Emigration, Remittances and Social Change:
ASPECTS OF THE SOCIAL FIELD OF NEVIS, WEST INDIES

by RICHARD FRUCHT

RÉSUMÉ

L'émigration et l'infux d'argent dans l'île de Nevis (Indes orientales) ont des effets socio-économiques importants. Pour analyser cette situation on a recourt, malgré ses limites, au concept du "champ social."

In a recent article, Robert Manners (1965) argues for a more widespread use and recognition of the social field concept, especially within the context of Caribbean studies[1]. The social field concept refers to the realization of the importance of extra-local variables in understanding culture change and stability in primitive and peasant communities. The expansion of the advanced industrial societies, imperialism and colonialism, and the discovery of primitives and peasants, as well as the creation of "post-peasants" (Geertz 1961; Friedl 1963), gives support to the concept of the ties that bind the latter societies to the former. Gluckman (1949) and Barnes(1954), have been instrumental in the development of the social field concept. They stress the nature of social, economic and political ties between the community and nation-state, and between colony and metropolitan power. *Inter alia,* the social field of the West Indies exists in two complementary forms. One is the labor migration from the west Indies to England and in some cases to other Caribbean islands. The other is the cash remittances which migrants send to their home islands. In many cases these remittances provide the wherewithal for further migration. Manners presents remit-

[1] This is a greatly revised version of a paper read before the American Anthropological Association, in San Francisco, 1963.

tance data from seven island societies in the Caribbean and concludes, in part, that "the islands' economic ties to outside areas are very close and that significant amounts of cash filter into the area in the form of contributions from insular emigrants." Furthermore, "the extension of the local or island 'community' through this migration and the consequent flow of cash into the islands, is only one of several factors which emphasize the importance of conceptualizing the area of research and analysis in social field terms" (1965:192). Although Manners' presentation of remittance figures makes obvious the economic (and, implicitly, the social) ties between island society and metropolis via the emigrant, except for his brief discussion of St. John there is no extended consideration of "the effects of the cash inflow from remittances (which), if they are at all significant, (should be) apparent to the community researcher" (1965:185).

In this article I will extend Manner's contentions by considering some of the effects of emigration and remittances in Nevis, one of the islands in his list, and one in which I have carried out fieldwork.[2] It is important to state at the outset that emigration and remittances are not necessary conditions for the changes now occurring in the island. Rather, they are themselves effects of the decline of the international Sea Island cotton market, the demand for labor in the United Kingdom, and poor productive techniques in local communities. Emigration and remittances can be seen as sufficient conditions for the shift in Nevis from dependence on productive labor and wages to reliance on cash remittances sent by overseas relatives, and for abetting the rearrangements of social classes, especially in terms of class criteria and composition. I will also mention some possible effects of changes in the social field over time, a point which Manners does not consider, but which has crucial implications for the future development of the island. In effect, I make the following assumptions: (a) that Nevis (and all the West Indies) is not a developing or modernizing society — it has always been part of the social field of England, however exploited and backward; (b) that

[2] Fieldwork was carried out in Nevis from June to September, 1961, and from July, 1962 to June, 1963, under the auspices of the Department of Anthropology, Brandeis University, and the Research Institute for the Study of Man, New York.

migration and remittances are only one manifestation of this social field and as such are partial not sole causes of the changes now occurring.

A Brief Description and History of Nevis

Nevis is part of the Associated State of St. Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla, in the northern Lesser Antilles. It is a small, ill-watered volcanic isle with stony, shallow and relatively unproductive soil. About half the arable land is actually cultivated. The major crops, in order of frequency, are ground provisions (root crops, such as yams, sweet potatoes, taro and manioc), Sea Island cotton, and sugar-cane. Nevis does not have the clean cut appearance of West Indian sugar islands; its face is overgrown and stubbly.

The population of almost 13,000 (almost all of whom are Black) live in nucleated settlement areas and in "Strassenburg" type settlements strung out along the main circumferential road. The numerous small holdings are owned or rented, albeit non-productive. Furthermore, more than half the land used at one time or another for agriculture or husbandry is in parcels of 50 or more acres, more than half of which is government owned. There is little, if any, estate cultivation of cash crops. Large landowners appear to be interested in selling and renting land to tourists and other foreign developers. For them, land is more a direct source of cash rent than a means of agricultural production.

