

Marten Schalkwijk, Ph.D.

REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STATE, ECONOMY, CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY

1. Introduction

Most of the current economic and political literature is about the post-colonial state in the Caribbean. This is only natural, but methodological problems arise when the frame of reference is not properly stated. We may get a debate between people whose frame of reference may vary e.g. one person compares Post-Colonial Trinidad with post-Colonial Jamaica, while the other may compare Trinidad with England. The conclusions on the position of Trinidad in both analysis will vary. Dutch journalists and politicians mostly compare the current situation in Suriname with the situation in the Netherlands and draw their conclusions from it, but do not specify their frame of reference, which may lead to frustrated politicians who do not agree with their conclusions. The ensuing debates between people with different frames of reference and actually different frames of mind is never very productive. We therefore need more precise methodological specifications. The same is true when people analyze a certain country and mix concepts such as State, Economy and Society, without realizing that these are distinct entities. State and Nation are also concepts that often get mixed up, as are Politics and Democracy. It is not only the concept, but also the connotation that goes with it that varies across cultures. In the end we may say that the relationship between State, Economy, Civil Society and Democracy is one which is often not clear, not even to those who use these concepts professionally. Thus several methodological biases may operate at the same time and may well be one of the causes why we do not make enough progress in the analysis of our nations. From a comparative perspective one of the problems that hounds us is that we have made many methodological mistakes when we try to reflect on our own societies. It is for such reasons that I think a reflection on some of these concepts is useful. Let me make it clear that I am still struggling with some of the specifications myself, so what I offer are reflections rather than conclusions.

2. Three spheres: Economy, State and Civil Society

One may say that Society consists of three spheres or dimensions that are interacting with each other i.e. the Economy, the State and Civil Society. I put them in this order, because for the Modern Caribbean this is the historic order in which the different spheres developed. The pace of State-Formation in Europe was slow, while in the Caribbean it was amazingly rapid. The two core colonies -Barbados and St. Christopher- were settled between 1620 and 1630, while most other territories were colonized before 1660. This at least is true for most British, French and Dutch colonies and does not include the earlier Portuguese and Spanish colonies.

2.1 Economy

Surprisingly one will not find a definition of the Economy in the Social Science dictionaries and literature. Normal dictionaries provide definitions such as “the system by which a country’s wealth is produced and used” (e.g. Longman). This is a hardly satisfying definition, since it does not

identify the main actors. The term Political Economy is not suitable since it already connects the Economy with the activities of the State.

From a pragmatic point we can define the Economy to be made up of all production activities (i.e. goods and services) and trade activities (distribution and everything that comes with it), and driven by actors in these areas. The actors may be individuals, corporations, or interest groups who pursue economic goals.

In the Caribbean the Economy has been the main force throughout much of the Plantation and Colonial period and less so during the post-Colonial period. Actually the Anglophone, French, Dutch and Danish Caribbean started out as an Economic project of several individual entrepreneurs, traders and corporations such as the Amazon Company, Guiana Company, Dutch West India Company. The plantation became the core of Caribbean society and was primarily a commercial agricultural production unit, which imposed itself on all other relationships.

The main elements of the plantation as an economic unit are: specialized production of a few export products for an export market, some form of coerced labor, relatively high capital inputs, comparatively large size, and a high degree of vertical integration. Capital, management and labor were imported, while land was provided locally. The British, French, Dutch and Danish plantation was clearly different from that of the Latin American hacienda and the plantation economy was very different from the colonial Spanish mining economy (e.g. Wolf & Mintz 1977). Neither did the plantation fit in Marx' analysis and modes of production and most Marxist have struggled with the plantation economy ever since (Schalkwijk 1994: 33-36). Only in the Caribbean has there been any systematic attempt made to come to terms with this phenomenon, and the term Plantation Economy has proven its conceptual value to the region (e.g. George Beckford 1983).

2.2 The State

According to Tilly (1990) States were mainly a by-product of conquest or warmaking in Europe. Not so in the Caribbean where the State developed as a by-product of the Economy and was quickly usurped by the Economy i.e. the Planters. The differentiation of the three institutions of the State into separate branches came much later i.e. the Bureaucracy (including the Judiciary), the Coercive Forces (Police and Military), and the Executive (President, Ministers, District Commissioners). The term 'Government' is used by some to describe the Executive (those exercising power over the State), by others to pinpoint the Bureaucracy, while another group uses it for both of these or even for all three institutions together. In fact, however, the State is more than the Government. One way to distinguish between these is to see the State as a more static institutional entity, while Government is the State in action.

