

# LAND AND THE LANDLESS OF JAMAICA

JAMES PHILLIPS

## Introduction

... we have sinned against God and the people of this region by our neglect, silence and complicity in the process of oppression on the plantation.<sup>1</sup>

The primary purpose of this article is to help end neglect, break silence, and overcome complicity. Specifically, what is attempted here is a review of certain major aspects of land tenure and use in Jamaica today, and a brief discussion of Christian alternatives. We begin, as does the Trinidad Consultation, with the "promise that land belongs ultimately to the people, and its use should be for the benefit of all the people."<sup>2</sup> Land indeed is life, and therefore it is power. The land is not simply a material reality but a source of economic, political, socio-cultural and spiritual power. If we are to promote the human development of peoples, we need to carefully consider the land in relation to each of these kinds of power.

## Land as Economic Power

The economic power of land resides in the fact that the land provides two things essential to human material existence: living space and nutrition.

## Living Space:

It should be obvious that every human being has an inherent need of and right to the unhindered use of adequate living space. This should be all the more obvious if we consider the functions of a family. Yet, a glance at present conditions in Jamaica quickly reveals that the right to adequate living space is denied or only grudgingly afforded to a very large number of Jamaicans. Squatting and crowding are realities of life in both urban and rural areas.

a. **Squatting.** A squatter is one who has no legal right to the use

MR. JAMES PHILLIPS HAS SPENT SOME TIME STUDYING THE LANDHOLDING PATTERNS IN RURAL JAMAICA. THIS ARTICLE REPRESENTS THE RESULT OF HIS RESEARCH. MR. PHILLIPS IS PRESENTLY A DOCTORAL CANDIDATE AT BROWN UNIVERSITY IN RHODE ISLAND.

of the land on which he lives. In post-emancipation days, squatting, especially on remote Crown lands, was one way in which freedmen might obtain a little land for their use, while the planter-dominated Assembly did all in its power to restrict the availability of land in the less remote and better areas. But squatting is an essentially unstable existence, and, especially today, squatters are subject to a variety of threats to their use of the land.

In the city, the instability of the squatter's hold on the land (and the poverty of the squatter) often leads to an identification of squatter settlements with slums. Thus, urban development, whether by Government or by private developers, has very often meant that the bulldozer has swept squatters off the land, in total lack of concern for the absolute human need for living space. The result has too often been that squatters have simply moved elsewhere in the urban area, and that the slums have simply sprung up in another area of the city, or that existing slums have become even more tightly crowded.

In the rural areas, huge, modernized estates have been consolidated from smaller estates during the past century, and have characteristically sought to expand the area under cultivation for export crops. Where, for example, sugar cane cultivation has been expanded in recent years, it has some-

times happened that rural estate labourers have been forced out of their living space and have, of necessity, become squatters on land considered unsuitable for cane cultivation.

Squatters are often victims not so much of land shortage as of inequality of land distribution supported by a distorted system of values which considers the production of certain crops (and the profits which accrue to the large landowners and companies) as of greater worth than the human beings whose lives are disrupted by seizure of their needed living space. Despite what has been done, the stigma of extra-legal or illegal status is still imputed to squatters, and is reflected in the actions of others (including, too often, Government and the Churches) toward squatters on the land. Such a stigma becomes an excuse for depriving people "legally" of their right to adequate living space, and adds still another burden upon the backs of too many poor Jamaicans. Squatting is most often a symptom of social (and economic) injustice, and the victims of the injustice are the squatters far more often than those on whose land they live. Ultimately, a system of economy which gives rise to and perpetuates a category of persons as squatters cannot be just, and must be changed.

b. **Crowding.** Crowded living conditions are a fact of life in areas of Jamaica, where many persons share a single small, drab room. In urban areas, crowded yards with too many persons sharing the same few facilities are far more common than many of us would like to believe. Aggravating this condition is an economic system in which poor persons are often forced to sub-let part of their already too small living space in order to obtain enough income to exist.

