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# Some Aspects of Work Organization on Sugar Plantations in Barbados<sup>1</sup>

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Although sugar plantations have been the concern of a number of students of Caribbean societies (cf. Rubin 1959), there still appears to be a relative dearth of descriptive materials which deal with the kinds of tasks plantation laborers perform and the ways in which laborers are organized in the performance of these tasks. When such discussions have taken place they have usually centered upon large "field-and-factory combines" (Steward 1959: 10) which grow cane on relatively flat lands and whose physical size and facilities, corporate and sometimes absentee ownership, etc., involve large-scale organization and role complexes. In addition, these descriptions have usually been embedded within, and often incidental to, a larger discussion of such topics as cultural change or the historical development of specific plantation types, the plantation as a social system or as an "economic institution" (Greaves 1959: 14), the culture of communities formed by plantation workers or aspects of the culture of such communities (cf. Jayawardena 1963, Mintz 1956, Padilla 1956, Cumper 1954, Lasserre 1952). From studies such as these it is apparent that there are sufficient differences in production techniques and work organization between various plantation areas to warrant presentation of data along these lines.

This paper is specifically concerned with the more salient features of work organization on several small-scale sugar plantations in the Scotland or highland district of Barbados. Emphasis is less upon the plantation as a productive enterprise or social system than upon the organization of work activities and the statuses which workers fill as they perform these activities. It is the workers, the kinds of jobs they perform, and the organization involved in the performance of these jobs which form the subject matter of this presentation.

The southern Caribbean island of Barbados lies about 100 miles east of the arc of volcanic islands which constitute the Lesser Antilles. Its 166 square miles include several physical regions. One of these is the Scotland District—the sole highland area in Barbados—which is separated from other regions of the island by a semicircular limestone escarpment fourteen or fifteen miles long. In contrast to the rest of the island, which consists of a series of gently undulating plateaus of varying elevations, the landscape of the Scotland District is fairly rugged and is free of the limestone cap which

covers the other six-sevenths of Barbados' surface. According to Buie (1955: 1):

The topography is generally steep. . . slopes of 75 per cent or more are not uncommon. . . . The area is characterized by deeply dissected, narrow valleys.

Since the middle of the seventeenth century Barbados has been a sugar island. Sugar continues to dominate its economy, and various agreements with the British Government, especially since the Second World War, have minimized the vicissitudes of marketing which plagued the industry for many years. As in former times, sugar today is largely a plantation crop. Of the island's total cane production in 1961 and 1962, for instance, plantations accounted for 84.2 and 84.8 per cent, respectively, the remainder being grown by small farmers on parcels of about an acre.

The materials for this paper are drawn from the plantations for which the villagers of Chalky Mount work.<sup>2</sup> Their village is a small one, located in the heart of the Scotland District. Although it is not entirely an agrarian community, much of the villagers' cash income is derived from pursuits associated with one form or another of land use. Chalky Mount has an adult population of about 215 persons. Some 70 to 75 of these, including persons of both sexes representing 63 of the village's 117 households, are regular plantation workers. However, more individuals and households become involved in plantation wage labor during the cane reaping season when regular laborer contingents are augmented as work demands increase. Close to 70 per cent of the laborers are also actively engaged in small-scale cane farming, 63 per cent of them renting their "working lands" from the plantations for which they work. It is not unusual to find a worker growing cane on his own small freehold land parcel as well. Virtually all of the workers are members of households which own their own houses, although about half of the households to which they belong rent their house sites from plantations.

Aside from small-scale cane farming, many people are likewise engaged in other cash-producing activities, including the raising of income-producing livestock such as cows, sheep, and goats, the cultivation of minor cash crops, wage labor on the lands of other small farmers, and even occasional employment in the village's small pottery industry (Handler 1963). People also follow a number of other occupational pursuits, some of which are not directly associated with land use. Not only are a variety of income-producing activities characteristic of the village's economy, but adults normally combine several such activities throughout the year. Approximately 80 per cent of the plantation working males, for instance, and 35 per cent of the households with regular plantation workers combine at least three income-producing activities such as those mentioned above. A number of households have four major sources of income, and a handful regularly combine five income-producing activities.

Chalky Mount is a community consisting neither of a landless rural proletariat nor of a peasantry. In general, its inhabitants, including those

who are not regularly engaged in plantation work, seem to exemplify what Cornitas (1964:41) has called occupational multiplicity—"a situation wherein the modal adult is systematically engaged in a number of gainful activities which form for him an integrated economic complex." In terms of the villagers' extreme dependency upon cash (virtually all of the goods and services they regard as essential can be acquired only with cash) occupational multiplicity has distinctive adaptive advantages in the social and economic environments of Barbados. This paper, as suggested above, is concerned with only one aspect of Chalky Mount's occupational multiplicity, that of plantation wage-labor.

Since this presentation is focused upon the plantations for which Chalky Mount villagers work, the sample is a small one; it is composed of four plantations, though better than 90 per cent of the village's regular laborers work for but two of these. All plantation fields are within relatively short walking distances from the workers' homes. None of the sample plantations has its own factory (each contracts with one or more of the island's factories for the selling of its cane); many of their fields are located on hillsides, some of which are quite steep; the plantations are totally dependent upon rainfall for their water supply; there is a moderate amount of mechanization (primarily in certain phases of cultivation and the hauling of cane to factories); and the average land unit upon which sugar cane is grown is about 154 acres. Furthermore, the owners and managers of these plantations are all Barbadians, and, in general, the plantations' organization and role complexes are relatively simple. In many of these characteristics the plantations for which most Chalky Mount people work contrast rather sharply with the "field-and-factory combines" which have been described, for example, for British Guiana (Jayawardena 1963), Puerto Rico (Mintz 1956), Jamaica (Cumper 1954), and Guadeloupe (Lasserre 1952).

#### PLANTATION STAFF AND THE WORKERS

Although owners are the ultimate sources of authority, the person who is largely responsible for the day-to-day operation of the plantation, and consequently the one with whom the workers have the greatest contact, is the manager. The dual role of owner-manager is not uncommon in Barbados, but no owner in the sample also functioned as a manager. The manager's role demands that he makes virtually all operational decisions on production activities in addition to functioning as director of field activities, bookkeeper, and paymaster.