Nevis was settled by the English in 1628, and sugar-cane cultivation commenced at the end of the seventeenth century. Slave plantations predominated until emancipation in 1834. During the remainder of the nineteenth century, sugar-cane maintained a precarious hold on the island's economy under sharecropping arrangements, in which the household was the effective unit of production. Unable to complete with European beet sugar, and, later, with sugar produced in centralized steam powered mills in other islands, the Nevis sugar industry collapsed after World War I. Sea Island cotton, a delicate long staple fibre introduced early in the twentieth century to supplement the declining sugar industry, became the chief export crop of Nevis. Cotton was also produced on a sharecrop basis.

During the depression of the 1930's, many private estates ceased cultivation and sold out to government or to local speculators, both of which later sold or rented small plots. Increasing government ownership of land, and increasing numbers of small holdings (freehold and leasehold), is characteristic of recent Nevisian land tenure. According to the Agricultural Census of 1957, 94 percent of the holdings are in parcels of less than 5 acres, but comprise only 27 percent of the land used at one time or another for agriculture. Sixty-four percent of this land is in parcels of 50 or more acres, as already stated. By the end of World War II estate cultivation practically ceased. The decrease in the price of Sea Island cotton in the mid-fifties resulted in a decrease in cultivated acreage, a shortage of labor due to emigration, and economic decline and stagnation.

Politically, Nevis, with a brief exception, has always been a British colony. It had an independent legislature until 1882, when it was merged with that of St. Kitts and Anguilla. This arrangement still exists: Nevis has only two representatives, whereas St. Kitts has eight.

The foregoing brief historical sketch points out that Nevis was not brought into the orbit of an imperial nation-state. Nevisian society (notwithstanding the aborigines, who were annihilated early on) has always been part of the social field of England. The concern here, however, is not with the effects of changes within the larger context — the vagaries of international markets and colonial polity — but with the immediate and local effects of intermediate variables — migration and remittances.

The Pattern of Migration and Social Class

Migration is not new to the West Indies or to Nevis. After Emancipation there were movements of laborers throughout the Caribbean. During the 1880's, some Nevisians emigrated to Venezuela to work in the gold fields at El Callao. In 1904, when the United States acquired what was to be the Canal Zone, Nevisian males participated in the large-scale West Indian labor migration to Panama. During the first quarter of this century

Nevisians emigrated to the United States, where today there are sizeable Nevisian communities in New York and New Haven. During World War II, Nevisians also went to work in the oil refineries of Aruba and Curacao, and have recently returned home bringing with them savings and pensions after fifteen to twenty years of sending remittances. Finally, labor demands in England (Peach, 1965), availability of passage across the Atlantic, and a local depression in the cotton industry, led to a major migration from Nevis in the mid-fifties. During this time another terminus for emigration became available in the U. S. Virgin Islands, with the expansion of its tourist industry and the demands for construction and hotel workers.

The pattern of migration and the changes subsequently effected can best be understood against the background of the changing class structure in Nevis before and after the 1930's. It will be seen that the lower classes have undergone a great transformation in recent years, especially in the freedom from agricultural wage labor, or from any agricultural labor at all.

A broad outline of stratification in Nevis before the 1930's would place at the top the White estate-owners and the colonial administrators, followed by a Colored middle class composed of small estate-owners, town merchants, sugar and cotton agents, tenured civil servants, and estate managers. Below this middle class would be a small group of Black non-agricultural workers: mill-hands and foremen, overseers and overlookers (field foremen), small country shopkeepers, carters, mechanics, and other tradesmen and artisans. Some owned their own house-spot, but in almost every case they had access to small plots on which to cultivate sugar-cane.[3] They were called, by their social superiors, *Special People,* because of their occupations, but were still considered part of the Negro laboring class. At the bottom of this class system stood the Negro rural proletariat, agricultural wage laborers and sharecroppers, who may have owned their own miniscule house-spots, but who, unlike the *Special People,* did not have control of productive land.

