenced approaches to colonial state repression. There are perhaps three such approaches that stand out. One sees the development of distinctly colonial forms of repression as written in the very formation of colonial states. Central to this interpretation are three linked factors: the effort of colonial states to transcend their origins as occupation regimes; the influx of European administrators, settlers, and corporate interests and the attendant requirements imposed on the state to advance their interests; and, finally, the physical displacement of indigenous populations as colonial land seizures gathered momentum. The second approach, informed by social movement theory, is exemplified by the work of James C. Scott, whose analysis of peasant protest movements in South East Asia is informed by the presumption that the fear or actuality of colonial state violence drove indigenous populations to more innovative, surreptitious, and subtle forms of political mobilization and protest. The third approach rejects the idea that imperialism gave rise to unique forms of state coercion. Instead, it proposes that methods of state violence, policing, judicial regulation, incarceration, and repression, were all, to varying extents, imported, whether from the European imperial mother country or from other colonial dependencies. In this model, there is no new form of repression under the colonial sun, only the adaptation and reconfiguration of past precedents practiced in other places at other times.

Each of these approaches has merit, but they also share a weakness: their relative neglect of economic factors or, to be more specific, of the political economy of colonial states. How did the dominant characteristics of particular colonial economies influence collective manifestations of internal dissent within them? This basic question lends itself to crudely instrumental answers loosely derived from the acute economic disparities and resultant social iniquities readily observable in most colonial societies. One way to look beyond these manifestations of economic inequality is to

explore the interaction of colonial economic structure and state organization, and this brings us back to political economy. Of the many aspects of colonial economic structure that helped shape institutional forms of state repression, three stand out:

- First, the dominance of a narrow range of primary goods produced for export within the colonial economy, which, in turn, is closely linked to the matter of goods prices and local wage levels.
- Second, the principal forms of worker employment within the local economy; a factor that obviously affected types and degrees of worker organization.
- Third, the relationship between private capital - in some colonies a shorthand for settler interest, - the state, and indigenous workers.

From the regulation of export prices and financial or fiscal support for corporate interests, to the determination of minimum wage levels and the policing of worker dissent, colonial government identified its interests with expanding or, at minimum, safeguarding the export economy of dependent territory. Seen in this light, the mechanics of state repression were integral to the political economy of colonialism.

Urban Disorder and Colonial Repression in Kingston

After the outbreak of debilitating riots in Ceylon in May and June 1915, British Colonial Secretary Walter Long appointed a committee to investigate police conduct in cases of colonial civil unrest, specifically the regulations governing the use of force. Individual colonial governments were to report on their local regulations and plans for the conduct of police riot control operations, which were to be as consistent with principles of minimum force as possible. Thirty-three colonial governments responded, among them those of the British West Indies.⁶ The British authorities in Jamaica were among the last to do so, filing their ‘scheme for dealing with disturbances’ in 1920.⁷

The demands from Jamaica for police reinforcement, a mounted police detachment to clear the streets of urban rioters, and more widespread use of paramilitary equipment, including steel helmets, automatic weapons, and an armored car were of a piece with the recommendations received from most other colonial administrations. More interesting was the focus on the prevention of looting and inter-communal attacks, both forms of colonial violence closely linked to extreme poverty. Recent street disturbances in Kingston, in October 1919 and, again, in January 1920 had quickly descended into widespread looting, with Chinese traders singled out for attack. Meanwhile, episodic communal violence in Jamaica’s rural parishes, often linked to disturbances among workers on the island’s major sugar plantations, had already led to the appointment of Special Constables to be deployed in the event of further disorder. But just what was a colonial ‘riot’ and why was it considered so

threatening? Political scientist Donald Horowitz's influential study of inter-ethnic riots suggests the following:

A recurring cross-national feature of ethnic riots is their bizarre fusion of coherence and frenzy. The riot is not an unstructured *mêlée*, in which it is impossible to distinguish attackers from their victims. Rather, the ethnic riot consists of a series of discernible actions, identifiable initiators and targets, attacks and (rarely) counterattacks. Riots spring from highly patterned occurrences and conditions, and they reflect clear-cut structures of ethnic-group relations. Communities do not generally slip gradually or imperceptibly – or randomly – into ethnic violence. Moreover, after the event, participants typically exhibit an utter lack of remorse for their conduct.⁸

