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**‘White bashing’: power and victimisation among the
Mauritian white elite**

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White bashing – power and victimisation among the Mauritian white elite¹

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Introduction

March 12, 1968, marked the collapse of almost two centuries of Franco-Mauritian hegemony. That day the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius gained its independence from the UK, which was the continuation of a process towards a multi-ethnic democracy that had begun in the preceding decades. This was of disadvantage to the white colonial elite, the Franco-Mauritians, as the overlap between their elite position and ethnic background was associated with colonial domination. Franco-Mauritians had strongly opposed independence as they feared that their position might be compromised, especially since they only numbered about one percent of the population vis-à-vis much larger sections of Hindus (52 percent), Creoles (28 percent), Muslims (16 percent) and Sino-Mauritians (three percent). Remarkably, however, more than forty years later, the Franco-Mauritians, who currently number about ten thousand out of a population of 1.3 million, can still be considered an elite—albeit that they no longer constitute a hegemon. Comparatively, white elites in other postcolonial states, such as a number of Caribbean islands, also retained post-colonial positions of power. The relative success of securing their elite position is, in my opinion, not sufficiently explained by existing theories on (elite) power.

Democracy and independence in multi-ethnic states, as most former colonies are, negatively impact upon ethnic elites in their confrontation with much larger ethnic groups. At first sight, for such a minority elite opposing the power of larger ethnic groups appears a lost cause. Franco-Mauritians, for example, could have decided that, over time, they would not stand a chance against a majority made up of, specifically, Hindus. Yet they did not directly accept their (political) defeat. Historical and ethnographic data used in this chapter suggest that not accepting defeat in what prima facie appeared a 'lost' battle may have contributed positively to the capacity of this elite to maintain power and privileges in specific domains. By using their power 'defensively', Franco-Mauritians could 'trade' their political power for the maintenance of economic power. This allowed them to continue as an economic elite, which is an outcome that would have been less likely had they directly accepted their 'defeat'. Since this differs from what is deemed resistance, I argue that this particular feature of elite power, 'defensive power', should be made more explicit in order to enhance the understanding of how and why former colonial elites have been rather successful in maintaining their elite positions. This analytical addition, derived from the Mauritian case, may be also applicable to interpreting behavioral patterns of 'threatened' elites more generally.

Power

¹ This paper for University of Johannesburg's Sociology, Anthropology & Development Studies Wednesday Seminar is based on Salverda, Tijo. 2013. In defense: elite power. In: Jon Abbink and Tijo Salverda (eds.). *The Anthropology of Elites: power, culture and the complexities of distinction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

The use of 'defensive power' by elites appears to contradict simplified analytical relations of power between the principal and the subaltern (Scott 2001, 2). Weber (1968, 152) stated "[p]ower' (Macht) as being the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests." Weber's notion of 'power over' and the imposition of one person's will on another (Westwood 2002, 133) defines one side as having power and the other as resisting power. Since elites tend to be seen as the principal agents, this assumes that they are all-powerful; this prevailing perspective of domination from a ruler's perspective has a long history in western thought (Brennan 1997, 92).

To a certain extent, this perspective ties with the hegemony of white elites in the European colonies as they exerted political, economic, ideological, and cultural power over subordinate groups; although the British controlled Mauritius, the Franco- Mauritians could be considered as the (proxy) hegemon. It is important to remember that while "the Franco-Mauritian elite [not only] dominated island politics despite the façade of British rule" (Storey 1997, 37), they were also economically, ideologically, and culturally dominant. In many colonies, though, this position was sustained by the capacity to use force. Strictly speaking, Gramsci considered 'pure domination and coercion' the opposite of hegemony; as Fontana (1993, 140–141) suggests, "[h]egemony is defined by Gramsci as intellectual and moral leadership . . . whose principal constituting elements are consent and persuasion." It is argued, however, that Gramsci "refers to a psychological state, involving some kind of acceptance—not necessarily explicit—of the socio-political order or of certain vital aspects of that order" instead of purely moral and prescriptive connotations of consent (Femia 1981, 37). Colonial Mauritius, for example, was not free from conflict (Allen 2011), yet the colonial hierarchy was ideologically dominant, even though this was also sustained by (the possibility of) using force. This possession of "coercive powers that provide an ultimate last-resort back-up for [the elite's] authority" (Scott 2008, 33) can be considered power as the capacity to use force, not the exercise of that capacity (Lukes [1974] 2005, 12). With this in mind, the concept of hegemony, albeit not literally in the Gramscian sense, is in my opinion applicable to understand the history of the colonial projects, and especially their collapse.

