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A Socio-Historical Analysis of the Labor Revolt of 1878 in the Danish West Indies*

I ARRIVED IN THE VIRGIN ISLANDS on June 1, 1979. During my first year of residence I became involved in "Emancipation: A Second Look," a cultural heritage project funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The main focus of the project was the Emancipation of 1848 and the Labor Revolt of 1878, which is commonly known as the "Fireburn."

I attended several public forums and private meetings where the general public and scholars alike referred to the Fireburn as a riot. Initially, I assumed that the description was accurate, but upon further investigation discovered that the Fireburn was a classic example of a labor revolt. It had leadership, division of labor, objectives, tactics, and organization. The revolt by the workers was an attempt to change the economic, social and political system which oppressed them.

As a sociologist interested in collective behavior research, I deemed it necessary to take a "second look" at the Fireburn. The Labor Revolt of 1878 had many socioeconomic circumstances in common with social movements and change throughout history. Economic inequality, denial of a voice in the political process, and a subordinate social status, all of which were preserved in the Islands in 1878, are breeding grounds for social conflict.

As can be seen from an historical standpoint, there is little need for a revolt "in a static society which successfully satisfies the felt wants of its members. Social change which is not accidental comes in response to dissatisfaction."[1] On the other hand, three conditions motivate individuals to revolt: "(1) people must consciously recognize their dissatisfaction and share it with others; (2) people must believe in their own ability to reshape the course of their lives; (3) people must live under conditions in which banding together to change something is both possible and plausibly effective."[2]

THE ECONOMIC ORDER

The system of inequality and the deterioration of the Danish colonial economy helped to spur the Labor Revolt of 1878. The wealth of the Danish colony derived from the profit was controlled by an elite class (Danish King and Planters), comprised of a small segment of the

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[1] William B. Cameron, *Modern Social Movements* (New York, 1967), p.10.

[2] Ibid, p. 10.

total population. Members of the elite class formed corporations (The West India Company) to safeguard their economic interests. The purpose of the West India Company "was to furnish a profitable field in investment for men with capital; hence the need of concentrating the management of the company's resources in a few hands."[3]

Before occupations and classes of free persons in the Danish Colony are discussed, the Labor Act of 1849 must be analyzed. The legislation was the foundation of the class structure and the division of labor on the plantations. It determined duration of employment, wages, occupation, work days and hours, deductions, extra compensation, absenteeism and sickness on each plantation.

The Act was created by Governor-General Hansen, who succeeded Peter Von Scholten. Previously, Hansen had held conferences in all three islands with planters and members of the Colonial Council. The planters feared the newly manumitted workers would not work, or worse yet demand a higher wage. Both alternatives would severely curtail the planters' profits. Hence, the Labor Act was passed and put into effect in January of 1849. This law, except for minor reforms, created a slave-master relationship once more. "The so-called Labor Act was not beneficial to the people of St. Croix since it continued some of the degrading and exacting conditions of slavery without being justified by involuntary bondage on the part of those who suffered under it. But the laborers felt that their condition was going to be made worse."[4]

Workers were obligated to work for an employer for at least one year after a contract was signed. The contract could be for no longer than three years and no less than one. Workers were required to give 15 days notice for renewal or termination of contract. A worker who failed to give the notice was automatically obligated to the same employer for another year. Workers were to be provided dwellings (concrete house with small rooms, one family to each room) and a small plot of land (provision grounds of 40 square feet) to grow food, and also a wage for their labor. The best workers were called the first class and received 15 cents a day; second class workers received a wage of 10 cents a day; and third class employees received 5 cents a day. These wages were subject to a deduction (often 5 cents a day) for medical care and meals. The meal often consisted of salt fish, corn meal, flour and a "gill" of rum. There was a wage differential between factory and field workers. When the central factory in Christiansted was built, factory employees received 30-35 cents a day. "A central factory system had been established to manufacture sugar by large scale methods. While the small owners kept the old provisions of the

[3] Waldeman Westergaard, *The Danish West Indies under Company Rule* (New York, 1917), p. 179.
[4] Antonio Jarvis, *A Brief History of the Virgin Islands* (St. Thomas, 1938), p. 10.