[3] How the *Special People* came to have access to productive land is discussed in Frucht 1967:297-298.

The depression of the 1930's saw the exodus of the White population from Nevis, and the expansion of the Colored middle class into landowning and administrative statuses. Since the end of World War II, however, many factors — not the least of which are emigration and remittances — have been responsible for increased social mobility and the apparent replacement of the status criterion of color by the criterion of wealth or access to cash resources. These changes can be best understood if some of the more recent periods of migration are analysed in terms of the social class origins of the emigrants. The relationship between emigration and the changes wrought in local society and economy can be seen in the nature of the social and economic ties of the emigrants to those left behind. The nature of the ties varies with social class and style of life.

The migration to the United States (i.e., to New York and New Haven) during the first quarter of this century can be characterized as middle class (refering to the pre-1930's class structure). Passage money and expenses for the first weeks or months in the new country came from the profits of the family business or savings on salaries. The emigrants I have interviewed in the United States, and those who eventually returned to Nevis, came from merchant, estate manager, and overseer families. These middle class migrants had a better education than the laboring classes (having attended the private schools in Nevis and St. Kitts), and perhaps a better education than most American Negroes. In the United States, they were employed in commercial and technical positions. Some were able to purchase property in the United States. As representatives of the Colored middle class, they carried with them the outlook, attitudes and skills of a metropolitan oriented West Indian, which may account for their easy assimilation into American urban society and their higher status than Southern Negroes within the northern community. Some of these emigrants have returned to Nevis; most have not.

This middle class migration influenced little change in local economy and society, except to hasten the already existing process of replacement of Whites by Colored in the local power structure. The middle class family in Nevis was — and is — based on a legal, conjugal tie and in many instances took the form of a viri-

local extended family; especially if estate overseer or manager was concerned. Under these conditions there were little or no demands made on the emigrant, in terms of child support or the care of indigent relatives. In the case of illegitimate children, whenever responsibility was recognized, support money was not sent directly, but through the emigrant's family. As we shall see, this is quite the reverse of recent practice. The middle class emigrants were usually young and unmarried, and any remittances sent home enhanced the already comfortable position of landowners, merchants, civil servants and the like. Money accumulated in the United States usually went into the acquisition of property *there*. Only in recent years, as some of the emigrants return to Nevis for retirement, is their money used to buy local property. This property, however, is used for residential purposes and is not put under cultivation.

This period of emigration occurred during the 1920's. The middle class came to a position of power in the 1930's, during the Depression, when many English absentee landlords sold out to local, Colored speculators, who borrowed money from local banks or used their savings. At this time they were also able to call on the resources of those relatives in the United States. The rise in cotton prices during the late thirties enabled these speculators to pay off their debts and retain the land, thus ensuring their social and economic power.

The next important period of migration came during and immediately after World War II, when some Nevisians went to Aruba and Curacao to work in the oil refineries, and to Trinidad and Antigua. As there are no reliable figures on the number of Nevisians who did emigrate during this period, the following conclusions on the nature of the social changes effected comes from interviews with those who have since returned.

The migrants to Aruba, Curacao, and other islands came predominantly from the households of *Special People*. Passage money came from wage savings or from the proceeds of sugar-cane cultivation. Social and financial responsibilities made more demands on these emigrant mechanics, artisans and tradesmen than on the emigrant *bourgeoisie*. Many of the former emigrants left nuclear family households on Nevis, and part of their wages

earned in other islands was sent back for the care of mates and children, as well as for savings. On returning they usually had bank accounts waiting, and some of these returnees still receive pension cheques from the oil companies. One of the first objectives of the returnees is the purchase of land and a shop. Their intention is to cultivate the land in cash crops, especially in sugar-cane. Due to the shortage of labor, however, and the low price of sugar-cane, the land is rented out as house-spots, used for pasture, or not used at all. The returnees are more effective as small country shopkeepers and successfully compete with the town merchants by using their overseas contacts to import their own goods. This is a shift from the traditional pattern in which the town merchant imported goods and served as wholesale supplier to the country stores.