The manager is often assisted by a "superintendent" (or foreman) in the supervision of certain kinds of field labor. Overseers or submanagers immediately subordinate to the managers, though present in the hierarchies of larger plantations elsewhere, are absent in Chalky Mount. Superintendents come from the ranks of the laborers and live in the local villages, toward which their lives are oriented. One occasionally hears the word "driver" in reference to this position—a survival from slave days when favored field

hands were placed in positions of relative authority over other field hands—but the term superintendent is generally preferred today.

The superintendent is paid a fixed weekly salary, whether there is work in the fields or not, is exempt from manual labor, and is eligible for a number of benefits which vary according to the personal relationship between himself and the manager. He is often allowed a fairly wide latitude in his authority over the laborers, and it is rare for a manager to contradict a superintendent's labor decision. In an altercation with a laborer, for example, the manager will invariably support the superintendent even before the "facts of the case" are known to him.

The superintendent functions primarily in the supervision of labor crews that are paid on a "day work" basis. People working at piece, or "task," rates usually receive periodic inspections from the manager. In jobs paid at day rates, however, the superintendent is normally in constant attendance over labor crews, insuring that work proceeds according to the manager's standards. His work demands are consequently heaviest during the out-of-crop season, or "hard times," when proportionately more day work is done. Nevertheless, he exercises nominal supervision over some cane-cutting crews (who are paid at "task" rates) during the reaping season to insure that "things is done right." The superintendent, then, functions as a foreman. His authority, though limited, may be increased to the extent that the manager, in the absence of overseers and other supervisory staff, has to depend upon him in everyday plantation work. His official authority, however, is largely confined to the field laborers and does not extend to other plantation workers, e.g., truck and tractor drivers, most of whom come under the direct authority of the manager.

Other statuses on a plantation's staff, i.e., those which are paid weekly salaries, include house servants, yard men or grooms, and the watchman. Persons who perform these roles, though considered "staff members," do not, of necessity, enjoy any higher status or prerogatives than many of the field laborers or truck and tractor drivers.

The field laboring segment of the plantation's labor force—its largest contingent—can be classified into five categories on the basis of age, sex, and task performance: Class A males, Class A females, Class B males, Class B females, and Class C, composed of children of both sexes under eighteen years of age. These categories are recognized in discussions between the Barbados Workers' Union and the Sugar Producers' Association when, for example, wage rates are negotiated. Class A males are defined as those who perform at least two of the following jobs: cutting cane, digging cane holes, and digging drainage ditches in the fields. Class B males consist of those who do not meet these criteria. Class A females are defined as those who, during "crop," i.e., the harvest, carry and/or load cane and during hard times carry baskets of dung. Class B females perform other tasks. Class C includes boys and girls under eighteen years of age and, according to the law, not less than twelve. Each class receives a corresponding wage for day labor, ranging from Class A males at the top, through Class B males,

Class A females, and Class B females in order, to Class C members at the bottom.

Class A males are among the younger men, averaging about 40 years of age. They work primarily as cane cutters and truck-crew members during the crop season and as cane-hole diggers during the out-of-crop season, and they average the highest earnings among the field groups. Since most of the jobs they perform are paid for on a task basis, differences in work output are largely reflected in earnings, even though mechanized equipment used in cultivation has made their services unnecessary for extended periods during the out-of-crop season (see below).

One Class A man is known as the "first row man." Though not a staff member, he assumes this status as a management appointee and is usually considered a faster and more responsible worker. The first row man can be viewed as a subforeman. He works with the groups of Class A males who perform such task-paid jobs as digging cane holes, doing the same kind of work and being paid at the same rates, but he is responsible for noting the amount of work each man does and reporting this to the manager at the end of the day. His privileges are limited, though he does receive some extra money for his duties, and his authority is indeterminate and poorly defined, so that conflicts are more likely to arise between him and other laborers than between the latter and the superintendent. If the superintendent cannot work, the first row man usually substitutes for him. Superintendents have usually been first row men themselves, and the position can be viewed as an apprenticeship to the job of superintendent.

Class B men are the older men, their average age being 61, and they are largely employed in the clearing and weeding of drainage ditches and other assorted and minor jobs. They are employed in smaller numbers and receive proportionately less work than any other adult labor class. Much of the work they could do, e.g., weeding fields and cutting potato slips, is more commonly performed by Class A women, who receive less daily pay and who can perform these tasks just as effectively and probably faster.

Females find, on the average, more employment during the year than either of the male groups (see Tables 1 and 2). Mechanized equipment has diminished the need for male labor during the out-of-crop season, whereas the kinds of jobs that females perform, such as weeding and distributing fertilizer, are in fairly continuous demand. Moreover, the plantations of the Scotland District normally employ two female "headers"—people who collect and tie the cut cane and carry it on their heads to a road—per cutter during the crop season, and most out-of-crop chores can be effectively performed by females who receive less pay on a daily basis.

In terms of actual plantation operations, the foregoing classification of workers requires some qualification in the case of Class B females. As defined above, these include women who do not "head" during the crop nor carry dung baskets during "hard times." Yet there is one group of female workers, known as "farmers," who, though technically Class B workers, are nevertheless paid at Class A female rates. The system of "farming," i.e., the

practice of jobbing out fields to be weeded by particular individuals, dates back to the early 1840s (Starkey 1939: 120). The "farmers" are actually specialized weeders who are kept occupied, regardless of the season, weeding fields of newly planted cane with hoes. They are paid on a task basis by the fields they hoe, which are assigned to them as individuals. Hence their work, contrary to most other major plantation labor, is not performed in the context of a group environment. As compared with workers of other classes, "farmers" find relatively full employment throughout the year. Like other Class B women, who are engaged more sporadically in such chores as picking cattle fodder and carrying drinking water to field laborers, "farmers" are older women. While the average age of Class A women is 37, that of Class B women is about 61.