Labor Act, the central factory preferred to pay a higher wage than to furnish labor with houses; labor wanted both."[5]

Workers who were tradesmen (skilled craftsmen, masons, blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors, shoemakers) were also ranked first and second class, with first class wages at 20 cents a day. The wages were uniform on all plantations as provided by the Labor Act. Occupational mobility within the classes was very limited or nonexistent. A combination of occupational discrimination and ethnic prejudice relegated most persons of African descent to the bowels of the economic order. "There were very few workers in the second class category; most were kept down in third class and it was very difficult to move upward. Nor was it easy to get started in any trade, as the free-colored class had a monopoly on these skilled jobs even before slavery ended."[6]

Everyone able to work had to; those who refused to work were jailed for vagrancy or severely punished. The work day was from sunrise to sunset five days a week (under slavery there was a six-day work week) with one hour for breakfast and a two hour lunch break. Field workers were allowed three holidays — Christmas, Easter and Whitsuntide. Labor disputes were settled by a magistrate who invariably ruled in favor of the planters. A worker absent from work without permission was fined according to his/her class:" seven cents for first class, five cents for second class and two cents for third class.

The Labor Act even controlled the lives of children. Children were "dependent" between the ages of one and six; however, working age began at six years. When children reached their sixteenth birthday, they were eligible to negotiate their own contracts. Parents were fined for the misconduct, tardiness or absence of their children from work.

The Labor Act of 1849 was another form of slavery. The only real change from slavery under this legislation was the privilege to change jobs once a year. Low wages, deductions and the requirements that workers buy all supplies from the plantation store kept then dependent on the planters. Florence Lewisohn describes the fundamental economic situation between workers and plantation owners:

> The planters had always provided housing and provision grounds, clothing, extra rations and medical services. Now they would provide the same house and grounds and some of the medical costs, but the ex-slaves' new salary would be absorbed by payments for extra rations, clothing and half the medical costs. The treadmill was still turning for them.[7]

On the island of St. Thomas with its shipping industry and relatively small agricultural economy there were fewer plantations and field workers than on the other islands. Many St. Thomians were warehouse

[5] Ibid, p. 80.
[6] Florence Lewisohn, *St. Croix under Seven Flags* (Hollywood, Florida, 1970), p. 328.
[7] Ibid, p. 225.

or packinghouse workers who unloaded cargo from the ships. These workers along with skilled tradesmen enjoyed shorter work hours, more holidays and other privileges than were given field workers.

The island of St. Croix, with the largest land area of the three populated Virgin Islands and flat terrain, supported over 150 plantations. Field workers represented nine-tenths of the work force. "St. Croix never had a large class of free colored in its overall population as in other islands; where the economy rested on sugar and cotton production, it became imperative that there be a large labor force, especially field hands."[8] The field workers' lives changed very little after emancipation. Men, women and children worked in the fields from 4 a.m. until 10 p.m. during the sugar cane season. There were overseers, called "Bombas," in the field to insure maximum production. Workers suspected of laziness, feigning illness or working below maximum effort received physical punishment.

ETHNIC GROUP STATUS IN THE DANISH COLONY

Stratification within the black community was based on skin color and occupation. The free colored prior to emancipation were primarily of mixed race, and following manumission became the small nucleus of a nonwhite middle class in the Danish colony. Many of them held positions in skilled trades or as house servants. In an occasional papers series published by the Virgin Islands Department of Conservation and Cultural Affairs, entitled *Eye Witness Account II,* the status of the mixed races is described:

> Under no conditions did they want to work in the canefields, because this would place them on the same level as the slaves. The best men could hope for was to become fishermen or small artisans, women seamstreses, but many ended up in vagrancy or prostitution. They ranged in color from ebony to almost white; most were neither black nor white. The light colored had an inferiority complex because they could not be considered as white.[9]

Menial jobs, lower status and fewer privileges were given to persons who retained their African features, identity and customs. A conscious attempt was made by Danish officials to have workers relinquish their "Africaness" for better job opportunities and higher social status. The more they denounced their Africaness or assimilated into Danish "society," the more European they became and the less likely they would be to revolt against the Danish government.