The emigration of *Special People* effected two major changes in local economy and society. First, the increase in small holders, which characterizes Nevisian land tenure today, has proceeded directly and indirectly from this group. Many of the returnees having bought large amounts of land, sell smaller plots to local buyers, who are less affluent returnees, or laboring class people now receiving remittances from England. One estate, for example, was sold in 1953 to a Nevisian just returned from the Dutch islands, where he had spent the previous ten years. Between 1954 and 1962, he sold not less than 34 plots of various sizes to as many buyers. He used part of this capital to establish local businesses.

The second change wrought by the emigration of *Special People* is structural. Since the Colored middle class took over the top positions of local wealth and power, the *Special People* have begun to move into the abandoned positions. In a real sense, the *Special People,* as a social category, is disappearing. This is possible through their landowning and shopkeeping activities, and through extending the opportunities for upward mobility of their children. Increased cash resources have enabled these people to send their children beyond primary school. A Secondary school education enables the graduates to fill most of the civil service and commercial positions available, and hence provide monthly salaries to supplement the cash resources of the

household. Those who continue their education in overseas technical schools and colleges soon reach the top positions in the local government administration and private businesses.

The relationship between these former *Special People* and the laboring classes becomes attenuated. In style of life and attitudes the former approximate the local upper class, which emulates the middle class activities and behavior of the *bourgeoisie* of England and the United States. Under these conditions, a sharpening of class and political differences would occur, but the recent mobility of part of the laboring classes mediates potential conflict.

Finally, we come to the period of emigration which has influenced the most dramatic changes in the economy and society of Nevis. This period of emigration, which began in the mid-fifties, and which continues to the present, although at a much lower rate, is composed primarily of unskilled young adults from working class households. In these households, the major source of income is (*was,* as we shall see) agricultural wage labor or the cultivation of small plots of ground provisions, e.g., root crops which serve as the basic food. These households are landless, except for a fraction of an acre used as house-spot and provision ground. These house-spots, whether recently purchased or inherited, are used as collateral when borrowing money (at 10 percent interest) to provide passage for one member of the household to England or the United States Virgin Islands. The remittances received from the first emigrant are used to send subsequent members of the household overseas.

Between 1955 and 1959 the yearly migration rate from the British West Indies was ten to twenty thousand (Henry n.d.). In 1960, it was approximately fifty thousand; in 1961, close to sixty thousand (Davison 1962:5). St. Kitts and Nevis together ranked third, after Dominica and Antigua, among the islands suffering the heaviest migration pressure (Davison 1962: 42). Migration figures for Nevis alone are difficult, if not impossible, to obtain through local records. Some idea of the extent of migration may be ascertained through a census carried out in two settlement areas of Nevis during 1962-63. Since 1958, approximately 22.4 percent of the population of one, and approxi-

mately 15.5 percent of the population of the other, had emigrated.[4] However, only part of the laboring classes contribute to the stream of migration and even fewer receive remittances. In these same settlements, 46.3 percent of the households of one, and 56.7 percent of the other, contributed emigrants, but only 39 percent of one and 48.6 percent of the other, respectively, receive remittances.

The emigrants do not seek agricultural work. They travel to England or the United States Virgin Islands in the hope of finding factory, hotel, or construction employment. They are rarely trained for such positions and consequently must take the most menial and lowest paying jobs.

The majority of these emigrants have not returned, and some are sending regular remittances *directly* to parents, or to friends or relatives caring for their children. Money is usually sent to the emigrant's natal household, but in some cases it is sent to the mother of his illegitimate children, or, in some cases, to the one with whom he intends to live or marry on his return. Of the ten returnees known to me, five returned in order to marry the mothers of their illegitimate children. In the case of female emigrants, their illegitimate offspring reside with maternal grandparents. It is my impression that few, if any, of the women return to Nevis from overseas. Finally, remittances are sent not only because they may be the sole support of a household, or a supplement to a meager income locally earned, or a legal necessity (i.e., support of illegitimate children), but also because there is among the lower classes — especially among males — strong ties of sentiment to one's mother and younger siblings; a moral obligation to help them is strongly felt.