A basic prerequisite of British colonial order was the denial of any right of assembly to indigenous subjects. To this end, gatherings of three or more people could be legally defined as riotous assembly, particularly if the authorities could prove that those involved had a 'common purpose' that they intended to accomplish by force or threat of violence. In such circumstances, the infamous 'reading of the Riot Act' demanding immediate dispersal of the group under penalty of police intervention could take place. In practice, such an orderly, sequential procedure was rarely followed. Police or troops generally sought to break up disturbances – actual or potential – whenever the moment seemed most opportune. The governing factor here was often the ability to apprehend or shoot those identified as the organizers of protest. Lethal force was more likely in colonial settings than in British ones because colonial police and military officers were instructed neither to use blank ammunition nor to fire over the heads of demonstrators. Once it became apparent that the group would not disperse, security force commanders were, instead, to shoot 'ringleaders'. Obviously, neither events nor human reactions were so predictable. 'Ringleaders' was a loose concept, strict 'fire discipline' often broke down, and the original illegal gathering could be both more spontaneous and less seditious than assumed. Put simply, the crucial escalatory factor in colonial violence was often the security forces themselves.

Policing by expedient

To study colonial policing in the British Caribbean, then, is to study paradox. On the one hand, to judge from the events in the Jamaica and its near neighbors during the interwar years, state repression of strikes, prison riots, urban demonstrations, and other civil emergencies connoted the end of 'normal' policing and resort to desperate and violent expedients. On the other hand, high levels of state violence and police

brutality were routine, part of the everyday in colonial Jamaica.⁹ Recourse to violence was neither unusual, nor unexpected. Any analysis of repressive measures must begin with the acknowledgement that it was not violence per se, but rather the qualitative changes in that violence – its form, its function, and its extent – that marked out periods of acute colonial crisis across the British Caribbean.

In the years 1935-38 colonial police forces faced with mass opposition and organized protest in British Guiana, in the towns and oilfields of Trinidad, and, above all, in Jamaica proved unable to cope. Their practices and procedures in response to civil disorder were woefully inadequate. Police actions frequently degenerated into the use of firearms, more often out of panic than as part of a planned escalation of coercive force. Once police lines were broken or uniformed constables injured or killed, the colonial authorities of the British Caribbean turned to the military or, as was more geographically feasible, to the Royal Navy, to provide armed personnel to stifle public protest, enforce curfews, patrol the streets, and guard government installations and business premises. In other words, there was no intermediate point between the low-level violence integral to civil policing of industrial disputes or political protest and the high-level violence of armed force repression in conditions analogous to martial law.

Such was far from the whole story, however. Underlying these security measures were more profound social and cultural divisions rooted in the abiding mistrust across Jamaica's ethnic divide. The geographical isolation of island territories and the shortage of locally available police or military forces sharpened the governing elite's intense distrust of the black majority population, a disdain that escalated into 'black peril'-type fear of racial violence, physical and sexual, in periods of maximum economic distress. Most important, the political culture of the British Caribbean was warped by the institutional memory of slavery and the inability or reluctance of the colonial state to come to terms with the ethnic divisions that the slave economy had first put in place.¹⁰

Abiding racial tension and the acute inequalities that pervaded these former slave colonies deepened the rift between whites and non-whites once protests began. Fears of a general uprising, of racially-motivated killing and of sexual violence against the white minority nurtured the sense of embattlement and shared interest between colonial authorities, white estate managers and business owners. One consequence was that white settlers, employers, managers and other employees took up arms as police auxiliaries and vigilantes whenever industrial unrest erupted. Thus, into the mix of civil police and naval squadrons we must add the white irregulars prepared to use force to defend homes, businesses, plantations, and other commercial interests against what was typically depicted as mob violence.