THE DANISH WEST INDIA AND GUINEA COMPANY

Denmark became involved in the Caribbean to capitalize on the slave trade and the profits derived from African labor. Portugal monop-

[8] Pauline Pope, *Crucian Slavery* (Ann Arbor, 1969), p. 178.
[9] Eva Lawaetz, *Eye Witness Accounts* (St. Thomas, 1975), p. 3.

olized the trade for over fifty years until Spain became involved in 1517. Shortly after England, Holland, France, and Sweden became involved, Denmark officially joined the pillage of Africa in 1659. The Danish King Christian V "organized the Danish West India and Guinea Company in Copenhagen for the purpose of colonizing and slave trading; out of this grew the Virgin Islands adventure."[10]

The Company was a corporation established to secure the islands and to guarantee a profit for the stockholders. The directors of the company answered to a board of stockholders. The King was the most powerful stockholder and he appointed three persons who comprised the Board of Trade, which was responsible for the overall management of the colony. "The directorates of the Danish East and West India companies at the beginning were in a sense committees delegated to work from the recently established Board of Trade."[11] Meetings of the stockholders (membership rose from 3 to 7 by 1733) were called the General Assembly. Each stockholder had one vote in the Assembly. The King gave the Directors of the West India Company, which controlled the government of the Virgin Islands, complete powers of governing the colony. Danish law was also the law which governed the Danish colony; however, "special laws have been issued for the islands, without, however, affecting the general character of their legislature as originally and materially Danish."[12]

W. Westergaard described the control of the Virgin Islands government by the West India Company as follows:

> The active control of the business of the Danish West India and Guina Company rested almost solely upon the directors. They selected the governors and chief officials both in Guinea and in St. Thomas, subject only to confirmation by the King; they found captains for their trading vessels and provided ministers to care for the souls of employees, planters and slaves. The directors through their factory in Copenhagen were expected to find a market either at home or abroad for African slaves and West Indian sugar, cotton and indigo.[13]

The company sold plots of land to be converted into plantations. Planters purchased land for 1,000 rigsdalers for sugar estates and 500 rigsdalers for cotton plantations. Profits from the West India Company went into the general state treasury of Denmark: any "surplus of revenue was to flow and by which any under-balance would have to be covered, the colonial budgets and accounts to form parts of the general state budgets and State accounts."[14]

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[10] Charles Taylor, *Leaflets from the Danish West Indies* (Westport, Conn., 1888), p. 67.
[11] Westergaard, op. cit., p. 179.
[12] *Proceedings of the Colonial Council from St. Croix,* 1856-1881.
[13] Westergaard, op. cit., p. 180.
[14] *Proceedings from the Colonial Council from St. Croix,* 1856-1881, p. 19.

The government of the Danish colony was administered by the Colonial Council for the Danish West Indian possessions. The Governor-General and his staff were appointed by the West India Company. Each district (island) had a council by 1856. Christiansted had five members, Frederiksted three members, St. Thomas six members, and St. John two members. The Danish King appointed four members to the Council. "Hedged by all sorts of restrictions regarding residence, income and property taxes it developed that only a few hundred persons on St. Croix could vote for council members. Soon the council became the exclusive club of the propertied whose income was in excess of $500 a year."[15]

The Colonial Council was comprised of the Governor-General, the Governor's secretary, planters (more representation than other), procurator, paletimester, commandoure captain, pastors and judges. The council managed all the affairs of the colony, i.e. immigration of labor, inter-island trade, maintenance and sanitation, disease control, general financial matters, taxation, medical attention, military expenditure, post office, transportation and maintenance of the "unfree."

The officers of the council included a chairman, a vice chairman and a secretary. Council members were salaried employees of the state. They also had a "state church" which was Lutheran and served to reinforce the rules of the Danish Crown.

The society was divided into three classes of persons. The top of the economic and political order was the board of directors of the West India Company. The planters and local officials comprised the government, which was the vehicle to secure and support their interest as a wealthy class. There was a small white middle class comprised of small plantation owners, professionals, managers and church officials. Below the European planter class were the mixed races (offspring of planters and government officials) which monopolized the skilled trade occupations. The bottom of the economic order were the field workers, who were persons of African descent and outnumbered the European population as much as 7 to 1. Clearly, as free men and women the status of the plantation workers had changed very little.

The interests of these classes were antagonistic. The planters wanted to continue to exploit African labor and the Caribbean region for profit, whereas the Africans wanted to be free from oppression. Eventually the two groups clashed over these opposing interests. It is a mistake to assume that because the Fireburn did not erupt until 1878 all was well in the Danish Colony after Emancipation. Several strikes, meetings, work stoppages and minor insurrections had occurred through the years. The workers were denied redress of their grievances through "legitimate" channels via the magistrate, the planters and the Colonial

[15] Lewisohn, op. cit., p. 277.

Council. Eventually workers perceived the government as unjust and inflexible to change through established channels; therefore, a revolt became one possible alternative. The rigidity of the grievances procedure and the limited mobility within the occupational structure helped forge a consciousness among the workers that their socioeconomic problems were caused by the governing elite.