It is amazing how few studies there are in fact of the State in Colonial times and how many there are of the State in the post-Colonial period. The problem this creates is that the post-Colonial state is mainly understood and described in comparison to typical Western models. I have made the point in my dissertation that such a comparison is flawed, since we can understand the post-Colonial State better if we compare it with its natural predecessor, which I labelled the Colonial State. Strange enough political scientists have more problems with such a comparison than other social scientists. Development sociologist and anthropologist have no problem to get a firmer handle on post-colonial society by analyzing its colonial predecessor, nor have development economists any problem to trace the post-colonial economy back to its colonial roots.

One of our problems in understanding the dynamics and problems of the post-Colonial State in the Caribbean, may thus be traced back to our limited understanding of the Colonial State. The Colonial State to me represents the set of State institutions that are run by specific agents, which may dominate a colonial territory, but which is not merely an extension of the imperial state. Local elites should have some say over these institutions or may have developed similar but competing institutions, while they struggle for power or share power with imperial agents. Colonial Administration then is made up of those parts of the Colonial State which are fully or virtually controlled by imperial agents (Governor, expatriate bureaucrats, foreign troops). In the case when the imperial agents have managed to dominate all state institutions extensively and for a prolonged time, the Colonial State may cease to exist, and only Colonial Administration remains. This normally is the goal of the colonizing power. When local elites, however, maintain some 'indigenous' control over the state institutions the Colonial State remains alive, while conflicts between foreign and local elites will often continue (Schalkwijk 1994).

What this means is that we should avoid to collapse the analysis of political systems in colonial periods to coincide fully with imperial politics and/or Colonial Administration. There often was some form of a pre-independent state, which did not emerge only during a transitional period of internal autonomy. It often was there even before internal autonomy was granted. When the Colonial State was absent -because Colonial Administration had strangled it- as I argue was the case in the French colonies, the elites were submissive and did not aspire and fight for independence. Where there was a Colonial State to build on, the elites most often wanted and got political independence. Thus the extent to which the Colonial State survived imperial domination and penetration, most probably correlates highly with the chance of establishing a post-Colonial State. Since domination and penetration was easiest in small societies these were also the least likely to gain independence or to get it quite late.

This concept of the Colonial State may also help us to explain variations in the capacities of the post-colonial states in the Caribbean e.g why do some bureaucracies perform better than others.

Clive Thomas (1984) is one of the few who have made an attempt to explain the reason for authoritarianism of the post-Colonial State by pointing towards the authoritarian nature of the Colonial State. It is not a convincing argument, however, because his analysis of state-formation during the colonial period is too sketchy and brief, while the democratization wave that wiped out most authoritarian regimes in the region shortly after the publication of his book blurred his assertions. Nevertheless his effort to use the characteristics of the Colonial State as a predictor for the post-Colonial State has to be applauded. His results at the same time warn us not to shift the burdens of the post-Colonial State completely to its historic predecessor.

Actually the picture is more complex, since there were also pre-Colonial States of the Amerindians and parallel States of the Maroons, while in Suriname there even was a Jewish State with its own court and militia.

Another way of analyzing the State is by looking at the functions it has performed during different periods. Gaining insight from various sources (Weber 1968, North 1986, Hall 1989, Mann 1989, Tilly 1990,) the main functions assigned to the State can be summed up as:

- a) Military function (preparing and engaging in war and attacking rivals)
- b) Maintenance of internal order (state making and protection)
- c) Extraction (of means for warmaking, statemaking and protection)
- d) Economic redistribution (of scarce resources)
- e) Production and maintenance
- f) Legislative function (enactment of law, adjudication or settlement of disputes)

We can work our way through the development of the State in the Caribbean by describing these different functions. I did this for Suriname by analyzing the content of all the laws (1743 in total) that were made between 1667 and 1862. What we see is probably a pattern that also applies to most other Caribbean colonies (Schalkwijk 1994: 80-83):

- Despite popular notions, initial colonization was peaceful, while the typical plantation
- state structure took shape in the first decades of colonization.
- In terms of historic periodization the height of the plantation period (i.e. Economic growth) coincided with intense policing (state making), production and extraction.
- This, however, led to a period of crisis, because of slave reactions to increased
- Exploitation (and we see more warmaking in addition to production).
- The period before the abolition of Slavery was marked by a Colonial State that took its
- distributional tasks a little more serious, while it provided more protection.
- After Emancipation the Colonial State assumed more tasks, thus becoming more of a
- typical State in terms of functions.

It is safe to say, however, that for an extended period Extraction and State-making were the dominant functions of the Colonial State in the Caribbean. Whereas wars were in the center of the European State formation process and the Economy developed around it, in the Caribbean 'Extraction' was the key issue and the State developed around the Economy. Thus the Colonial State started off as a mirror image of the European State. These differences in State formation processes have been overlooked by Tilly (1990) and explain why he is unable to give a satisfactory explanation of the failure of many Third World States to follow the Western route.