Migration and Social Change

The effects of this migration of laboring class young adults include increasing amounts of cash and decreasing dependency on local sources of income; a changing age structure in the

[4] I have included only those emigrants who left the colony. The figures would be greater had I included those migrating from Nevis to St. Kitts.

population and changes in the quality of the labor force; decreasing production of agricultural items; and disruption of traditional social ties.

The major and immediate consequence of this migration is the increase in the number and amounts of remittances. In 1956, at the beginning of this period of emigration, over $226,000 BWI[5] in postal and money orders were cashed in Nevis; 68 percent from the United Kingdom, 30 percent from the United States and its possessions, and 2 percent from Canada and elsewhere. Six years later, in 1962, the figure was well over $600,000 BWI; 85 percent from the United Kingdom, 14.5 percent from the United States, and .5 percent from Canada and elsewhere. The amount for 1962 is greater than the proceeds cotton growers in Nevis received during 1956, which was their biggest crop year in fifteen years. At that time, cotton receipts came to $511,126 BWI. Based on gross figures, and a total of 3,000 households enumerated by the 1960 census, the remittances for 1962 amount to almost $200 BWI per household in Nevis. In 1954, the estimated per capita income in Nevis was $182 BWI (O'Loughlin 1959). Remittances have replaced agriculture as a main source of cash income.

A further consequence of this migration and receipt of remittances is a change in the age structure of the population, which in turn affects the nature of the labor force and the nature of productive organization in Nevis. According to the 1960 census, 32 percent of the population falls within the 15-44 age group. Compared to Jamaica, which has contributed most of the West Indians in the United Kingdom and where the 15-44 age group represents some 40 percent of the population, the effects of migration appear to have taken a heavier toll in Nevis. In the two settlement areas surveyed, 27 percent of one and 30 percent of the other fall within this age group. Between 1955 and 1960, 14 percent of the population of St. Kitts *and* Nevis applied for new passports, ostensibly to emigrate. Almost 90 percent of the applicants were between the ages 17 and 40.

[5] The rate of exchange in 1956 was $1.60 British West Indian (BWI) to $1.00 U.S. The current rate, since late 1967, is almost $2.00 BWI to $1.00 U.S.

As a result, the population of Nevis is very old and quite young. In the settlements surveyed, almost 45 percent of the households were comprised of grandparents and grandchildren; the intermediate generation having "bailed out," seeking work in England and other places. In these two areas, 70 percent of the household heads, male and female, were over 50 years of age. More than half of these households received remittances from overseas. The older men and women carry out desultory cultivation of cash crops, each year decreasing the acreage they are able to work. Those persons most able to pay for workers to cultivate cash crops have also decreased their acreage, claiming there is no worthwhile labor in Nevis and that which is available is much too expensive and slow.

In recent years, as labor migrated and remittances were received, and as sugar-cane and cotton prices decreased, wages for agricultural labor increased and the unit of work — the task — decreased. Wages increased from the equivalent of 24 cents BWI, per task during the 1930's, to $1.00, per task during the World War II period. The size of the task was reduced from 600-700 feet of hoeing, planting, or cutting canes, to 400-500 feet. Since the end of the war, wages rose to $1.25-$1.50 BWI, whereas the task has become a *time-task,* that is, as much as can be done between 6:30 or 7:00 in the morning to about 11:00 or 11:30 a.m. Under the new conditions there is hardly reason to hasten.[6]

There is also a reduction in cultivated acreage in Nevis. Over a seven year period, from 1955 to 1962, there was a 70 percent decrease in cotton acreage and 50 percent decrease in sugar-cane acreage. This is not just due to decrease in cash crop market prices. The acreage decrease continues in spite of occasional rises in price, as for example in 1961, when the price per pound of seed cotton jumped from 36 cents to 40 cents; cotton acreage has yet to increase. Unwillingness to cultivate, in the face of alternative sources of cash is a factor.

