

# Commentary: A Tale of Two Islands

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*Antigua under Stanford, Guadeloupe under France*

**Mervyn Claxton**

This week's *Economist* features two very interesting articles on Caribbean islands: one on Antigua, the other on Guadeloupe. Antigua's Prime Minister has declared that the fallout from Stanford's massive fraud will be "castastropic" for the country. It appears that both of the country's leading political parties, seduced by his wealth and his promises to share it lavishly, had willingly "jumped into bed" with Stanford without knowing much about him or his business background. Stanford's ploy would not have fooled most teen-age girls nowadays, although that might not have made them reject his advances, but they would have accepted them with their eyes wide open. Antigua and its leaders apparently did so with their 'eyes wide shut' to borrow the title of Stanley Kubrick's last film. It is no wonder that the country got raped. As usual in such cases, it is the Antiguan people who are the real victims.

Guadeloupe (and Martinique) are examples of an extreme form of colonialism which one would have thought had disappeared in the 1960s. All consumer products, including foodstuffs are imported from France. Incredibly, even milk, cheese, lettuce, and chickens, to cite only a few items, are imported from France. It was revealed last week that 96% of the chickens sold in Guadeloupe are imported from metropolitan France. The very fact that most consumer products come from France would make them more expensive than they are in metropolitan France. But the metropolitan and local white businesses (those of the Bekés) who monopolize economic activity in the islands appear to be much too avaricious, so they utilize their monopoly to jack up the prices of the already over-priced products.

The *Economist* article states that food prices in the French Antilles are, on average, 34% higher than on the continent but, as a comparative price study undertaken by a French national paper last week showed, the prices of some brand articles are more than twice as high as in France. Another bit of information revealed by the French media in the past week is that the cost of living in Guadeloupe is twice as high as it is in France. Regarding the local price of petrol products, which was the most serious grievance expressed by protesting French Antilleans, even the Government in Paris has

admitted "sotto voce" that it is a scandalous rip-off by the French oil company which holds the monopoly for supplying the local market. The fact that the 1% white population in the French Antilles own 90% of the economy has added oil to an already incendiary situation, which has consequently become even more explosive. It is very significant, in more than one respect, that the principal Guadeloupean protest group calls itself Pwofitayson, a word that signifies in creole a blend of "profiteering" and "exploitation".

Apart from their blatant economic exploitation by local and metropolitan whites, French Antilleans suffer from a loss of identity. They have become Frenchmen and French women but, being Black and Brown, they are, in effect, second-class Frenchmen/women. Increasingly, they have come to see the recovery of their Antillean identity as an essential part of the solution for their problems. The extent to which the Metropolitan government has been blind to that problem is shown by the fact (as revealed last week in one of the numerous televised discussions of the Antillean situation) that the Ministry of Education in Paris had removed Aimé Césaire's celebrated work "Discours sur le Colonialisme", first published in 1950, as a text for the Bac examination – the French high school diploma – which has been an examination text in Haiti and in Francophone African countries for decades. One can hardly imagine a more wounding blow to the Antillean psyche than that most insensitive act on the part of a national French administration in which Black Antilleans are excluded from the senior levels where such decisions are taken.

It is that cultural insensitivity which has perhaps been the single most important element fuelling Antillean discontent. Virtually all the senior civil service posts in the islands are held by civil servants transferred from Metropolitan France, with the Antilleans mainly relegated to subaltern posts. When taken with the fact that the economy is controlled by the relatively small number of local whites plus Metropolitan businesses, the protesting Guadeloupeans are perfectly justified in brandishing the slogan: "Guadeloupe for Guadeloupeans" in their protest marches and, also, in demanding the re-establishment of "the legitimate rights of blacks as the majority people", as the Economist reports. But such demands have, incredibly, been denounced by (white) Government spokesmen and French businessmen as "racist."

The two leading French Antillean prize-winning writers, Patrick Chamoiseau and Edouard Glissant, who both enjoy an international reputation (Glissant was one of the writers who participated in the First World Congress of Black Writers and Artists which took place in Paris in 1957, together with Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Léopold Senghor) have jointly come out in support of the protests, declaring that Antilleans need to recover their identity, which they consider has been largely dissolved in a national (white) French identity. Chamoiseau, who in 1992 won the most prestigious of all

French literary prizes - the Prix Goncourt - for his novel "Texaco", has made the question of Antillean creole identity (creolité) the central theme in all his work, a theme that also runs through much of Glissant's work.

The situation appears to be a throwback to 18th-century mercantilism when no European colony was allowed to trade with other countries or their colonies, so that they may take advantage of cheaper products. The very sight, on television, of WHITE French riot police facing off a crowd of protesting Black Guadeloupeans cannot help but bring back bad memories of the 1930's for Caribbeans, except that the economic "riots" which took place in the English-speaking Caribbean colonies in that decade were put down by white-officered police forces. In 2009, over 70 years later, even the rank and file French police forces performing a similar task in the French Caribbean are WHITE.

It would be interesting to know how much trade, if any, there is between the French Antilles and nearby Caricom countries. I see a very good opportunity for Caricom businesses in the current crisis. The French government considers the situation in the Antilles a pre-insurrectionary one and it is scared that that particular element might spread to metropolitan France, which is currently experiencing serious social discontent because of rapidly deteriorating economic conditions, and inflame the situation to such an extent that the entire society may explode as happened in 1968. The Government knows that it has to find a quick economic fix for the Antilles, one that would significantly reduce the cost of living, but the parlous state of the nation's finances leaves it little room for manoeuvre.

If Caricom business enterprises, which produce foodstuffs and every-day consumer necessities (it was revealed last week, for example, that baby diapers, all imported from France are so expensive that many Antillean families cannot afford them), are prepared to take the initiative by making feasible proposals to local Antillean political leaders and business interests to supply a broad range of products to the Antilles (which would inevitably be considerably cheaper than those now imported) and which could immediately bring down the high cost of living, it would be very difficult for the Metropolitan government to oppose it in the present explosive situation, if those proposals are supported by the local politicians and business interests, who would almost certainly do so in order to, respectively, maintain the political support of the populace or for their own commercial benefit.

But do Caricom businessmen/women possess the drive, the business acumen, the initiative, or the entrepreneurial chutzpah to explore such a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity? Surely an initiative of this kind should fall well within the legal framework of the EPA and, if it does, that would be a good test of the Agreement because France would do all it can to maintain the absolute commercial monopoly it has imposed in the Antilles.

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*See also the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Trinidad and Tobago's (FITTUN's) statement of [Solidarity with Guadeloupe Movement Against Exploitation](#).*