2.3. Civil Society

There is a distinct difference between Society in general and Civil Society. Society can be seen as a wider, more inclusive concept of all three spheres; actually a concept which can be expanded to delineate all human activities within the borders of the nation-state.

The Plantation Economy gave rise to a Plantation Society, with the following defining elements (Curtin 1990):

- a) Most productive labor was forced labor.
- b) The population was not self-sustaining.
- c) Organization type was the large-scale capitalist plantation.
- d) There were certain feudal features.
- e) Plantations supplied a distant market with highly specialized product.
- f) Political control lay in another country.

Plantation societies were fairly rigid elite societies. If we focus on the transformations of elites in these societies this will give us great insight in colonial society, but also in post-colonial society. Elites are also of interest because they tend to organize themselves well to further their interests and to influence policies at all other levels.

Civil Society consists of the sphere of activities of the population in their role as citizens; notably the way these citizens organize themselves and act to promote their interests. This is the sphere in which all kinds of associations, cooperatives, labor unions, foundations, religious organizations, sport clubs, etc. operate. If we label all such organizations NGO's or NCPO's (Non

Commercial Private Organizations as I prefer to delineate these organizations more scientifically) we may say that NGO's form the backbone of Civil Society. There is more going on in Civil Society, however, because we should also include the independent press as part of Civil Society and all kinds of informal networks.

The distinct process of State-formation in the Caribbean was also reflected in the development of Civil Society. The search for Civil Society in previous centuries is the search for organizations that -individually or collectively- were strong enough to compete with the state for power, or at least had some success in increasing civil rights, for we can measure the success of Civil Society by looking at the expansion of civil rights. Prior to Emancipation -and actually well into the 19th Century- Civil Society was virtually limited to the elites, since slaves had very limited social space. Those who escaped -such as the Maroons- also disconnected themselves from Colonial Society. The elite clubs were only concerned with their own civil rights and not those of the larger population. It was the Church -at least certain denominations- that became the main vehicle for the expansion of Civil Society in Colonial Society.

Again this was a significant departure from earlier European experience, where the Church often had much political clout over the State's personnel. In Europe the State had to wrest itself from religious control, whereas in the Caribbean it was the other way round. The Church in the end proved strong enough to withstand the State's urge for total control over its citizens. The Church provided education and provided Mullattoes, Blacks and others with their first forms of social mobility. After Emancipation gradually other organizations became actors in Civil Society and we see social and religious life becoming disentangled. The growth and diversification of Civil Society can be reconstructed also from the growth of Non Commercial Private Organizations (NCPO's or NGO's), since these represent specific interest groups. It should be noted that political parties are one type of NCPO's that are a product of Civil Society i.e. of the quest for more freedom. Strong Civil Societies will probably produce multiple political parties (Schalkwijk 1986, 1994, 1997).

3. Democracy

The three spheres of human activities do not exist separate from each other, but have to interact to make society -i.e. living together- possible. In primitive and in authoritarian societies the three spheres are often collapsed or overlap substantially. When societies become more complex and/or less authoritarian the three spheres grow apart, which creates tensions between the spheres. Thus there should be some mechanism to make society function. And this is where -at least in my mind- Democracy comes in as an institution to manage these three spheres of activities. Democracy has to prevent on the one side that the three spheres increasingly overlap and society becomes increasingly authoritarian, and at the other hand should see to it that the spheres do not drift apart completely and society breaks down.

It is most often Civil Society that pushes for Democracy, and thus the introduction of Democracy can be conceptualized as a major concession by the State to its citizens. Some of our Caribbean societies have weak or little differentiated Civil Societies, for instance Guyana, which allow State actors to drift easily towards more authoritarian behavior and which leads to weak democratic institutions. One solution therefore may be to work on a stronger Civil Society rather than frame the problem as an ethnic struggle, which most probably will undermine Civil Society.

Elections and Parliament are most often the means to make Democracy functions, but it should be clear that if a chosen Parliament can not ensure that society functions to the satisfaction of most of the citizens other arrangements can come to take its place. The problem is that some actors in each

of the three spheres have an urge to dominate the others e.g. the State which wants to go into business and drive private enterprises out, or economic actors that want to tell the State what to do, or a State that wants to limit civil rights. The existence of political parties and the occurrence of general elections do not by itself mean that Civil Society have definitely conquered an otherwise authoritarian State, but only that the agents of the State are being recruited by other means. The danger is always that the new agents may try to strengthen their position and subdue the Economy and Civil Society.