Reduction in acreage, unwillingness to pay higher wages, and alternatives to agricultural wage labor compound the unemploy-

[6] This theme and the following discussion of reduced acreage is elaborated in Frucht (1966).

ment of the labor force. According to the 1960 census, 70 percent of the adult population of Nevis (above the age of 15 years) *do not* cultivate land. Eleven percent cultivate less than one acre, and 18 percent cultivate between one and four acres. The remaining 1 percent cultivate five acres or more. The unemployment picture is brought into further relief by the following: only 55 percent of the adult population of Nevis could be classified as "classifiable labor force," that is, those who, during the year preceding the census (i.e., 1959), worked *at least two days for pay or profit.*

A further consequence of migration and the change in age structure and the nature of the labor force is the disruption of established ties between households and traditional forms of cooperative labor. There are, or were, two kinds of "partnerships" or cooperative labor in Nevis: a form of exchange labor between two to four men, and a cooperative working group among six or more men. This last form is similar to a rural North American "bee" and to Jamaican "morning sport" and the Antiguan "jollification." The bee is an old form used primarily in cutting sugar-cane. The exchange form, which still exists, albeit infrequently, seems to operate only in the forking and hoeing of cotton land. Each day the partners work on the plot of one of their group in preparing his land for cultivation. Since the plots are small, the partnerships do not last for more than two to three weeks. Planting and reaping is the responsibility of each farmer.

This form of exchange partnership was once more frequent. Partnerships may have been prevalent during periods of cash shortage (e.g., the 1930's), in much the same way as sharecropping.[7] During and after World War II cash became readily available and one could not only hire labor — without entailing the obligation to pay back in labor — one could also move out of the "bush" settlements and into the main areas where there was little or no cultivation. Old men in various parts of the island who participated in partnerships in previous years claim the demise

[7] Elsewhere (Frucht 1967), I argued that sharecropping may represent a peasant-like *means* of production, during periods of cash shortage. Exchange labor groups, such as partnerships, may indeed be characteristic of the organization of peasant and peasant-like production.

of the partnerships came about because someone invariably did not or was not willing to do his share. Emigration has meant that willing and able partners are hard to find. Thus, established ties between households and partners were disrupted and ceased to exist. This can also be seen in the virtual disappearance of such communal celebrations as Tea Meetings and the various Christmas pageants. A traditional mode of life in which social relationships were mediated through neighborliness and common participation in productive and ritual tasks has been replaced almost completely by a mode of life mediated by the cash nexus, in which invidious comparisons and the "grudge" become the hallmarks of social relations.

Emigration, Remittances and the Changing Social Field

Emigration and remittances have contributed to local changes ranging from the nature of labor to traditional ties of neighborliness. There is increasing non-production in Nevis. With more laboring class children than ever before attending secondary schools, it is conceivable that there will be few, if any, agricultural laborers in the next adult generation. If life seems relaxed and relatively prosperous, it is because Nevisians are living off the hard work of their relatives in England and other places. Remittances replace agricultural labor and production. This new source of cash has visibly improved the standard of living among the lower classes and brought about a new style of life which does not include nor demand agricultural labor.

This new source of cash, however, is not limitless; already the stream of migration is slackening, primarily due to less than ideal employment conditions in the United Kingdom (Peach 1965). The influx of remittances is lessening: from $447,577 BWI in 1963 to $330,254 BWI in 1966.[8] This may also reflect the fact that as migrants in England begin to develop responsibilities there the amounts they can send home must decrease.

The productive economy of Nevis is stagnating, but the island is both poor and prosperous. Its prosperity is based on

[8] These data collected in St. Kitts and Nevis in June, 1967.

the amounts of cash available through remittances, and, for the meantime, improvement in the material well-being of most of the population. Its poverty lies in its potential. Nevis suffers loss of productive workers; agricultural production has been replaced by decreasing remittances. Emigration and remittances have been sufficient to abet crucial changes in local economy and society, but in the last analysis they may become quite tenuous aspects of the social field.

In this discussion I have not mentioned other aspects of this social field. To be sure, there is dependence on the St. Kitts sugar industry, which itself is dependent on the United Kingdom and the international sugar market. There is dependence on the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and other countries for food, medicines, clothing and other necessary materials. Standards of education are set in England, and there is a growing dependence in Nevis on American and Canadian tourist dollars. Finally, as recent events have proven, the Caribbean is still very much an American lake, and every West Indian island still part of the American political sphere. Thus, other aspects of the social field will play their parts in effecting even more important social changes in Nevis.

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