Regarding the workings of hegemonies and their (potential) disintegration, it is worthwhile taking into consideration Lukes' analysis of three views of power. Under colonial rule the 'two-dimensional view of power', controlling the political agenda and keeping potential issues out of the political process (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Lukes [1974] 2005, 20–25), certainly applied to colonial elites. Lukes' third and 'radical view of power', which follows that dominant ideologies tend to work against people's interests by misleading them, distorting their judgment, and applying the ruler's power in such an effective way as to prevent conflicts from arising (Lukes [1974] 2005, 13, 27), has substantially contributed to the sustained domination of colonial elites. Only gradually were these ideologies, thus the colonial elites' hegemony and power structures, challenged by overt opposition to the status quo. Overt conflicts, the first dimension of power, became common, eventually resulting in independence and a prima facie reversal of power structure. Yet, the old white elites maintained much of their economic, and some of their status, position.

Power sources

As a social group, elites require privileged access to, or control over, particular resources that may be mobilized in the exercise of power (Woods 1998, 2108). Often, however, elites only

control certain resources. Numerous authors, consequently, have argued that elites are not all-powerful by virtue of the fact that distinction can be drawn between, for example, 'business/economic elites', 'military elites', 'governing/political elites', 'religious elites', 'academic elites' and 'administrative/bureaucratic elites' (Nadal 1956, 418; Shore and Nugent 2002, 4; Dogan 2003, 1). Hegemonies, in that sense, are not self-evident, as in liberal and democratic societies one elite rarely controls all resources, such as land, financial means, parliamentary control, knowledge and access to force (Dahl 1961). That said, Nadal (1956, 418) states:

. . . [b]ut let us note that this restriction to particular resources, interests or talents indicates essentially . . . the domains in which [the elite's] pre-eminence is primarily established; it does not indicate in the same manner the degree the actual influence it exercises. This [can still be] of a broad and embracing kind; we might say, it spills over into other domains of social life.

There is thus a symbolic aspect to power, granting the elite (potentially) more power than would be assumed on the basis of the resources it controls. This does not imply, however, that converting power from one domain to another is a foregone matter—although it is not impossible—as resources and the control over them tend to be subject to different characteristics and strategies. Privileged access to parliament and the state apparatus, which can be mobilized in the exercise of political power, for example, is something else than access to land and ownership of private companies, which can be mobilized in the exercise of economic power. Elites dominating a specific domain, moreover, cannot rely automatically on their position of power either. Access to certain resources can be subject to change, shifting power from one group to another: “[p]ossessions of power by one agent are always potentially able to be countered. This means that there are ways in which subordinate agents can seek to achieve power over the dominant agent that would allow them to counter this power” (Wartenberg 1990, 173).

Scott (2008, 38), therefore, rightly argues, “[o]ne of the errors made in much elite analysis . . . has been to assume, or at the very least to imply, that elites are all-powerful and that organisationally dominant groups will hold all the other power resources of a society.” Many elites seem to be aware that “power is intrinsically tied to the possibility of resistance, and the power of the elite must be seen as open to challenge from the resisting counteraction of its subalterns” (Ibid, 38). Numerous Franco-Mauritians, for example, asked me during interviews whether I was writing for local newspapers. They seemed anxious about too much public attention, something also noted in the case of the white Jamaican elite: “[p]eople in positions of power may fear that information about them might be used against them by their critics” (Douglass 1992, 37). Consequently, Dogan and Higley (1998, 241) state, “[e]ven the most dogmatic elite theorists acknowledge the political importance of mass publics, the need of elites for mass support, and the difficulties elites have in gaining and maintaining that support.” In a way, this relates to the continuum between the elite's universalistic functions, that is its service to the public, and organizing itself particularistically. As Cohen (1981, xiii) writes, “[i]n time, an elite may move from one end of the continuum to the other, and history repeatedly records the rise and fall of elites.” The position of elites can thus never be taken for granted, as in many societies the particular interests of elites are often secretly performed (Ibid, xvi). This implies that we have to analyze power without the a

priori assumption that elites and/or other powerful groups use power 'pro-actively' and are the main driving forces behind the exercise of power. In order to maintain their position they often have to defend themselves, and for a better theoretical understanding of the workings of elite power the introduction of the concept 'defensive power' is, I argue, essential.