Jamaica's long entwined histories of colonialism, slavery, and labor coercion bred permissiveness to casual violence across races and socio-economic sectors of the Island's population. The assumption prevalent within Jamaica's ruling elites that government existed to promote more efficient capitalist exploitation of labor and material resources, helped entrench a particularly authoritarian style of colonial governance.¹¹ By contrast, the more or less daily experience of such coercive behavior had, to some degree at least, desensitized the island's black majority, for whom workplace discrimination, corporal punishment and police brutality were ever-present realities. This is what I would term a distinct political economy of colonial violence. The combination of quotidian violence, compounded by the colonial state's authoritarian impulse, also determined police deployments and behavior.¹²

Strikes and Violence in the Plantation Economy

Was Jamaica's police force in the Depression years of the 1930s merely the defender of the socio-economic status quo - of strict regimens of work in the plantation sector, of a low-wage economy crucial to sugar profitability, of prohibitive sanctions against organized labor on the plantations and in the ports - in short, of the political economy of West Indies colonialism? If so, then the Police force in British Jamaica was little more than the colonial order's first line of defense. Or, had it advanced in structure and purpose from its post-emancipation origins in the mid-nineteenth century as the protector of white hierarchy, of landowner and corporate privilege, and of the maximum extraction of profit from the sugar economy?¹³ If this characterization may be crudely reductive, what seems undeniable is that the island's police force remained a coercive instrument without roots or legitimacy among the black majority communities in Jamaica's rural parishes and urban centers hardest hit by the Depression. The nature of Jamaica's colonial police, its underlying purpose and limited reach was thrown into much sharper relief by perhaps the best-known social disorders of the pre-decolonization years: the 'labor rebellion' of the late 1930s.

Despite the efforts of the colonial authorities in Kingston to stimulate industrial growth and agricultural diversification, Jamaica's economy in the Depression years was still dominated by the production and refining of sugar cane for export. The island's economic crisis was, first and foremost, a sugar crisis. Increased availability of cheap refined sugar on global markets and a widespread switch to sugar beet to help meet European demand made Caribbean sugar production commercially unprofitable for much of the pre-war decade. Imperial preference backed by British subsidy of Jamaican sugar prices kept the industry afloat, while Canada played a crucial role as a reserved market for British West Indian sugar. Facing declining profit margins, private plantation owners and larger foreign-owned commercial concerns cut

production costs to the bone.¹⁴ In an industry as labor intensive as sugar cultivation, any cutbacks were bound to hit field workers hardest. Lay-offs, greater reliance on part-time, piece-rate workers, and declining real wages were commonplace across rural Jamaica throughout the 1930s. Poverty, always general, became extreme. While sharecroppers and smallholders could stave off hunger with foodstuffs grown for family consumption, the landless majority was in desperate straits, aware that rising unemployment in Kingston and elsewhere made local economic migration infeasible. Return migration of Jamaicans from other Caribbean islands in which employment opportunities were similarly diminished made the situation still worse. Above all, the Depression simply lasted longer than previous economic downturns in the living memory of most rural workers, making the prospect of recovery seem hopelessly remote.

During 1938 simmering anger among plantation workers boiled over. Trouble began at the Serge Island sugar estate in St Thomas parish. The colonial administration blamed both the work stoppages and the violence that ensued at Serge Island on outside agitators among the newly formed cane cutters union. Much was made of the fact that the estate manager was deeply unpopular and that his employer, the plantation owner, was a member of Jamaica's Legislative Council. In the St Thomas region estate bosses recruited large numbers of day cutters from outside the parish and this imported labor was blamed for the increasing militancy among local field workers.

Police intervention against the strikers followed the classic precepts of minimum force delineated after Walter Long's survey of protest policing. Local special constables equipped with batons supplemented regular officers whose job it was to identify ringleaders and extract them from the crowd. Once these arrests were made, workers' protests were quickly contained in situ at the Serge Island estate without any use of firearms. Sixty-three arrests were made and all of those detained were tried before magistrates within a fortnight. Three alleged ringleaders received sentences of one month's hard labor, but the bulk of those detained were discharged with a severe warning. These relatively lenient punishments reflected the fact that Governor Edward Denham's administration was more concerned to persuade estate managers across the island to agree increases in piece rates. The Governor hoped that the threat of renewed strike action would induce employers to bargain with their workforce thereby avoiding any need for state intervention to compel them to do so. The Kingston government may have recognized that acute hardship underpinned the upsurge in rural unrest, but its efforts to convince employers yielded little.¹⁵

The first week of May 1938 witnessed work stoppages at the Frome estate in Westmoreland parish. The estate was one of the largest in Jamaica. Owned by the