Thus democracy is not only a one-man/woman one-vote system, but much more than that. It is also a necessary management system of intersecting spheres of human activities in society. If it does not function properly most citizens suffer and therefore they have a stake in seeing to it that democracy works.

4. Specification of relationships

It should be clear by now that we need to be more careful in our specifications of vital relationships in society, since they have consequences for our understanding of very important issues. For instance several authors collapse the Economy and Civil Society into one. William Fisher (1997) who tried to bring some analytical depth in the relationship between Civil Society and NGO's used a very weak definition of N. Chazan, who described Civil Society as "that segment of society that interacts with the state, influences the state and yet is distinct from the state". Thus Fisher and Chazan see the world as consisting of a dichotomy between the State and Civil Society. Cohen & Arato (1992) are more precise and describe Civil Society "as a sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication". Still they see Civil Society as a sphere that is some kind of intermediary between the State and the Economy. In my conceptualization of Society, however, Civil Society is not squeezed between the State and the Economy, but these three spheres can better be visualized as three circles that intersect and overlap. Democracy (or the political process) manages the relationship between these three circles. It should be clear, however, that this is not a simple job since the agents of the Economy are always trying to influence and steer the State through interest groups, lobbies, committees, contracts, professional associations, political parties, etc. Likewise citizens (Civil Society) are trying to influence the State and its policies through petitions, NGO's, lobby groups, or to get new agents in positions of influence by means of political parties. Such efforts are normally meant to get Good Governance and accountability as products from the State, which means that the State remains responsive. Some groups, however, may try to get special benefits for themselves rather than Good Governance and may try to secure this by means of bribes, favoritism, etc. Within the State itself –and within the political agents that steer the State- there are always tendencies towards oligarchy as Michels (1962) has pointed out long ago. The State agents may therefore also try to dominate the other spheres rather than provide necessary services.

The exact relationship between these different spheres will vary from society to society, based on specific social and historic processes. There is also no magic bullet in the management of the three spheres that make up society, but democracy probably is the best way to try to manage it as best as possible. It is clear that success does not come easy, but will depend on the democratic values and practices in that society. Given this task it is clear that we probably need to put much more effort in the development and maintenance of democratic institutions and a democratic culture.

References

- Beckford, George L. (1983)
Persistent poverty, underdevelopment in plantation economies of the Third World. Jamaica, Maroon Publishing House.
- Cohen, Jean L. & Andrew Arato (1992)
Civil Society and Political Theory.
- Curtin, Phillip D. (1990)
The rise and fall of the plantation complex: essays in Atlantic history. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Fisher, William F. (1997)
Doing good? The politics and antipolitics of NGO practices. Annual Review Anthropology.
- Hall, J. (ed.) (1989)
States in history. Oxford, Basil Blackwell.
- Mann, Michael (1989)
The autonomous power of the State: its origins, mechanisms and results (in “States in history”, ed. J. Hall. Oxford, Basil Blackwell).
- Michels, Robert (1962)
Political parties, a sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy. New York, the Free Press.
- North, Douglass C. (1986)
A neoclassical theory of the State
(in “Rational choice”, ed. J. Elster. New York, New York University Press).
- Schalkwijk, J. Marten W. (1986)
Het Niet Commerciele Particuliere Initiatief in Suriname: Stichtingen, Verenigingen, Coöperaties en Kerkgenootschappen als Mededragers van Ontwikkeling, doctoraal scriptie, Universiteit van Suriname, Paramaribo.
(translation: Non Commercial Private Initiative in Suriname; foundations, associations, cooperatives and churches as carriers of development, Masters thesis).
- Schalkwijk, J. Marten W., (1994)
Colonial state formation in Caribbean plantation societies, structural analysis and changing elite networks in Suriname 1650-1920.
Ithaca, Cornell University, Dissertation. Published in two limited editions in Paramaribo, 1994 and 1998.
- Schalkwijk, J. Marten W., (1997)
The historical development of institutional relations between the State and NGO's in Suriname, Journal of Social Sciences, Vol. IV, Nr. 2.
- Tilly, Charles, (1990)
Coercion, capital, and European States, AD 990-1990. Revised paperback ed. Cambridge, Basil Blackwell.
- Thomas, Clive Y., (1984)
The rise of the authoritarian State in peripheral societies. New York, Monthly Review Press.
- Weber, Max, (1968)
Economy and Society. Edited by G. Roth & C. Wittich. Berkely, University of California Press.
- Wolf, Eric R. & Sidney W. Mintz, (1977)
Haciendas and Plantations (in Robert G. Keith: Haciendas and Plantations in Latin American history. New York, Holmes & Meier Publishers,).