Defensive power

Because of the view that elites, through their control over resources, have the most power at their disposal, it is often assumed that they are the ones exercising power proactively and expansively. But it needs to be stressed that elites, especially in the face of change, tend to defend their interests and privileges as a reaction to external challenges to their position. The elite may apply its power to resist pressure in order to maintain the status quo, at least in certain domains. Hence, colonial elites who have lost their hegemony—their initial dominance over virtually all (public) spheres of life—have to move from exercising power over others directly to more strategic uses of their remaining resources in order to prevent them losing their power base and privileges. In Weberian terms, the Franco-Mauritanian elite does things it would not otherwise have done due to exercise of power by others. One could argue then that the elite resists, as if they were subalterns, yet I argue that from an analytical perspective a distinction ought to be made between an elite applying power defensively and identifying an action as subaltern resistance. As an analytical concept, the resistance of subalterns should be considered as the means to try to undo an unbalanced situation—the two principal forms of subaltern resistance, pressure and protest, are active forms in order to challenge the established power structure (Scott 2001, 27). The elite, however, applies power defensively in order to achieve maintenance of the status quo instead of trying to alter the situation. Thus, this kind of elite is more passive, instead of pro-actively using its power. In the analysis of power and elites, one ought, therefore, to closely examine which groups and/or individuals exercise power, who exactly initiates a power struggle, what wider impact this has and whether elite power is used pro-actively or defensively. This becomes even more pertinent when we look at how power and its use(s) are perceived by elites themselves.

Perceptions

The 'elite' classification tends to be eschewed by many Franco-Mauritians and other elite groups; it is argued that 'elite' is a term of reference rather than of self-reference (Marcus 1983, 9). The aversion seems to stem from the image that elites are all-powerful and in control. Indeed, Mills ([1956] 2000, 17) argues that, in the USA, "[m]ore generally, American men of power tend, by convention, to deny that they are powerful." Social psychologists confirm that there is a paradoxical misuse of power by those who perceive themselves as powerless but who are actually in a socially recognized position of authority (Bugental and Lewis 1999). In such cases, people's subjective sense of power has more impact on their thoughts, feelings and behavior than their objective position of power. From this analysis one could argue that elite members who feel powerless will think and behave like powerless people despite the fact that objectively they have more power than others. It could, of course, be that only when elites feel threatened do they 'realize' the workings of power, though in a negative manner: they feel powerless, while they may be less consciously aware of power (or see it as the natural course of events) when they use it pro-actively and the burden is carried by others.

The potential use of force and violence by subaltern groups is also a consideration in

regard to elites' perceptions of themselves. The violent expropriation of the land of white farmers in Zimbabwe shows that their opponents could put their power into practice. As analyzed by Chua (2003), this constitutes a threat that is taken very seriously by minority ethnic elites more generally. Threats to use violence do not appear empty. Thus, with respect to the elites' perceptions, it is important to take into consideration their opponents' capacity do something (Lukes [1974] 2005, 12), even if that capacity is never actualized. As argued by Scott (2008, 29), while the mainstream of power research focuses upon overt decision-making, power can only be fully understood by taking account of perceptions of its potential uses. While former colonial elites may still have substantial power, it has certainly declined since the end of the colonial period. This, consequently, affects these declining elites' self-perceptions of their own power. Because they see themselves as under pressure and perceive others as competitors vying for their privileges, their perception of their opponents' potential use of power (imagined and real) constitutes highly significant data. Such perception may, accordingly, manoeuvre an elite to adopting a position of defense, either by taking a lower profile or by acting defensively in public. Interestingly, an elite may also benefit from feeling 'powerless': elites that perceive themselves as challenged are likely to have a stronger internal solidarity. Perceptions (and worldviews) of elites are, therefore, highly relevant, as they have an impact on how elites balance their (or lack of) willingness to 'share' power with a desire to oppose change.

Establishing power: Franco-Mauritians in colonial times

Until five centuries ago, Mauritius was uninhabited—conversely, the Caribbean islands and the African landmass were populated, although on the Caribbean islands the indigenous populations were quickly replaced by enslaved peoples (De Barros et al. 2006, xix). The first attested Europeans to land in Mauritius were the Dutch in 1598. The Dutch 'occupation' of the island, however, was not very successful and they finally abandoned Mauritius in 1710.