British sugar giant, Tate & Lyle, the Frome estate also housed a company factory in which cane was processed and refined. Factory personnel were employed on labor contracts that offered at least some guarantee of long-term employment. Field workers had no such job security or assured minimum conditions. Here, too, most were taken on as day laborers working at piece rates. Even the most efficient cane cutters, capable of harvesting between five and six tons of cane each day, rarely earned more than five shillings for their daily work. Payment of one shilling per ton had been conceded following the earlier unrest at the Serge Island estate. But numerous cane-cutters still only took home three to four shillings per day, depending on the volumes of cane cut. Finally, several hundred construction workers were employed at the estate, building additional factory plant.

Protests on the Frome estate were more protracted and violent than at Serge Island five months earlier. Confrontation between estate laborers and Tate & Lyle staff began on Friday 29 April after workers were kept waiting several hours to receive their pay. The long wait combined with higher than normal company 'deductions' from workers' pay packets created a poisonous atmosphere. Estate office windows were smashed and pay clerks, who were already armed, fired in the air to scare off the protesters.¹⁶ The next day at least two-thirds of the 600 construction workers working on the new site factory struck, blocking access to the estate for those factory personnel willing to work. With no Tate & Lyle representative with whom to negotiate, cane-cutters who joined this initial work stoppage relayed their demands to L. O'Donoghue, the Inspector in charge of policing the strikers. Their demands were conventional and unsurprising: an explanation of the company's deductions policy, minimum daily payment of four shillings, and improvements to housing provision. O'Donoghue found himself in an awkward position, acting both as intermediary between strikers and the estate management and as the officer responsible for riot control.¹⁷

The explosion came the next morning, Monday 2 May, when an estimated 3,000 laborers, some construction workers, others cane-cutters, still others unemployed youths, converged on the Old Frome estate compound, which housed the main estate offices and factory. Despite the increasingly tense atmosphere at the main estate compound, at approximately 9.15am the main police party and its two commanding officers temporarily left it after being told that another crowd was attacking the homes and vehicles of company staff in Old Frome village about one mile distant. The destruction encountered by the police in and around Old Frome village was highly symbolic and well orchestrated. Additional company-owned buildings were vandalized, estate trucks and cars destroyed, and personnel files ransacked. 'Fontabella', the home of Tate & Lyle's planting attorney, the closest colleague of the estate manager, was destroyed.¹⁸ When police returned to the estate

compound they were immediately bombarded with bricks and stones thrown from the crowd. Three were injured. In response, O'Donoghue ordered his men to fix bayonets to rifles and prepare to charge the demonstrators. After final verbal warnings ordering the crowd to disperse, O'Donoghue reorganized a party of sixty police into two ranks and gave the order to shoot. Four demonstrators, three men and a woman, were killed by police gunfire. Nine more were hospitalized. The retreating protesters set fires in numerous separate locations burning some ninety acres of cane, further destruction only averted by a torrential downpour that afternoon.¹⁹

Official readings of the violence at Frome were less forgiving than those of the unrest at the Serge Island estate in January. The vast Frome estate was well known across the island, its on-site factory, medical facilities, and worker housing seen as a model of corporate modernization in the island's sugar industry. This made the wholesale destruction of estate property all the more shocking. While violent strike action was rationalized as a by-product of inflated expectations among the many migrant workers that had come to Westmoreland believing that Tate & Lyle were paying day rates far in excess of those on smaller plantations, evidence of coordinated strike activity and mass protest pointed to a deeper menace to the colonial state. Aside from the loss of life and much greater damage to property, the sheer scale of these apparently concerted disorders threatened Jamaica's socio-political hierarchy. Under police pressure to make an example of the rioters at Old Frome, the colonial authorities recommended that a special tribunal be established to try those accused of coordinating the violence.²⁰