But crowding is not confined to

1. *Ecumenical Consultation for Development* November 1971

2. *Ibid*

urban areas, for in rural parts, especially where modern export-crop cultivation is conducted on large estates worked by wage labour, the "barracks system" or its slightly modified successors continue to exist. In this system, agricultural workers live in long estate-owned barracks, divided into small rooms. An entire family, at least until recently, might share a single dilapidated room. Nearby stretch acre after acre of crop fields and, at a convenient distance, the spacious, lawn-surrounded homes of the owner or of the manager and staff. Here, the social power of land is reflected in its interrelationship with the economic realities of land use. The amount of land surrounding a man's home is taken as a symbol of his prestige and his position in a hierarchy which, in its basic principles, has not much changed since the slave-worked plantations of the seventeenth century were first laid out. Land becomes matter for conspicuous consumption. It need hardly be added that in a poor nation the size of Jamaica, such conspicuous consumption of land is a luxury which cannot be afforded. A similar point can, of course, be made of certain non-productive Church lands in Jamaica.

At bottom, the problem of providing adequate living space for all Jamaicans is not so much the problem of lack of land as of an inequitable distribution of land and a pattern of land use based not upon the real needs of all the people but upon the false principle that profit is more important than people.

#### Nutrition:

A second aspect of the economic power of the land consists in the need to provide an adequate level of nutrition for all the people. We have just seen that patterns of land use in Jamaica have characteristically relegated to second place the needs of the mass of poor Jamaicans. Throughout the history of the island, the classic problem of the land in relation to nutrition has been the question of

the relative demands of local consumption and the export market. This has been as much a question of quality and variety as of quantity of produce. Plantation owners had to decide what percent of the land to put under sugar cultivation and what percent to set aside for the "Negro provision grounds." It is a well-documented and well known fact that the internal marketing system of Jamaica, with its characteristic "higglers" had its origin in the surplus of the "Negro provision grounds."

At a later period, when the slave-worked plantation system had given way to the estate-tenancy system, estate owners as landlords entered into various kinds of "agreements" with their tenants, including cash and labour rental, sharecropping, etc. A common form of agreement required the tenant to plant bananas (for example) on the land which he tenanted, and allowed him to plant provision crops between the banana plants. As part of the rental of the land, the tenant agreed to give or sell the bananas only to the landlord, but was free to dispose of the provision crops as he chose. There were usually additional obligations on the tenant.

At present, the question of land use in relation to nutritional needs is inherent in the use of land by both small farmers and the large, modernized estates. The small farmer (the man who owns and operates an average of three to five acres, but not much more than

seven acres) faces the question of how much land and effort he will devote to the nutritional needs of his family, and how much to their need for cash. One result of this

"dilemma" is that farmers often sell most of the more nutritious foods which they produce, or that they restrict the quantity and variety of foods grown for personal consumption in favour of more marketable produce. This often means an imbalanced diet for the small farmer and his family. Added to this, of course, is the question of ignorance of basic nutritional needs.

The imbalanced diet of the small farmer and his family might at least be mitigated if the farmer could rely upon a decent cash return for his marketable produce. But this is often not the case. If, for example, the small farmer sells peas, he is forced to compete with very low-priced American imports, and of course he loses and, with him, Jamaica once again loses to foreign business concerns. If the small farmer turns to producing export bananas, his efforts are usually not much compensated. If he cuts and carries down from his field (often as much as a mile away) 560 pounds of bananas on his back, he may receive about J\$8.00, out of which he must still pay for trucking to the packing plant. If all his bananas are accepted (a shaky possibility at best) he may end up with about J\$7.00 for his efforts in planting, cultivating, cutting, and carrying 560 pounds of bananas. If the bananas are rejected, he incurs a total loss. And somehow the instability of the industry — poor market periods, shipping strikes etc. — can be made to ride heavily on the small farmer, despite the guaranteed base price of 1.6 cents per pound. For it is easy enough to raise acceptance standards and thereby create an artificial shortage when the market is bad. Other devices, which usually are more easily applied to the small than to the large farmer, are not lacking. In sum, the small farmer can be made to bear a very heavy percentage of the instability of the export industry, at least in some crops.