SOCIAL CONDITIONS AND CHANGE

The plantation economy became unstable after emancipation, with layoffs, lower wages and fewer privileges (for example, medical care was not provided). These socioeconomic problems adversely affected workers as individuals and collectively as a class. The workers' subordinate position in the economic order made them the most susceptible to the negative effects of the fluctuations of the economy.

There may be certain social conditions which "encourage people to change their view of themselves and their world, to object to and challenge arrangements which they may have accepted previously."[16] A common consciousness among the workers of such conditions existed for many years after the emancipation and was transmitted into radical action by the social conditions following 1848.

Historically, "changes in political behavior and beliefs do not occur separately from economic change."[17] After emancipation, the workers expected economic, political and social conditions to improve; when their expectations were not met, they became frustrated and discontented. If those who are "deprived can readily see who is responsible for their conditions, that group may soon be defined as the enemy and becomes the focus for the discontent."[18] The social conditions which had a negative impact on the field workers were in cane sugar; this economic mainstay of the islands was unable to compete in the world market with the newly discovered beet sugar from Europe. Island planters were faced with high taxes, export duties and shipping costs. To compensate they lowered the workers' wages.

Added to the economic instability were epidemics of small pox and cholera, and hurricanes which devastated St. Thomas and St. Croix in 1867. These incidents were followed by severe earthquakes, tidal waves and droughts which yielded poor crops. Many of the plantations were poorly administered by managers and attorneys who were given authority to manage the plantations by absentee proprietors. The mechanization of factories made workers and field hands expendable. There were few jobs for unskilled workers off the plantations and Danish authorities made travel between islands very difficult. The

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[16] Irving Krauss, *Stratification, Class and Conflict* (New York, 1976), p. 21.
[17] Roberta Ash-Garner, *Social Change* (Chicago 1977), p. vii.
[18] Krauss, op. cit., p. 21.

Fireburn offered workers "answers to certain dissatisfactions prompted by societal conditions in relation to their unique experiences."[19]

The social conditions and discontent simmering in the African community had set the stage for social upheaval. Another ingredient for the revolt was a highly emotional incident which precipitated collective action.

THE PRECIPITATING FACTOR

The precipitating factor for the Fireburn was a rumor on Contract Day in 1878. Contract Day was an annual holiday and workers celebrated by dancing, singing and drinking. There were usually several arrests for disturbing the peace and drunkeness. The highly emotional atmosphere of the day, heightened by rumors of police brutality and discontinuation of the issuance of passports touched off the revolt. "On October 1, 1878, the first day of the new years' labor contracts, rumors of impending violence were in the air in the town of Frederiksted. News circulated that passports were not being issued and that travellers were being detained. A series of incidents between police and crowds of people who had congregated in town resulted in the burning of several buildings."[20]

The spontaneous nature of the Fireburn explains why so many people mistakenly refer to the Fireburn as a riot. Similarities between the Fireburn and riots exist only in the presence of an initial precipitating factor. The Fireburn was instead a revolt by field workers on the plantations. It was organized, endured for a prolonged time period, had leadership, division of labor, tactics, and goals and it achieved significant change in the society. Antonio Jarvis suggests that the Cruzan workers were "revolting against the power of the estate owners and managers to fine them for trifles and to determine their private lives."[21]

LEADERSHIP IN THE FIREBURN

There is some evidence which supports the idea that revolt was planned, for example, such circumstances as the calm on Contract Day, which was usually a rowdy, rum-drinking holiday. It was so quiet, in fact, that Police Master Peterson in Frederiksted was moved to investigate the situation. Other evidence was that workers had failed to cultivate their provisional grounds during several weeks prior to the Fireburn. Gerard Emanuel, a student of the Fireburn who has collected data in the Danish National Archives, said, "some workers interrogated after the Fireburn say it was planned." The Reverend Dubois, the British Vice Counsel during the Fireburn, declared that

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[19] Raymond Hall, *Black Separatism and Social Reality* (New York, 1977), p. 13.
[20] "100 years," October, 1878 (St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, 1978), p. 5.
[21] Jarvis, op. cit., p. 80.

he "knew of unrest but the worse they would have expected was some verbal protest, some type of work stoppage."[22] Mr. Farrelly, a British planter whose property was destroyed, reported, "We had suspected a strike might take place, but nothing worse."[23]