Whereas membership in the A and B classes is determined by sex and task as well as by age, membership in Class C is determined primarily by age. Class C laborers—the "third gang"<sup>3</sup> or simply the "children"—are used only occasionally on some plantations; during 1961-62 only one of the Chalky Mount plantations employed child labor regularly, and even this group of about ten children did not find employment throughout the year.

Children work as a group, usually in hand weeding and the distribution of fertilizers. Each child is paid on a daily wage basis, at a rate considerably lower than that of any adult class. When working, the children's group is supervised by a Class A woman. She is, for the time being, a quasi-superintendent, although there is no special term to designate her status. At other times she is engaged in the usual Class A female work of the particular season, under the direction of the superintendent, but when the children are working she is assigned to supervise their labor, being paid her normal Class A daily wage.

Plantations usually have a regular labor contingent which they augment during the reaping season. There is no large-scale migration of workers from other parts of the island; most of the added laboring force comes from the village or other adjacent villages. Although some laborers work for one plantation during "hard times" and for another during "crop," or for one plantation one year and a different one the next year, the majority of the regular employees, barring severe altercations with managers, continue with one plantation and are not inclined to change. In fact, since wage rates are similar throughout the area, the choice of the employer is generally based upon the proximity of the plantation's fields to the worker's residence. This is a matter of convenience for the worker not only in reaching his job but commonly also in visiting the small "farmer" fields when plantation work ceases for the day.

Although most major plantation jobs except "farming" are performed by groups, tasks are for the most part assigned to individuals (with important exceptions occurring during "crop," to be noted below). In general, although a worker may be part of a labor group engaged in the performance of one job, he is paid not on the basis of the group's performance but of his own, regardless of whether payment is on a day or task basis.

The majority of jobs most fundamental to a plantation's productive activities are today performed on a task basis. Laborers overwhelmingly prefer this manner of payment, for they can often make as much or more money by "breakfast time" (early afternoon) doing task work as they could make during the entire day working at day rates. It is also both usually admitted and clearly observable that performance is slower in day work and not necessarily better. In fact, the speed and earnestness with which task work is performed differs in an often remarkable way from the performance observed on day-work jobs. The contrast is even more dramatic when one has an opportunity to observe the same individuals working under the different systems, especially if the day work is not under managerial supervision. Managers, well aware of this, make every effort to subject day-work crews, regardless of the job they are performing, to as much supervision as possible. Task work is supervised to a considerably lesser extent, and primarily to insure that the work is conducted according to the manager's standards.

There are other general differences, regardless of the particular job involved, between task and day work. Day workers take off an hour for lunch around noon, while task workers normally quit for the day in the early afternoon and then go home for their midday meal. In some cases, task workers can work longer hours if they so desire—provided there is still work to be done on the assigned job and the manager does not limit the amount of work that may be done in a day. Usually, however, task workers prefer to quit after they have done what they consider a "fair day's work," i.e., have made a satisfactory wage for the day. They like to quit early not only because of the rapid pace of the work and the concomitant fatigue—a reason managers sometimes give—but also because they are then free to work for the remainder of the day on their own parcels of land or at other unpaid or cash-producing chores. During "hard times," consequently, it is not unusual to see male workers returning home from the fields about 1:30 P.M. and soon after taking their hoes and forks to their own land parcels to "work on de ground" for the remainder of the afternoon.

#### TASKS AND THE AGRICULTURAL CYCLE

This section will outline the major tasks performed by the several work classes and will attempt to correlate them and the organization involved in their performance with the two major phases in the agricultural year. The same individuals usually perform a number of different tasks at different periods of the agricultural year. Aside from the customary assignment of tasks along sexual lines, few workers are considered so specialized that they cannot perform a variety of jobs. There are, to be sure, individual differences in abilities, and managers attempt to allocate the more specialized jobs in terms of these differences.

During the months from February to May, when the cane is reaped,



the majority of the laborers are occupied with cutting and heading the cane and transporting it to factories. We turn first, then, to the cutters, headers, and truck workers and to the particular characteristics of their roles within the plantation environment.

The procedure involved in cutting cane is relatively simple. Wielding their "bills,"<sup>4</sup> the cutters move through a field, each one taking two or three rows, while the headers move behind them tying the cane stalks into bundles and then heading these to the nearest road, whence they are loaded onto trucks and transported to the factories to be sold. Ideally, cutters can cut as much cane as they wish, and all are paid task rates, but limits are set to the amount of cane a plantation will cut during the day by the daily quotas that factories assign to the plantations which have agreed to send them their cane. These quotas are established in order to insure the operation of the factories at maximum efficiency. If a plantation's daily quota has been met the cutters must cease their activities for the remainder of the working day. Cutting activities can also come to a stop during the day, especially during the initial phases of the crop season, as a result of mechanical failures at the factories. The latter commonly accept no more cane when they have accumulated what they consider a sufficient amount for immediate grinding, and the plantations must then perforce stop cutting to avoid loss through drying at the roadsides or in the fields. Cutters are then freed, as they are at the end of the week, to work their own cane fields or on the holdings of other small farmers.

Most Chalky Mount workers who cut plantation cane during 1961 and 1962 worked alone and not as members of cutting "gangs." Though cutters usually work in groups, "gang" refers specifically to a formally organized group whose members pool their labor resources in a co-operative effort and divide equally each week the total amount received for their collective tonnage. Only one-fourth of the Chalky Mount males who cut plantation cane for most or all of the 1962 crop, for instance, did so as gang members. The rest, for the most part, worked alone. It is noteworthy, however, that about 63 per cent of them started out as gang members at the beginning of the crop season, most of them discontinuing their membership after a week or so. In fact, only three or four gangs in the plantation sample persisted throughout the season. Whatever their duration, gangs rarely include more than three men, and most are formed by only a pair of cutters.