Governor Denham duly secured Colonial Office approval for the appointment of a commission of inquiry that would not confine itself merely to studying the 2 May clashes but would, in addition focus on their underlying economic causes. This shift in emphasis away from criminal investigation towards levels of poverty in the rural economy counteracted the pressure from police and judiciary for severe repression of the strikers. Denham noted that the commission's membership and terms of reference was intended to meet approval 'across all classes of society' in Jamaica. And while careful not to prejudge the inquiry's outcome, he stressed that the police accounts indicated that a hardcore among the construction workers at Frome appeared to have compelled cane-cutters and factory employees to join the strike action. Most of these building laborers were migrant workers, some of them allegedly known to the police as members of Kingston's 'criminal element'. For the rest, persistent rumors that wages at the Frome estate were exceptionally high had created false hopes, leading irrevocably to the demand for unsustainable increases in daily pay rates. Thus was the strike action curiously depoliticized and disassociated from the plantation sector in which it originated.²¹

If Denham's inclination was to defuse the crisis over the Frome estate, one of his predecessors was doing the reverse. Former Governor Lord Olivier, a vociferous critic of the plantation-owning elite in Jamaica, took issue with the official interpretation of gullible, but loyal, field workers manipulated by quasi-criminal extremists from the city. During a House of Lords debate on the West Indies situation and in correspondence with senior Colonial Office officials as well as with company chief, Sir Leonard Lyle, Lord Olivier depicted Jamaica as an island driven to the brink of social breakdown by rapacious capitalists. Making the most of his status as seasoned veteran and local expert, Lord Olivier had long been the establishment 'conscience' regarding the extreme poverty prevalent throughout the British Caribbean.²² In 1930 Olivier chaired an official inquiry initiated by the second Labour Government, the West Indian Sugar Commission, whose task it was to assess the impact of collapsing prices on the agricultural economy. The Commission's findings exposed the depth of suffering already evident at the outset of the Depression and pressed the case for tax relief and increased 'special preferences'.²³

Acutely sensitive to Olivier's influence as a former Governor, the indulgence of Denham's administration towards the rural poor was not matched by equivalent sympathy for Kingston's burgeoning urban underclass. The threat of a general strike in the capital in late May shifted attention away from unrest in the plantation economy back to civil strife in the capital.²⁴ In this instance, the colonial authorities and municipal police took a firm line with street protest. Strike organizers were accused of manipulating naïve workers lacking any experience, indeed any concept, of collective bargaining. Denying the legitimacy of industrial protest, the authorities ascribed disorder among Kingston's working population to a vicious 'criminal element'. Demonstrators' demands for improved pay and conditions were dismissed as a pretext for looting and the settling of scores with employers and the police. But matters were soon to change.

Both Governor Denham and his deputy, C.C. Woolley, were alive to the extreme poverty prevalent among the capital's working population, not least as many of the worst paid workers were employed by the Government Public Works Department as day laborers in Kingston's Corporate Area. With unemployment levels approaching fifty per cent in the capital, the rapid escalation of wildcat strikes into generic labor rebellion was perhaps inevitable. The fundamental obstacle to any short-term improvement in the situation was one of political, and not economic, structures. Simply put, the colonial state lacked the arbitration mechanisms necessary to deal with widespread industrial disputes. The unionization of labor was, unsurprisingly, viewed with suspicion as opening a backdoor to socialist-inspired sedition and anti-colonial protest against the dominance of Jamaica's white minority. And, as noted above, in the absence of disciplined union organization or accredited union

representatives, voiceless strikers were, all too often, demonized as opportunistic and semi-criminal, particularly within Legislative Council discussions. But reliance on police coercion to enforce order in the workplace was untenable in the short term and ethically unjustifiable in the long term. Depression conditions thus catalyzed a rapid transition toward a recognizably modern system of industrial conciliation between employers and labor. The political economy of protest dictated a fundamental shift in employer-worker relations.

The key agent in this catalytic change was a Government-appointed Board of Conciliation, put in place at government behest to arbitrate settlements of the major strike actions that paralyzed the capital in the final week of May.²⁵ The Board was, itself, an offshoot of the two special commissions that Denham had appointed, the first on 24 March 1938, to investigate wage rates and living standards among Jamaica's lowest paid workers, the second appointed on 6 May to report on the causes of the violence at the Frome estate. The Board's preoccupation with the connections between extreme economic distress and social disorder was, therefore, already apparent in the earlier work of its leading members, Sir Charles Doorly and Sir Henry Brown.²⁶ As is well known, its successful transformation into an industrial arbitrator owed much to the tireless efforts of Norman Manley, the young mixed-race lawyer soon to achieve greater prominence as founder of the People's National Party, and Alexander Bustamante, the left-leaning organizer of Jamaica's first mass trade unions. Only their willingness to fill the void left by the lack of official worker representatives enabled the Board to function at all. This, in turn, depended on their unquestioned status as respected figures that could vouchsafe for the workers whose claims they advanced. This *de facto* reliance on local elite auxiliaries to defuse potentially revolutionary unrest in Kingston and rural parishes underlined the weakness of the colonial state, reflected in its inability to enforce order through legal sanction and police intervention.