It can hardly be matter for amazement that many small



farmers tend to drift away from banana cultivation, and that many revert to subsistence agriculture as



far as possible, while their sons leave the land entirely.

The large modernized estates which grow a single crop for export (usually sugar or bananas) manifestly do not contribute to the basic nutritional needs of all the people, except in a round-about fashion. All too often, the large estates and landowning companies are foreign owned and directed, and the lion's share of profits from export crops find their way abroad, while much of the best land in Jamaica is given over not to the production of nutritious foods and products for all Jamaicans but to the production of wealth for wealthy non-Jamaicans. Even when a number of Jamaicans are able to share in the wealth derived from large-scale export crop cultivation, that wealth is not likely, in the present state of affairs, to remain in Jamaica for long. The monopolization of the best lands for export crops, together with an often false standard of taste, induces the importation of foods and products from other nations—foods and products which can be produced in Jamaica.

What has here been said of the large estates can be said, *a fortiori*, of the many thousands of acres owned by bauxite-aluminium companies (which in Jamaica are entirely foreign owned).

Can it be argued that export crops and bauxite really increase the well-being of all Jamaicans by bolstering Jamaica's balance of payments and foreign credit? Even if this were true, it would mean little more than that the people exchange their valuable products of the soil, essential for life, and receive in return what amounts to a "promise" from foreign nations and a continued dependence upon the vagaries of foreign markets.

### The Land-Labour Problem:

The question of striking a balance between subsistence needs and cash return also relates to the problem of labour. The rural proletarians, that is those who own no land but labour in the fields of others and exist solely on cash wages, as well as many small farmers who turn to cane-cutting for seasonal cash income, constitute a labour force working the land. It is an old truism that "without labour, the land is worthless." Indeed, the slave trade and the plantation system were heavily based upon this truism.

The land-labour problem has historically been a question of land monopoly by a few. In an agricultural community, a man who does not possess land must either work as a tenant on the land of others or leave the community. If only a few persons are landless in a community, these persons might find work as craftsmen in the community. But one of the major devices whereby the large estate owners of Jamaica (like their counterparts, the *hacendados* of Latin America) attempted to ensure a sufficient labour force after the abolition of slavery, was by the monopolization of all available lands in a community. When the mass of people were landless, they had only the choice of tenancy or removal from the community. There is ample evidence that large owners collaborated closely in maintaining monopoly of the land. If, as someone has remarked, power can be defined as "control over the environment of others," the estate-tenancy systems of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Jamaica provide a classic example of the economic power of land ownership, and of how a few large owners could control much of the life of the mass of people in a community.

As alternatives to farming became, or appeared to become, realistically available, the power of land monopoly in the estate tenancy system was lessened. Tenants went to rapidly growing

Kingston in search of work. Estate and large property owners were forced to meet a growing shortage of labour by splitting their landholdings and sell out over a long period of time.

In recent years, the management of a large number of sugar estates has complained of a chronic shortage of labour, especially of cane cutters. In this situation, many of the estates have systematically sold their lands (often to Government). But in several cases, at least, the estate has retained the factory. Thus the sugar manufacturers have begun to shift the burden of cane production onto the cane farmers and other owners, while retaining the more lucrative and less troublesome aspects of sugar refining and export. Recent agreements between sugar manufacturers and Government, as well as certain official statements, have made clear that an over-riding concern, at least on the part of manufacturers, is to ensure a continuing supply of canes without the burden of cultivation.

In sum, this brief outline of aspects of the economic power of land points out that this power has been usurped by an inequitable distribution of land and by patterns of land use which too often have neglected the basic needs of all the people in favour of the further profit of the few. Government has taken steps toward changing the situation, but too often these steps have been ineffective, irrelevant, or even (perhaps unwittingly) supportive of the very evils which must be changed. But the intrusion of Government into the land situa-



tion recalls the second major kind of power deriving from land: political power.

Reprinted from *Justice*, Kingston, Jamaica