A cutting gang is a voluntary association; membership is left to the choice of the cutters, and a manager seldom interferes with its composition. Laborers who wish to form a gang have two primary considerations: equal work capacity and personal compatibility. The former is a necessary precondition to association, the latter a necessary condition for the group's survival. Regardless of personal compatibility, fast cutters refuse to work with slow cutters. Although slow cutters may be willing to join a gang, they may not be able to find anyone willing to accept them. Some workers insist upon

cutting alone. In general, there seems to be no correlation between a man's cutting ability and his proclivity to work in a gang. Among the faster cutters observed, some worked singly and others as gang members.

Because gangs are voluntarily formed, they can easily be dissolved. Their fragility is attested by the impermanence of most of those which started the 1962 crop season. Here the issue of personal compatibility is essential. Fundamental to the gang's output is not only the speed at which its members cut cane but also the necessity that all put in an equal amount of work. If one member rests too often, quits early, or does not keep pace with the others, the effectiveness of the group is lessened and antagonism among its members can easily erupt. Personal compatibility and previous strong friendship among the members minimize instances of this kind, but gangs formed solely on the basis of equal work capacity, unleavened by concessions to friendship, readily dissolve under undue stress. Because gang members are capable of fairly equal performance, it is unlikely that a man who rests too often, for instance, will be able to catch up and cut as much cane as his peers, yet he shares equally in the proceeds with those who have worked harder. It is not a question of the other members resting to let the recalcitrant one catch up and produce an equal share; since it is task work, all try to work at top speed to cut as much cane as possible. Gang members usually start work at the same time, take time off for lunch together, stop for cigarette breaks together, and so on. Unless they are extremely good friends it is unusual for one person to continue cutting cane while the others are resting, and quite often the gang will not work at all if, for some reason, one of its members is not present for the day.

Men who form a gang justify their behavior in terms of their feeling that they can cut more cane as members of a group than they could as individuals. This is presumably the reason why so many individuals start a crop season as gang members. Although some of the fastest cutters observed worked in gangs and felt that this increased their output, I have no evidence that their work output would have been significantly less had they cut as individuals nor that gang membership, in and of itself, results in greater cutting speeds.

On Scotland District plantations a pair of headers normally works behind each cutter. This pattern reflects the topography of the area, which frequently prevents trucks from entering the fields to be loaded, as occurs in the more level parts of the island. Since there is no mechanization of loading, the cane must usually be carried from the fields to the closest accessible road, and it is the headers who perform this important activity.

The alignment of headers with cutters is effected by the workers themselves. The faster cutters and headers consequently make an effort to associate with one another. Managers sometimes influence the composition of a cutting unit, especially when cutters and headers are added to the labor force during the course of the crop season, but even then the choice of association is commonly left to the workers themselves. Because the

selection of a work group is voluntary, headers can change their membership—provided, of course, that work is available with another group. Since headers work as a co-operative unit, and payment is determined by their combined tonnage, it is essential that both members contribute an equal amount of work. If one header does less work than the other, for whatever reason, she nevertheless receives the same payment. Arguments can arise as a result, especially with headers who do not form part of the normal working contingent of the plantation. Regular plantation workers commonly base their association on friendship whereas others, who join later, have less chance to do so and may have to accept any opening offered. Headers and cutters together form an integrated working unit whose earning capacity is dependent not only upon the ability of the cutter but also upon the speed with which the headers can move his cane out of the field to a road.

Transporting the cane to a factory is the third major task performed during the crop season. Since all transportation is by trucks, their drivers and crews have major roles to play in the production cycle. Truck drivers occupy one of the most prestigious positions in the plantation's labor force. They are absolved from agricultural labor, they enjoy relative freedom from constant supervision, and their earnings exceed those of most other workers.

During the crop season the plantations, especially the larger ones, augment their truck contingent by pressing more trucks into service along with additional laborers to man them. Most members of truck crews are male workers in their twenties and early thirties, many of whom do not normally work on the plantation during the out-of-crop season. A truck crew is usually composed of five men plus the driver, who is the formal leader. He is responsible for the operation of the truck and is held accountable by the manager if anything goes wrong. Although he does not have the power to hire and fire the members of his crew, he exerts a great deal of influence in choosing them, and under normal circumstances the manager does not interfere with his choice.

Because of the nature of the work it is important that the truck crew operate as a well co-ordinated unit, and physical qualifications and personal compatibility are again relevant here. Since all trucking personnel, drivers included, are paid according to the tonnage delivered at the factory it is of utmost importance to carry as much tonnage (within the five-ton maximum prescribed by law) as possible in each load and to transport it quickly so as to be able to maximize the number of daily round trips. Hence, when a truck returns from a factory, it is immediately reloaded for a return trip. The men work rapidly and strenuously in lifting the cane bundles from the road into the truck. Unless each member of the crew performs his share of the physical labor, arguments can arise and the rate of work may be slowed. For this reason drivers are concerned to have men who are not only physically qualified but also relatively compatible. Trouble can easily develop among crew members who are chosen at random when a new truck is

quickly pressed into service, and younger men are often reluctant to work with older men who they feel cannot meet the physical demands of the task.

While the work required of a crew member is physically demanding, it is confined to relatively short spurts—the 30 minutes or so at a time needed fully to load a truck. Other things being equal, e.g., the cutters are working and cane is waiting to be shipped, the payment received by the driver and crew is contingent upon their functioning harmoniously and at maximum speed. Although crew memberships shift throughout the reaping season, it is interesting to note that those crews and drivers which remained together for the entire duration of the 1962 crop were precisely those whose circumstances permitted the greatest latitude in the exercise of free choice in association.

Since truck crews and drivers are paid by the cane tonnage they haul, it is generally to their advantage to haul this cane to the nearest factory to which the plantation's cane has been committed. Furthermore, since truck drivers strive to make as many round trips per day as possible, they tend, if left alone, to exceed the plantation's quotas to particular factories while short hauling to others. Hence, as cutting proceeds during the day, the manager is forced to increase his supervision of truck movements. The only regular altercations witnessed between truck drivers and managers revolved around this issue. If, as sometimes happens, all of a plantation's cane is committed to one factory, this problem naturally does not arise.