After the island had been left idle for some years the French took possession of it and constructed a permanent settlement. The Franco-Mauritians are in a way the living heritage of these early settlers. It was not an easy task for the French colonizers to establish a self-sustaining colony, as they had to install themselves and develop the infrastructure from scratch (Chaudenson 1992, 93–95). For hard physical labor they imported large numbers of slaves from Madagascar and Mozambique, quickly outnumbering the white settlers (Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo 1993, 260–63). These slaves were obliged to convert to their masters' Catholic religion (Nagapen 1996, 13) and, as will be shown below, this shared religion led to interesting alliances at other points in the island's history. The white community was at the top of the island's hierarchy, although the establishment of a white elite was not a unilinear process: "[w]hile the consolidation of an elite was undoubtedly taking place through marriage and business alliances, this was a process constantly disturbed by the influx of newcomers, particularly at times of war" (Vaughan 2005, 80), often whites from poor rural backgrounds in Brittany, France (Boudet 2004, 54). It was actually only during the British period that many of the differences within the white community were bridged.

The abolition of slavery

In December 1810, the British arrived with a fleet of seventy ships and ten thousand troops and forced the French out of Mauritius. It was a relatively simple conquest, partly because the British had become the dominant force in the region (Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo 1984). The British

chose not to take any prisoners of war and paid to send French troops back to France. For those who remained, their property was not to be confiscated and the inhabitants were given the guarantee that they would be able to keep their religion, laws, and customs (Boudet 2005, 27). This accommodating British approach can be explained by the fact that they recognized in the well-organized community of planters a valuable asset (Eriksen 1998, 9).

Britons never settled in large numbers in Mauritius and most of the sugarcane plantations remained in the hands of white French planters. The estates were, however, increasingly backed by significant amounts of British credit as sugar was mainly exported to London, leading to a booming sugar industry from the 1820s onwards. In a way the Franco-Mauritians could maintain their hegemony, though under the aegis of the British. Shortly after their arrival, the British nevertheless posed the first real challenge to the Franco-Mauritian elite position by abolishing slavery. This, however, was due to external pressure instead of other Mauritians opposing Franco-Mauritian hegemony. One of the paradoxes of the British occupation, according to Vaughan (2005: 261), was that “Mauritius came increasingly heavy under the scrutiny of the British abolitionists . . . Mauritian planters had come well and truly in abolitionists’ limelight, and allegations of atrocities committed against slaves were numerous. There is little doubt,” she writes, “that many of these allegations were well founded, but it is also clear that Mauritian slavery and Mauritian planters were coming to assume a symbolic role within British abolitionist discourse as the epitome of evil.”

The intention to abolish slavery was met with much resistance from the slave-masters. This led to the first serious power struggle between the British colonial administration and Franco-Mauritian slave-owners. Through practices of lobbying and political trafficking, Franco-Mauritians used their power in order to try to halt the decline of their privileges. The main figure on the Franco-Mauritian side at this time was the rich planter Adrien d’Epinay (Toussaint 1971, 85). He went to London in person to argue the Franco-Mauritian case since, due to their French background, the planters had limited direct access to the political decision-makers in London. During this visit he persuaded London to grant Mauritius freedom of the press, and in 1832 d’Epinay founded the first independent newspaper of the island, *Le Cernéen*. The newspaper, accordingly, opposed the abolition of slavery and would during its long life function as the mouthpiece of the Franco-Mauritian community and, specifically, its interests in the sugar industry.

D’Epinay was unsuccessful in his attempt to stop the British from abolishing slavery, which took place in 1835, but he did manage to negotiate huge compensation for the slave-owners. Franco-Mauritians, thus, did not have enough political clout to determine the decision-making process, but their (economic) position still gave them political influence in order to negotiate compensation. A side-effect of the power struggle, moreover, was to the advantage of the Franco-Mauritians: they reinforced their elite position because they were unified not only by their shared economic interests but also by their joint resistance to British interference in their affairs (Vaughan 2005, 262). “[T]he Mauritian plantocracy as a whole, therefore, did not suffer drastic property losses from [slave] emancipation” (North-Coombes 2000, 23), and they remained powerful in the political and economic domain. Equally, in most Caribbean colonies abolition seems to have had little impact on the position of the whites. In the Dutch West Indies, for example, “abolition did not have a major economic effect and the social and cultural emancipation of the ex-slaves took place only very gradually . . . slavery was replaced by a coercive paternalism where colour determined one’s place in

the social hierarchy” (Hoefte 2006, 173). Also, the white population of Martinique, the Békés, remained in possession of the land even though the sugarcane industry had to restructure substantially (Kováts Beaudoux 2002, 34–36). However, this elite lost their hegemony, after the abolition of slavery in 1848 “whites in Martinique withdrew from public life. Mulâtres moved in to take control of the political domain, while whites retained control of the economic domain” (Vogt 2005, 263).