On 25 May 1938 Neville Chamberlain's Cabinet discussed the mounting disorder in the British West Indies. After Ministers evinced surprise at the scale, intensity, and duration of the unrest, Colonial Secretary William Ormsby-Gore presented a more detailed report on the situation across the British Caribbean. His conclusions were straightforward. Popular dissent was economic, not political, in origin.²⁷ Island treasuries were generally in severe deficit, local administration utterly reliant on British subsidy to function at all. Jamaica's limited franchise entrenched the power of the most reactionary landowners, industrialists, and white elitists. And the Island's administrative personnel were, at best, well intentioned but amateurish, at worst, complacent and inefficient.

Admitting the root of the problem was one thing, translating this into practical outcomes quite another. The Colonial Secretary used the time-honored device of a

commission of inquiry to investigate policy options and thus obviate the requirement for immediate action. He also steered clear of tackling the entrenched dominance of the British Sugar industry, Jamaica's major export companies, and the Island's settler elite. This was not mere timidity, however. His preference for financial aid and structural economic change also reflected the emerging concepts of developmentalism, with its accent on socio-economic improvement and professionalization of the colonial service then gaining ground in the Colonial Office. More than this, the cumulative evidence from across the British West Indies that extreme poverty precipitated disorder, something that would soon be confirmed by Lord Moyne's Inquiry into the islands' long-term future, was the spark that ignited Colonial Office reform plans. Endemic urban unemployment, the settler oligarchy's hold on prime agricultural land, and failure to diversify crop production and so break the dominance of the sugar plantation in the rural economy, were all identified as structural economic problems requiring urgent redress. Once again the political economy of colonialism emerged as the key to understanding the forms and functions of internal dissent.

Conclusion: A Colony in Revolt against State Violence?

Such was the frequency of police coercion in the British West Indies of the 1930s that it is hard to find a dividing line between colonial policing and the maintenance of white racial and economic dominance through violence. In times of civil unrest, the two were one and the same. What unites them is a distinct political economy of origin. The point may be extended to cover all communities in colonial Jamaica. Collective public dissent and state repression were rooted in the economic structures of an island labor system geared to high volume export whose defining features – low wages, insecurity of employment, and dependence on day labor – also mirrored the rigidities of racial hierarchy in the colony. It was this correlation between iniquitous economic system and ossified racial hierarchy that determined the forms of popular protest, their targets, and their objectives. Equally, it was the colonial state's refusal to redress this fundamental socio-economic imbalance that both made repressive policing imperative and which governed its practices as minimum force tenets gave way to mass arrests and lethality. By the end of the interwar period Jamaica was a colony in revolt against state violence; a violence born of its political economy.

¹ David Killingray, "The Maintenance of Law and Order in British Colonial Africa," African Affairs, 85:340 (1986), 434-5.

² Tarsis B. Kabwegyere, "The Dynamics of Colonial Violence: The Inductive System in Uganda," Journal of Peace Research, 9:4 (1972), 303-5. The converse of this argument is that indigenous colonial violence against Europeans was relatively infrequent, particularly in black Africa, see Robert A. DeVine, "Anti-European Violence in Africa: A Comparative Analysis," Journal of Conflict Resolution, 3:4 (1959), 420-9.

³ These comments draw on William Beinart, "Political and Collective Violence in Southern African Historiography," Journal of Southern African Studies, 18:3 (1992), 455-7, quote at 457.

⁴ Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth English trans., (London: Penguin edition, 1967), 29; also cited in Beinart, "Political and Collective Violence," 459.