Some other jobs are performed during the crop season; for example, women farm fields, older men clear drainage ditches, and children pick cane trash for animal fodder. Nevertheless, most of the plantation's labor force is focused upon the performance of the three basic tasks of cutting, heading, and transporting the cane. Each cane-cutting group of cutter and headers and associated trucking group of driver and crew are economically dependent upon one another though socially autonomous. Within each group, however, the interdependency of the members is so great that the group is likely to be extremely fragile unless its members have similar work capacity and are personally compatible.

After the last canes have been cut, plantation work all but ceases for the following two weeks except for minor jobs like cleaning the roads of trash. This is the beginning of "hard times," which today spans the period from June to January. Not only is there proportionately less work on the plantations, but weekly earnings are also commensurately less. The work demands placed upon the labor force are different in kind, the labor force loses part of its augmented contingent, and activities relate to the demands of cane growing and preparations for the next crop season.

After reaping, the fields are mulched by crews of women, who spread trash around the cane holes. As the rains commence, fertilizer is spread on the fields, and bulldozers or tractors begin plowing the fields that are to be planted to new cane and those which are to remain fallow during the coming year. Throughout June and July crews are kept fairly busy planting

food crops, such as yams, sweet potatoes, and corn, which are grown in alternate rows between the cane holes in some fields. Although some of the steeper fields are still cultivated by hand, most plantation land is cultivated today by mechanized equipment, mainly bulldozers.

Soon after the preparation of the non-ratoon fields by this equipment the cane holes are dug by hand. The practice of planting cane in holes dates from the earliest days of the Barbadian sugar industry, and cane-hole digging is today the chief task performed by Class A male workers during the out-of-crop season. Before the holes are dug, the field is laid out in grids five feet square by a man who is considered a specialist in "lining." Cane-trash markers are set up at the corners of every square to serve as reference points.

The field is now ready for the hole diggers. Each man, working with a pitchfork, takes a different row in the field and, following the markers, digs the holes in two-foot squares, leaving three feet of "bank" between each one. Cane-hole digging is task work. Each worker is paid solely on the basis of the number of holes dug, and each man works at his own pace. A fast and experienced worker can dig as many as four or five hundred holes per day, although informants estimated the normal rate at around 250. Daily work output is recorded by the first row man, who transmits this information to the manager. Cane-hole diggers normally start work at about eight o'clock in the morning and work steadily until one or two o'clock in the afternoon, when they quit for the day even though the field may not be completed, for they consider they have done a "fair day's work."

By late summer or early autumn all fields to be planted in cane and/or food crops have been "holed." During November and December the new "plant canes"—those to be reaped the year after next—are set out by Class A men who are especially proficient at this task. The "plant canes" are cut from the fields planted the year before. Plant cutting is done during a very limited period in the fall and involves, at best, not more than two or three men per plantation. Other men then plant the cane, placing two stumps in each hole, and later replace those which have not taken root.

Though Class A men also work on trucks, dig drainage ditches, etc., their major job during the out-of-crop season is digging cane holes. When this is completed, there is little other work for most of them.

Not more than a handful of Class B males find relatively continuous employment, mainly in weeding gutters in the ratoon fields and planting food crops. A few younger men, paid at B rates, are kept busy spraying weeds growing along the roadsides and on other assorted jobs.

Weeding is a primary female task which continues throughout the agricultural year. During the crop season "farmers" weed the fields of "plant cane," and after the crop, with other Class A women, they clear trash from the newly cut fields, piling it around the holes while weeding. "Weeding and clearing" are usually paid for at task rates, and it is during this process that the fields are mulched. Later, as the cane grows and other demands (see below) have been met, female crews return to the fields of growing cane,

and the "farmers" revert to weeding the new "plant cane." Weeding of the fields to be reaped continues through December or until the growing cane has so congested the fields that they can no longer be conveniently worked upon. Hoe weeding is primarily a female job, although labor crews of children are sometimes engaged in the removal of weeds that are most effectively pulled by hand.

The distribution of fertilizer is another primary responsibility of Class A females. Both animal and chemical fertilizers are used, although plantations rely less upon pen manure or dung than they did in former times, and some plantations do not use it at all. The plantations that use pen manure normally distribute it on the new "plant canes" from about November to January. Although this task is normally performed by Class A women, the children's group can be involved as well. Since the organizational procedure in the distribution of animal and chemical fertilizers is essentially the same, both will be discussed together.

Regardless of the kind of fertilizer used, it is conveyed to the fields in trucks. In the case of dung, the load is dumped at the side of a road, and two men with pitchforks load basketfuls which are "headed" out to the fields, where each cane hole receives one basketful. In the case of chemical fertilizer, members of the truck crews slit the bags and fill the pails which certain laborers carry. These are "headed" into the fields, and from them are filled the smaller containers carried by other women. These women then proceed down the rows scooping out handfuls of fertilizer for each cane hole. Meanwhile, the pail carriers return to the truck for another load and should be back in the fields when the distributors have emptied their containers.

Fertilization of the fields is best accomplished by relatively large groups and is paid for at day rates. Because of the size of the groups and the need for rapid and effective distribution, the workers are kept under constant surveillance and receive active verbal direction from the manager, superintendent, and, if the children's labor crew is working as well, their female superintendent. The degree of direction, e.g., by verbal prodding to carry heavier loads, varies with the personality of the manager and the time limits set for the completion of the task. Although the distribution of fertilizer is always done in large groups, the people work as individuals. If there is slacking, the pressure to proceed at a more rapid pace comes not from within the group, as in the cane-cutting and trucking units, but from the superintendent or, more usually, the manager himself.

Women also engage in other work during the out-of-crop season, e.g., cutting grass for animal fodder and planting food crops, but their two major tasks are weeding and fertilizing.

By December little work remains to be done. The cane to be reaped in February is high, and it is difficult for females to move through the fields weeding them. Class A men, unless odd jobs are found for them, are generally unemployed. Most fertilizing has already been completed, and in the last two weeks of December work all but ceases (see below). There may be a spurt in work demands during the first weeks of January, mainly to

complete the fertilization of the fields, but by the end of that month the plantation is ready, and the laborers are eagerly looking forward to the new crop season.