Indentured labor

In Mauritius, as in many of the Caribbean plantation states, many of the ex-slaves no longer had a desire to work for their ex-masters and established small coastal villages or moved to the towns. Nowadays their descendants are part of the Creole community, which is often considered at the lower end of the island’s socio-economic hierarchy. The main change for the Franco-Mauritians, then, was that they had to look for new sources of labor. As a consequence of the never-ending need for labor to work the sugar plantations and the limited number of ex-slaves, the Franco-Mauritian planters and the British colonial government had to turn to another source of labor: India. This marked the start of a new episode in Mauritian history, and the establishment of a potential counter-force: within ten years of the arrival of the first indentured laborers one-third of the population were Indians, while by 1861 they numbered two-thirds of the population (Benedict 1965, 17).

Despite this large influx, the Franco-Mauritians were able to relatively easily maintain their hegemony. The Indo-Mauritians (constituting a majority of Hindus and a smaller portion of Muslims) largely adapted to the ‘psychological state’ of the colonial hierarchy, even though potential and actual use of coercion certainly helped. Only as a consequence of plummeting sugar prices on the world market did the Indo-Mauritians gradually become prominent in the island’s affairs from the mid-1870s onwards. The Franco-Mauritian estate-owners had problems of capital and by selling land they were able to extract substantial sums of ready cash from the Indian immigrants. The latter then became land-owners and (small) planters themselves, which allowed them to steadily increase their political power (Allen 1999, 73–74, 138, 141). But with support from the British, the Franco-Mauritians prevented any change that would seriously jeopardize their elite position, such as widening suffrage, for another half a century. In line with the two-dimensional view of power (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Lukes [1974] 2005, 20–5), the Franco-Mauritians successfully controlled the political agenda and kept potentially jeopardous issues out of the political process.

1930s–1940s: challenging the hegemony

The strong position of the Franco-Mauritians within the plantation economy gave them significant influence in the colonial administration of the island. North-Coombes stated (2000, 79): “. . . the colonial state was, moreover, predisposed to favour Mauritian planters for reasons that can be roughly described as structural.” A harmonious relationship between the British colonial administration and the planters was required since sugar represented, by and large, the main tax revenue of the colony. Besides, “harmony of interests was likely for yet another structural reality, that is, the deep integration of the island as a sugar exporter in the peripheral circuits of the world economy which linked colonial and metropolitan ruling groups” (Ibid, 79).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Franco-Mauritian hegemony began to be steadily undermined. Initially, this was left unnoticed, as shown in the case of the gradual

emancipation Indo-Mauritians. “In 1901 Gandhi, returning to India from South Africa, stopped briefly in Mauritius; six years later, at Gandhi’s behest, Manilal Maganlall Doctor came to Mauritius to teach Indian immigrants about the traditions and heritage of their homeland” (Simmons 1982, 46). The idea was that they could only be emancipated if they respected themselves. Partly due to the fact that the colonial authorities paid relatively little attention to Manilal Maganlall Doctor’s activities, he was relatively successful in increasing confidence among Indo-Mauritians (Ibid, 47). Through his activities, there was an increase in cultural and religious organizations in the (Indo-Mauritian) villages, where no Franco-Mauritians lived to observe the change. Thus a cultural framework was laid down for the establishment of a counter-elite.

From 1930s onwards, the concrete exercise of power, one-dimensional power, became increasingly used in resistance to white hegemony. Observing the increasing influence of the European working classes, who had already proved a substantial challenge to the establishment (Hartmann 2007, 5–7), the Mauritian working classes, notwithstanding their ethnic background, started to raise their voice. This was fuelled by dissatisfaction with their situation and the global Great Depression of the 1930s that had devastated the economy of Mauritius, which was solely reliant on its sugar exports. The situation further deteriorated when the sugar mills reduced the buying price for a specific cane mainly produced by small planters. The sugar mills were in Franco-Mauritian hands, as was the control of the island’s scientific institutions—“access to sugar cane was a central grievance of protestors” (Storey 1997, 142). In August 1937, this led to a number of strikes and riots pitting workers against their employers, the sugar plantations, which were the first riots in Mauritian history where fatal casualties occurred. These riots are considered a turning point in Mauritian history; the British colonial government could not ignore the grievances of the working classes anymore and as a result changes were made: “the Mauritian government began to incorporate non-elite groups within the structures of the state, to guarantee the peace” (Ibid, 149).