The planters and government officials, then, suspected protest by the workers but were surprised by the severity and the method it took. If the workers were to plan a revolt, what better time than Contract Day? Whether the Fireburn was planned leaves us to speculate because concrete evidence is lacking. There is little doubt, nevertheless, that the Fireburn was organized and led by Crucian workers, both native born and immigrant workers from other islands. The "leaders encourage group members to question the present distribution of social good and legitimacy of existing authority structure and they work out practical means for attaining the goal."[24]

Several leaders emerged during the revolt. Some appeared to be very "charismatic" in the classical Weberian tradition. Three women or *Queens* appeared to be the most charismatic: Queen Mary, Queen Agnes and Queen Matilda, or "bottom belly," as she was commonly known. The title of *queen* was bestowed on these women because they were selected by the workers on the plantations to preside over all ceremonies, rituals and celebrations. These women were held in the highest esteem and were well respected as leaders by their fellow workers. Other prominent leaders were James de Silva, Joe La Grange, Rebecca Frederik, Axelline Soloman, Joseph Parris and General Paris. General Paris in particular was a gallant leader; he led groups of workers to the Moringster, Montpellier, Windsow and Glenn Plantations, forcing Danish Militia and planters to retreat. After observing his leadership ability, one Danish colonialist commented: "It made a bad impression to see brave soldiers turn their backs to Paris and his horde. Paris was a vaunted and daring leader who emerged to consolidate the roving gangs into an effective mass resistance."[25]

There was also a division of labor within the cadres of revolting workers. In a division of labor each individual is assigned specific functions and everyone's role is clearly defined; this enables the group to pursue its objectives more effectively. Men, women and children were assigned specific roles during the Fireburn. Women and children "were delegated to put the rum in the great house cellars and light it."[26] While they burned the "great house" on the plantations the menfolk, armed with confiscated rifles, axes, cutlasses, stones and torches, "set fire to the fort's out-buildings when they failed to storm the inner

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[22] Lewisohn, op. cit., p. 325.
[23] Ibid, p. 325.
[24] Krauss, op. cit., p. 22.
[25] Lewisohn, op. cit., p. 312.
[26] Ibid, p. 315.

gate and soon took on the more serious task of fighting the militia."[27]

More than fifty plantations and buildings were systematically burned. The damage extended to all areas of the islands and workers often communicated with each other by blowing into conch shells, ringing bells or beating drums. The workers also used battlefield tactics which were effective in momentarily confusing and intimidating the militia and volunteers. "The workers often organized into groups of 10-12 people and would attack the plantations. These units were mobile and it was easy to escape the volunteers by running for the bush."[28] Workers also attacked plantations by night and retreated to the canefields and eventually escaped into the hills or bush, where the Danish militia and volunteers were reluctant to follow them and often waited for daybreak to search for them.

Most riots are brief and no tangible social change occurs after they are controlled. This is not what occurred during the Fireburn. The most violent part of the revolt endured for five days, but the island was under a state of seige by the Governor-General from October 8th until October 31. In addition, reinforcements were sent to crush the revolt; the French man-o-war ship *La Bourdonnaise,* the British warship *Tourmaline,* and the United States warship *Plymouth* were anchored outside the harbor of Frederiksted.

The Fireburn also helped to clarify the grievances of the workers. They "were not just against their lack of mobility and limited job choice but also against the strict vagrancy laws, the unsatisfactory rulings about terminations of contracts and underpayment."[29] Specifically, the workers wanted the Labor Law of 1849 to be abolished. They wanted greater job mobility, more occupational choices and higher wages. The labor revolt, in fact, was more important than the emancipation in improving the socioeconomic status of the field workers, for after emancipation, the Labor Act kept them in a "freed slave" status and retarded their social, economic and political progress.

The Fireburn was costly. Eighty-four workers were killed, and two soldiers and a planter lost their lives. Three hundred workers were arrested. Property losses were also high. In Christiansted, $670,500 was lost in the destruction of fifty-one plantations, and in Frederiksted, the damage totaled $1,341,000. These must be meausred against significant changes in the lives of the workers which were also results of the revolt.

Three significant changes occurred as a result of the Fireburn and improved the quality of life for the working people of the Virgin Islands. First, labor contracts were no longer enforced on an annual

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[27] Ibid, p. 314.
[28] Ibid, p. 321.
[29] Ibid., 328.

basis. Second, laborers could buy land on good terms under the "parcelling out-systems;" each laborer was allowed to buy up to twenty-eight acres of land. Third, labor unions were formed.