#### EARNINGS AND EMPLOYMENT

Prior to World War II, before the days of effective collective bargaining and the growth of the Barbados Workers' Union, wage scales were more arbitrary than they are now. Wages were much lower, and they varied from plantation to plantation. Today this situation has been considerably altered as the negotiating power of the Barbados Workers' Union has increased, and wages on both task and day jobs, though subject to periodic renegotiation, are more or less standardized. Plantation workers have received steady wage increases over the past decade, and various other benefits have helped considerably in augmenting their annual earnings.

One of these innovations, the Holiday with Pay, provides for a two-week paid vacation for plantation workers. The amount of money received is roughly 4 per cent of the earnings for the previous year (exclusive of the production bonus). The Holiday with Pay was enacted as a national law in 1951 and is but one manifestation of the relatively liberal social legislation passed over the years as popularly supported political parties have increased their control in the island's legislative assembly.

The sugar production bonus—often called by the laborers "back pay"—is subject to periodic renegotiation between the Barbados Workers' Union and the Sugar Producers' Association, neither of which is a governmental agency. Unlike the Holiday with Pay, the production bonus is not written into law, but it is nevertheless normally paid to all plantation workers who have worked during the crop season. It is based upon the amount of money earned during the season in relation to the island's total sugar production. The production bonus agreement, first negotiated in 1951, provides that each worker receive a bonus of 2.5 per cent of his earnings whenever island production reaches 131,906 tons of sugar. For each 5,000 tons in excess of this amount an additional 1.5 per cent is added.

Both the production bonus and the Holiday with Pay are important factors in a worker's total earnings. They are, however, based upon the individual worker's capacity to earn money during the year, and this is contingent not only upon the number of days when employment is available but also upon the physical ability of the worker, the season of the year, the type of work done, and the work class to which the worker belongs. These differences in earning capacities make it difficult to discuss wages meaningfully in blanket terms. It can be misleading, if not in many cases positively erroneous, to discuss the earnings and employment of plantation laborers as a single generalized occupational category. This will become clear from an examination of Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 presents data on the earnings received and days worked during 1961 by laborers of the four adult classes who were employed during both

TABLE 1  
Average Earnings and Days Worked of Plantation Laborers Who Worked at Least 120 Days During 1961

Workers	Days Worked and Wages Received		Total for Year		Additional Earnings	Total Earnings
	Crop Season	Out-of-Crop Season				
Sex and Class	Number					
	72	91	163			
Male	Class A	44	91	163		
	Class B	36	87	137		
Female	Class A	38	110	176		
	Class B	44	93	167		
TOTAL	50	95	161			
Male	Wages received	\$404.66	\$271.76	\$576.21	\$40.46	\$743.88
	% of total wages	137.60	221.01	358.61	—	372.96
Female	Wages received	248.28	211.41	459.69	24.82	502.76
	% of total wages	145.28	173.33	318.61	14.52	345.94
TOTAL	Wages received	233.96	219.38	453.28	26.60	491.39
	% of total wages	50	2.33	2.82	18.16	
Male	Average daily wage	\$5.62	\$2.99	\$4.15	\$4.15	
	Days worked	2.75	2.54	2.62	—	
Female	Average daily wage	3.76	1.92	2.61	24.82	
	Days worked	1.96	1.86	1.90	14.52	
TOTAL	Average daily wage	3.52	2.33	2.82	26.60	
	Days worked	50	2.33	2.82	18.16	
Male	Production Bonus				\$27.21	
	Holiday with Pay				14.35	



the crop and out-of-crop seasons and worked for 120 days or more. Superintendents, other staff personnel, and truck and tractor drivers, as well as children under eighteen, are excluded. Monetary figures are given in British West Indian dollars (\$1.00 B. W. I. = \$0.58 U. S.). The production bonus amounted to 10 per cent of the wages received during the crop season, except for Class B males. The Holiday with Pay earnings amounted to approximately 4 per cent of the total wages exclusive of the production bonus.

Table 2 presents similar, though not strictly comparable, data on laborers who worked fewer than 120 days during 1961. Two Class A males, three Class B males, and nine Class A females worked during both seasons; four Class A males and three Class A females worked only during the crop season; three Class A males, one Class B male, and one Class A female worked only during the out-of-crop season; no Class B females worked fewer than 120 days. Table 2 largely comprises such people as women in the later stages of pregnancy, males going to the United States on contract farm-labor programs, and males who supplemented the regular plantation contingents during the crop season only. The total number of days these persons worked and their total earnings are thus not properly comparable with the similar data in Table 1.

Reference to Tables 1 and 2 reveals that the majority of Chalky Mount's plantation workers (50 out of 71) were employed for at least 120 days during the year, that females outnumbered males among both the regularly and irregularly employed, and that females were employed on the average more days during the year. That Class A males found slightly more employment during the crop season reflects the inclusion of truck-crew members, who normally work a longer week than do either headers or cutters. Mechanization has affected male more than female employment. It has reduced the number of males employed on a major out-of-crop task, and the surplus has not been absorbed in such jobs as weeding and fertilizing because these can be performed just as adequately by females and at less cost to the plantations.

Despite the fact that males worked fewer days over the year, both their average wage and total earnings were substantially higher than for females, the contrast being most striking during the crop season. For regularly employed workers of Class A, for example, males averaged \$241 more than females in total earnings, although they worked on the average thirteen fewer days during the year.