As on the Caribbean island of Antigua where, around the same time, large strikes marked the start of increasing participation of the masses in the island’s affairs (Richards 1983, 18–20), changing circumstances in 1930s and 1940s led to a situation that the Franco-Mauritians had never experienced before. Now that they no longer had the unlimited support of the British, their position was “open to the resisting counteraction of its subalterns” (Scott 2008, 38). A counter-elite of Indo-Mauritian, especially the Hindu section, and, to a lesser extent, upper-class Creole politicians campaigning for the emancipation of the masses could no longer be stopped and in 1945 the drafting of a new constitution was suggested. Despite the Franco-Mauritians’ defense, the British drafted a new constitution in 1947 that increased suffrage substantially. The Franco-Mauritians were furious with the British because, contrary to the past, the British colonial administration virtually ignored their suggestions for the new constitution. This new policy stemmed from the fact that the British were now of the opinion that, for the well-being of the colony, the working classes and counter-elites should be given a voice. The changing attitude of the British resulted in a clear defeat for the Franco-Mauritians and a victory for the Indo-Mauritians. The 1948 elections, the first under the new constitution, therefore, marked the first serious challenge to almost two centuries of Franco-Mauritian hegemony. They now no longer controlled all spheres of power, since their community no longer had unlimited access to resources that could be mobilized for political power. The result was the emergence of plural ‘functional’ elites, that

is distinct political and economic elites.

1968: an independent nation

The shifting power balance on the island increased the desire for independence, predominantly among the largest ethnic group, the Hindus. They had now firmly been established as a political force to be reckoned with, adding tension, however, to the complex ethnic balance of the island. The sharing of the Catholic faith between Franco-Mauritians and Creoles, for example, served the Franco-Mauritians well in their opposition to the Hindus because their strategy for establishing alliances with other ethnic groups, propagated by *Le Cernéen*, enlarged the opposition against independence. This was certainly to the advantage of the Franco-Mauritians: on the basis of their small numbers they could never make a difference in electoral terms. Yet the coalition seems not to have been completely 'orchestrated' by Franco-Mauritians. There was a genuine fear among other communities, especially among (middle-class) Creoles, that in an independent nation dominated by Hindus they would lose their positions in the state apparatus.

The question of independence finally culminated in the 1967 elections. Partly as a result of the anti-independence campaign of the newspaper *Le Cernéen*, it turned out to be a close call between supporters and opponents of independence: the pro-independence block won but received only a slight majority of the votes (Simmons 1982, 187). Apart from the Franco-Mauritians many more Mauritians had been drawn into the anti-independence camp, apparently not having much trust in an independent nation. They feared Hindu domination and the deterioration of the economy without the help of the UK. They lost, however, and their most dreaded outcome became a reality; in 1968, Mauritius was granted independence under the leadership of its first prime minister, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam. It was a clear sign that Franco-Mauritians could no longer sustain their hegemony in a multi-ethnic democratic state, which had shifted the political dominance to the Hindu elite, backed by the more numerous Hindu community. Equally, in the Caribbean, emancipation of the masses weakened the political power of the whites due to their ethnic minority character (Stone 1983a, 42). It is important to note that these comparative cases do not always specifically illustrate how the white elites opposed their loss of power and to what extent they applied their power defensively in order to face these challenges. But power-sharing could certainly constitute a fruitful avenue for an elite to safeguard its position. In the case of Jamaica, for example, the traditional local white- and light-skinned planters and merchants opted for power-sharing with, among others, the emergent brown and black political directorate representing the interests of the overwhelmingly black population (Stone 1983b, 238). They probably realized that it was a lost battle to defend their hegemony and that violent suppression of the majority as an answer to opponents pushing for change was not considered an option, contrary to South Africa and Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe) where the whites forcefully defended their minority rule.

Nevertheless, Franco-Mauritians appear to have been so accustomed to their role as the ones in command, reinforced also by the marginal loss of their anti-independence block, that even after 1968 they tried to maintain this position. For generations Franco-Mauritians had passed on their elite dominance, and coming to terms with counter-elites who successfully challenged their power was not easy for them. Historical analysis suggests that the Franco-Mauritians only gradually came to realize that their direct political role was over in a democratic Mauritius. After independence was an established fact, they could no longer

mobilize mass support, as differences with other ethnicities were too large, and they lost their (direct) political influence. In the columns of the newspaper *Le Cernéen*, however, the Franco-Mauritians continued to interfere in public discourse—the newspaper had always existed by the grace of Franco-Mauritian businessmen because they partly financed the newspaper. However, around 1980, the newspaper’s combination of defending the whites and the sugar industry came to be perceived by many Mauritians as ‘not opportune’ any more. The symbolism of their white skin color was becoming a liability to the maintenance of their power. Thus, what in the past had been a symbolic resource was now a liability. Franco-Mauritian businessmen realized that to maintain their control over the island’s economic resources they should no longer interfere openly in the public debate. These businessmen required good working relationships with the government and consequently considered *Le Cernéen*’s rhetoric as an embarrassment. Thus, the newly emerged elites increasingly claimed politics, and the discourse surrounding political institutions, as their exclusive domain.