⁵ Robert Blanton, T. David Mason, Brian Athow, "Colonial Style and Post-Colonial Ethnic Conflict in Africa," Journal of Peace Research 38:4 (2001), 476-7; Jeremy M. Weinstein, Inside Rebellion. The Politics of Insurgent Violence (Cambridge, 2007), 208-10.

⁶ TNA, CO 323/771B Civil Disturbances: Organisation, Committee depositions, 1915 et seq.

⁷ TNA, CO 323/771B, 'Report of the Committee appointed to prepare a scheme for dealing with disturbances and to draft instructions to the Officers engaged,' no date, 1920.

⁸ Horowitz, Deadly Ethnic Riot, pp. 12-13.

⁹ See, for example, the collapse of public order during Kingston prison riots in 1926: TNA, CO 137/781/13, Report by Owen F. Wright, Inspector I/C Kingston Inspector General of Police, East Queen St, Kingston, 4 September 1926.

¹⁰ Michael Craton, 'Continuity not Change: The Incidence of Unrest among Ex-Slaves in the British West Indies, 1838-1876,' Slavery and Abolition, 7:1 (1988), 144-70; Gad Heuman, The Killing Time: The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica (London: Macmillan, 1994); Howard Johnson, 'Patterns of Policing in the Post-Emancipation British Caribbean, 1835-95,' in Anderson and Killingray, Policing the Empire, 71-91.

¹¹ O. Nigel Bolland, The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean. The Social Origins of Authoritarianism and Democracy in the Labour Movement (Oxford: James Currey, 2001), 4, 11-15; Maurice St Pierre, 'The 1938 Jamaican Disturbances: A Portrait of Mass Reaction Against Colonialism,' Social and Economic Studies, 27:2 (1978), 171-96; see also Thomas Holt, The Problem of Freedom. Problems of Race, Labour and Politics in Jamaica and Britain (Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

¹² Bolland, The Politics of Labour, 19-20, quote at p. 20.

¹³ Regarding the early history and role of the colonial police in the British West Indies, see Howard Johnson, 'Patterns of Policing in the Post-Emancipation British Caribbean, 1835-95,' in Anderson and Killingray, Policing the Empire, 71-91.

¹⁴ TNA, CO 137/827/3, 'Proposed Royal Commission to look into the situation in the West Indies,' memo by Secretary of State for Colonies, William Ormsby-Gore, 1938.

¹⁵ TNA, CO 137/827/3, Governor Edward Denham dispatch to William Ormsby-Gore, 25 January 1938.

¹⁶ TNA, CO 137/827/3, Inspector O'Donoghue report to Inspector-General Wright, 3 May 1938.

¹⁷ TNA, CO 137/827/3, Inspector O'Donoghue report to Inspector-General Wright, 3 May 1938.

¹⁸ TNA, CO 137/827/3, Inspector O'Donoghue report to Inspector-General Wright, 3 May 1938.

¹⁹ TNA, CO 137/827/3, Inspector-General Owen F. Wright summary report to William Ormsby-Gore, 5 May 1938.

²⁰ TNA, CO 137/827/3, Wright summary report to William Ormsby-Gore, 5 May 1938.

²¹ TNA, CO 137/827/3, no. 296, Governor Denham letter to Colonial Secretary, Lord Harlech, 10 May 1938.

²² House of Lords, Parliamentary Debates, 2 June 1938, vol. 109:70, columns 877-888; TNA, CO 137/827/3, Sir Leonard Lyle letter to Lord Olivier, 7 May 1938; Lord Olivier reply to Sir Leonard Lyle, 9 May 1938.

²³ House of Lords, Parliamentary Debates, 2 June 1938, vol. 109:70, columns 877-8.

²⁴ TNA, CO 137/827/3, tel. 90, Governor Denham to Colonial Office, 23 May 1938.

²⁵ TNA, CO 137/827/3, Office of the Board of Conciliation, Jamaica Mutual Life Assurance Society Building, Kingston, to Officer Administering the Government, C.C. Woolley, 25 June 1938.)

²⁶ TNA, CO 137/827/3, Corrigendum to Colonial Office memorandum, "Local Commissions, Jamaica 1938," no date, May 1938.

²⁷ CO 137/827/3, draft memo. by William Ormsby-Gore, 'Proposed Royal Commission to look into the situation in the West Indies,' pp. 1-2, n.d. June 1938