In his comprehensive survey of the sugar industry of Barbados, McKenzie (1958: 27) states that "field workers earn the major part of their yearly earnings out of crop and this proportion does not carry the increase due from the production bonus." Our Chalky Mount data, though admittedly based on a limited sample, suggest a trend toward greater dependency upon crop earnings. Table 1 reveals that regular workers of all classes earned about 50 per cent of their total wages during the crop season, and this despite the fact that Class B workers of both sexes are in considerably less demand during this season. Although the crop season covers only about 30 per cent of the working weeks of the year, Class A male workers earned

TABLE 2  
Average Earnings and Days Worked of Plantation Laborers Who Worked Less Than 120 Days During 1961

		<i>Days Worked and Wages Received</i>				<i>Additional Earnings</i>		<i>Total Earnings</i>											
		Out-of-Crop Season		Total for Year		Production Bonus	Holiday with Pay												
		Average daily wage		Days worked		Amount received	Amount received	Amount received											
		Wages received		No. workers		No. workers	No. workers	No. workers											
		Days worked		Average daily wage		Amount received	Amount received	Amount received											
		No. workers		Wages received		No. workers	No. workers	No. workers											
		Average daily wage		Days worked		Amount received	Amount received	Amount received											
		Wages received		No. workers		No. workers	No. workers	No. workers											
		Days worked		Average daily wage		Amount received	Amount received	Amount received											
		No. workers		Wages received		No. workers	No. workers	No. workers											
<i>Male</i>	Class A	6	63	\$317.16	\$5.01	5	44	\$120.57	\$2.74	9	67	\$275.09	\$4.11	6	\$31.71	9	\$10.95	9	\$307.18
	Class B	3	26	83.54	3.14	4	75	211.19	2.82	4	94	273.84	2.91	4	—	4	10.95	4	284.80
<i>Female</i>	Class A	12	54	209.86	3.87	10	38	66.52	1.75	13	78	244.88	3.14	12	20.98	13	9.47	13	273.72
	TOTAL	21	48	203.52	4.00	19	52	132.76	2.44	26	80	264.60	3.39	22	26.35	26	10.46	26	288.57

Workers by Sex and Class

approximately 60 per cent of their total wages during this period. That a worker can earn proportionately more during the crop season on a daily or even weekly basis is, of course, not new information. It is of interest to note, however, that, with the changing demands for labor, Class A males in particular are coming to depend increasingly on their crop earnings. Should automatic loaders be introduced, this could drastically affect the already precarious earning potential, not only of Class A male truck crews but of Class A female headers as well.

The earning capacity of a worker also depends, of course, on the kind of work he does. Table 3 shows the average weekly wages (exclusive of

TABLE 3  
Average Weekly Earnings During Crop Season of Plantation Workers  
Who Worked Ten Weeks or More in 1961 and 1962

<i>Roles</i>	<i>Average Weekly Wage</i>	
	1961	1962
Truck driver	\$34.65	\$39.57
Cane cutter	26.47	26.91
Truck crew	21.69	22.57
Header	18.74	20.00

the production bonus) for the four major roles during the crop seasons of 1961 and 1962, which lasted fifteen and fourteen weeks respectively. Truck drivers, who were omitted in Tables 1 and 2, are included here for purposes of comparison. In level of earnings the roles range from truck drivers at the top, through cane cutters and truck crew members, to headers, some of whom are males. The three lower positions may overlap. Some of the slower cutters average about the same as some truck crew members. The faster cutters average more than the highest paid truck crew members and for this reason often prefer to cut cane. Headers, too, can average more than truck crew members, especially those who work behind the faster cutters.

#### THE UNION AND LABOR SHORTAGES

The Barbados Workers' Union, the primary bargaining agent for the island's workers, has played an active role in bringing about the wage increases and improved working conditions which have characterized the sugar industry of Barbados over the past ten or fifteen years. Yet the Union has no members among Chalky Mount's regular plantation laborers nor among the laborers from other villages who work for the same plantations being considered in this paper. The collective bargaining power of the Union nevertheless extends even to those who are not its members. The workers of

Chalky Mount, for example, profit by its agreements with the Sugar Producers' Association, and this seems to be one of the key factors in the difficulties the Union has experienced in organizing the workers of the area. So long as the workers derive benefits from wage increases and improvements in working conditions, they are not motivated to join the Union, even though they are well aware of its role in securing these benefits for them. It is important to note also that the local plantation owners do not belong to the Sugar Producers' Association, yet for the most part they comply voluntarily with whatever settlements it reaches with the Union. It is suggested that this compliance reflects their need to maintain a consistent and reliable labor supply.

There seems to be a growing recognition that labor shortages, particularly of cutters during the crop season, are growing more imminent as the years go by. The older managers and officials of the Sugar Producers' Association confess that recently it has become increasingly difficult to be assured of having enough cane cutters to reap the crop effectively. Among the more common alleged reasons for this are the recent large-scale emigration to England, which has drained some areas of Barbados of many younger people, and the increased availability of government jobs for unskilled workers. There is also a decreasing willingness to engage in certain kinds of plantation work—to "work with the hoe," as one manager put it—on the part of younger people, including even those without a secondary school education. That this situation has existed for several decades is attested by the observations of Starkey (1939: 197):

The availability of education has been both an advantage and a disadvantage to the island's economic system. . . many of the laboring classes have become dissatisfied with field labor and, at times, there has been a shortage of field laborers and a considerable surplus of clerks and artisans.

Although no plantation manager in the Chalky Mount area complained of any acute labor shortage, they all admitted that they could have used more cutters, and in some cases headers and truck crews as well. It is not uncommon for planters in certain locales to be forced to rely upon labor contingents from other plantations during the closing days of the crop in order to finish reaping their fields before the factories close for the season. It would merit further investigation to ascertain whether the pessimistic attitude of managers reflects a genuine scarcity of labor at certain times or simply an occasional difficulty in acquiring labor which is exaggerated by assumptions traditional to plantation operations, e.g., that labor should be "plentiful and cheap" (Wolf and Mintz 1957: 400).

#### DISCUSSION

The plantations for which most Chalky Mount laborers work are small in terms of their cultivated acreages, labor forces, and lack of factories. Mechanization is limited to certain aspects of field cultivation and to the

transportation of cane. Moreover, the hierarchical organization and major role complexes are relatively simple.

The major work classes were created in the days of slavery and have persisted through time with some alterations in the recent past as a result of the influence of modern labor unions. The fact that work groups are often referred to as "gangs" further suggests the continuity with the past in formal plantation organization. Females continue to play a vital role in plantation operations, which is sustained by the customary sexual division of labor in field jobs, a double standard in wage rates, and ecological conditions which favor the use of females as headers. The plantations are not owned by large foreign corporations but by Barbadians operating in simple partnerships or as individual proprietors.