Politicians, predominantly of non-white Mauritian signature, had made it clear to Franco-Mauritian businessmen that it would be appropriate to cease financing *Le Cernéen*. According to the last editor-in-chief of the newspaper, representatives of the sugar industry never explicitly told him personally about their objections but, nevertheless, he told me 25 years later, “I felt how I was an obstacle to them” (interview with author). In the new reality, the business community was no longer able to unite itself behind a publicly voiced single communal message (Lenoir 2000, 204) and, therefore, saw, as a means of prolonging its elite position, no other option than to stop financing the newspaper. After 150 years of existence the newspaper had to close its doors on May 15, 1982. This was symbolic of the Franco-Mauritians’ changing position in Mauritian society. Most Franco-Mauritians seemed finally to realize that their part in public debate was over. They withdrew from politics, apart from a few exceptions as will be shown below and, as a community, stopped voicing a public opinion in relation to their elite and ethnic position. In that respect, they had become like the white elite in Martinique who had already, and for a much longer period, displayed a similar fear of every criticism, especially when in the public sphere (Kováts Beaudoux 2002, 12).

Franco-Mauritian adoption of a low-profile position in the public debate proved effective in securing their economic interests. Although the transition to independence was relatively peaceful, it confirms that “in the case of abrupt regime changes, an analogy has been noticed across countries: the economic and administrative elites resist better the upheaval than the political and military elites” (Dogan 2003, 13). With respect to independence another parallel also seems at play: counter-elites that try to increase their power with the support of the masses initially focus primarily upon political participation. Initially, the Mauritian–Hindu elite wanted to increase its political power, without targeting Franco-Mauritians economic power. Even in Zimbabwe, resistance was initially driven by the desire of blacks to establish majority rule and self-determination and not so much by the desire to seize white farmland. At independence, white farmers were actually encouraged to stay and contribute to the nation (Shaw 2003, 80–81).

Present-day Mauritius: defending economic power

Despite Franco-Mauritian hegemony permanently coming to an end with the collapse of the colonial structure, they can still be considered an elite. Paradoxically, this is partly sustained by symbolic power: on the one hand, the symbolic aspect of white skin color has become a liability, while on the other, however, the symbolism of white skin color and association with

French culture are resilient and contribute to the maintenance of the Franco-Mauritian elite status (see Salverda 2011). Also, Franco-Mauritians have successfully expanded their power by heavily investing in new economic domains, such as tourism and the textile industry.

But Franco-Mauritian consolidation of their elite position is not set in stone. Nowadays, the newly emerged elites, such as the Hindu political elite(s), can no longer be considered the Franco-Mauritians' subordinates. From their previously disadvantaged position they have become equally powerful, if not more powerful. There is a certain level of consensus between the elites, enhanced, from 1980s onwards, by the economic prosperity the island experienced, making Mauritius one of the most democratically stable African states. Yet, power struggles between the island's functional elites remain rife. Franco-Mauritian business interests and the (Hindu-dominated) public sector and politicians often clash, or at least the potential for a clash is always latently present. Franco-Mauritians maintain a low political profile and have developed a remarkable tolerance of being targeted by politicians, especially during electoral campaigns. Political rhetoric is often about the Franco-Mauritians' disproportionate share in the island's wealth, symbolically stressed by referring to the white skin color.

An easy target

One of the strategies adopted by the Franco-Mauritians is not to defend themselves publicly when targeted by politicians. Franco-Mauritians appear aware of their role as easy target in electoral campaigns. They argue that politicians, in order to gain votes, criticize Franco-Mauritian economic power because, as a Franco-Mauritian CEO said, "there are so few whites that if the [political] mechanism of 'white-bashing' doesn't work for you it doesn't work against you" (interview with author). A widely shared perception is that after the elections politicians tend to tone down their criticism because in the end the private sector and the government need each other—a Franco-Mauritian businessman said, "when I'm having a drink with politicians they tell me that [white bashing] was just talking politics" (interview with author). This ambiguous relationship between public rhetoric and private consent to the status quo, has gradually led to consensus among Franco-Mauritian businessmen that it is best to support the government in place and remain neutral during the electoral campaign. In some instances, this is to such an extent that Franco-Mauritian businesses do not allow employees to engage in politics. To maintain their neutrality, Franco-Mauritian businesses now make approximately equal payments to the different (large) political parties (see also Handley 2008, 123).