Although there are pronounced status differences between owners and managers on the one hand and laborers on the other, they reveal numerous cultural similarities, and both operate in terms of many shared values and an awareness of reciprocal expectations. Proximity of living and common life experiences affect the working of the plantations in a number of ways. Although the plantations are fundamentally profit-seeking enterprises geared to the production of a monocrop for a large-scale external market, a personal quality nonetheless enters into their everyday operations and creates an atmosphere different from that of the large field-and-factory combines described elsewhere in the Caribbean. In a number of respects, then, the plantations for which most Chalky Mount laborers work have some of the characteristics of the "old style plantation" of Wolf (1959) or even of the hacienda (Wolf and Mintz 1957).

The Chalky Mount area does not present a situation wherein there is a great deal of competition for a few jobs. Its plantations do not operate with an oversupply of labor. Their laboring contingents are composed of persons who come from the immediately surrounding communities, and one does not find the labor migrations and extended absences from natal villages that are recorded for such larger sugar-producing areas as Jamaica (Comitas 1964) and British Guiana (Smith 1956). Labor—especially male labor on the more skilled field jobs—is not as expendable as might be expected in so densely populated an island.<sup>5</sup>

Conflict is infrequent, and workers are rarely fired. Two cases of firings were reported during 1961 and 1962, and in both instances they resulted from altercations between workers, and the managers thought it best to remove the "trouble makers," who found no difficulty in acquiring jobs on other plantations. The loss of job need not pose a "serious problem of biological survival" (Wolf and Mintz 1957: 400). Not only is work usually available on other plantations, but workers often fall back on other sources of income. It is not intended to underestimate the limited alternatives available to workers, but nonetheless there are alternatives. During the crop season no one need be without work. In "hard times," though cash resources are limited, the presence of other opportunities to earn money, albeit limited in number, still make it inappropriate to view the problem in terms of

biological survival. In fact, plantation managers, rather than paring their labor crews to a minimal core of workers during the latter phases of "hard times," generally try to provide two or three days of work per week for all or most of their regular workers. The sugar production bonus is paid during the early fall, and the Holiday with Pay also injects modest sums of cash into households during the latter phases of the out-of-crop season. During this time, too, sugar factories are making terminal payments to small cane farmers on the cane received during the previous crop, and this adds cash to the village's households and provides money for small farmers to hire workers on their small holdings.

Regular plantation workers have some notion of their occupational unity and commonality of interest, but this does not promote unique bonds of solidarity among them within the village (cf. Mintz 1956, Jayawardena 1963). In Chalky Mount plantation workers do not form a distinctive sub-cultural unit, nor do they feel that their problems, economic or otherwise, are unique to themselves as plantation workers. Their consciousness of kind is that of "poor people," and as such they align themselves with most other villagers regardless of occupational pursuits. This sentiment is further promoted by the frequent overlapping of the cash-oriented activities of individuals and the multiple economic activities or sources of income of most households. Only 54 per cent of Chalky Mount's households include regular plantation workers, and few of these households are totally dependent upon the plantations for their income. Most households have other means of support as well, and some are highly dependent upon remittances from abroad. Plantation wage labor, then, is only one means by which the people of Chalky Mount adapt to their social and physical environments. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider other means of support such as small-scale cane farming, livestock raising, pottery-making, cultivation of minor cash and subsistence crops, or the various other wage-labor and income-producing activities, and the ways in which these are integrated in the total economic life of the community (see Handler 1964).

#### NOTES

1. I would like to thank Lambros Comitas and Charles Lange for their assistance in preparing various drafts of this paper.

2. Field work was carried out in Chalky Mount and its environs during the summer of 1960 and from August, 1961, to July, 1962. Financial support from Brandeis University and a grant-in-aid from the Research Institute for the Study of Man made my stay in Barbados possible.

3. One often hears the three major field groups referred to as the first, second, and third gangs—terms which survive from the days of slavery when field slaves were thus divided, each gang having a complex of task responsibilities in many respects comparable to the tasks performed by the several classes of today (cf. Pitman 1926: 599-602). The discussion of an eighteenth century Barbados plantation by Bennett (1958: 11, 15) is relevant here:

Of the 276 Negroes at Codrington in February, 1781, some 162 were organized into three field gangs. Drummer and Johnny Sharry, the black drivers, led the first or

great gang of 35 men and 49 women in their tasks of holing the ground for canes, planting, and cutting, and carrying the canes to the mills. Quawcoe Adjoe, a boy, and two women, Sue and Sarah Bob, directed ten boys and thirteen girls in the lighter duties of the second gang, such as planting corn, carrying dry trash to the boiling house for fuel, turning manure, and weeding the fields. Old Dinah drove the little "meat pickers"—23 boys and 26 girls—of the third. . . gang to their work of shovelling manure into cane holes before the cane was planted, helping to weed young canes, and gathering fodder, called hogsmeat, for the livestock. . . A few declining men and women were members of the second gang.

4. The cane "bill" is a short, wide, cast-steel knife about ten inches long and seven inches wide. The blade tapers from its widest point at the top to its base, where it is forged into the handle. The latter is about an inch in diameter and six inches long. The "bill" has two cutting edges. One edge is fairly straight and is used in the actual severing of the cane stalk from its base. The other edge has a more convex blade with a two-inch sharpened hook projecting from it at the top. By injecting the hook between the cane trash and stalk and slicing downwards the trash can be quickly stripped from the stalk. Cane "knives" or cutlasses, which resemble machetes, are not employed in cutting cane but are used by truck crews to chop the bindings from the cane bundles and to trim the stalks ejecting from the truck's sides.

5. In 1960, Barbados had a population density of close to 1,400 persons per square mile. The two parishes of St. Andrew and St. Joseph, which comprise most of the land area of the Scotland District, had 570 and 913 persons per square mile, respectively.

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