The Franco-Mauritian Paul Bérenger is an exception to the rule that Franco-Mauritians are no longer actively involved in politics. However, the political fate of Bérenger proves the rule that Franco-Mauritians may be correct in their conviction that it is too risky to get involved in politics. Initially, Bérenger was not associated with the Franco-Mauritians, because when he started his political career in the first decade after independence, he strongly criticized Franco-Mauritian domination in the private sector. This helped him to gain wide support among Mauritians of all backgrounds. Many Franco-Mauritians, conversely, disliked him. A retired Franco-Mauritian businessman told me, 'I wondered whether Bérenger's attacks on [Franco-Mauritian] privileges had to do with the fact that he was *metissé* [i.e. of 'mixed' blood]' (interview with author). Clearly the insinuation was that Bérenger was driven by revenge on the white community because he was allegedly not completely white himself.

In 2003, Bérenger became the first non-Hindu prime minister of Mauritius. He was not elected directly as prime minister, but attained this position during the last two years of his coalition-government's five-year term (2000–2005). It was a coalition arrangement whereby the renowned Hindu politician of another coalition party served the first three years as prime minister, and Bérenger the second two. That a non-Hindu became prime minister was thought to represent a break with the past and it was considered a sign that Mauritius was ready for decreased influence of ethnicity on politics. However, once in government Bérenger found himself obliged to co-operate with Franco-Mauritian businessmen, which made him an easy prey for political opponents. Now his skin color suddenly became 'visible': he was a 'white' favoring other 'whites'. His background clearly constrained him in dealing with private sector matters. In reality, Bérenger does not appear to have favored the Franco-Mauritians or showed any 'racial' preferences. Yet, his white skin color was a liability.

As a consequence of Bérenger's position as prime minister, in the ensuing 2005 election campaign there was a strong focus on the Franco-Mauritians. As many ordinary Mauritians are of the cynical viewpoint that government, in general, represents the interests of the Franco-Mauritians (Hempel 2009, 468), they easily accept(ed) the political rhetoric that Franco-Mauritians hold all the economic power and, through the figure of Bérenger, were becoming hegemonic. This put the Franco-Mauritian community in a position of blame. Subsequently, Bérenger lost the 2005 elections; although it may be too simplistic to say that Bérenger *cum suis* only lost because of his white skin color.

After his defeat, the association between Bérenger and Franco-Mauritian economic privileges may have become less of an issue, since this link has lost its political purpose. However, politicians have not stopped criticizing Franco-Mauritian economic power and privileges in general. While this kind of rhetoric is common, especially during elections, the fate of Bérenger confirms the general Franco-Mauritian perception that participating actively in politics is potentially hazardous to the consolidation of their elite position.

Democratization of the economy

Many Mauritians and Franco-Mauritians are particularly critically of the present government (2005–present) because of their smear campaign against Bérenger during the 2005 electoral campaign. Since being in power, the Labor-Party-led government alliance has been transmitting mixed messages. Government has approved a number of Franco-Mauritian-led projects which they had promised to oppose. Yet, at the same time, politicians have continued to challenge Franco-Mauritian privileges in general and their sugar interests in particular. The government is the clear initiator of the ensuing power struggles, as the Franco-Mauritians have little incentive for change. They preferred to retain a low profile, to keep things as they are. Only when they felt their privileges and position being threatened do they react, defensively.

The government, for example, challenged the Franco-Mauritian position by introducing a policy designed to allow for the 'democratization' of the economy. The idea behind this was to reform the economy, open it up internationally, break the economic monopolies, and, especially, also to 'increase chances for other local players'—hence, a potential challenge to Franco-Mauritian economic power. The government's proposal, which was initially presented as concerning issues of concentration of wealth and unequal distribution of land, quickly became increasingly ethnicized. Franco-Mauritians perceived themselves as victims and argued that their political opponents targeted them out of

resentment. Eric Guimbeau, another Franco-Mauritian politician and exception to the rule that Franco-Mauritians have withdrawn from politics, though more of a 'typical' Franco-Mauritian and with much smaller support than Bérenger, resigned in 2006 from the government alliance because he disagreed with certain government-allied politicians' verbal charges made against the Franco-Mauritian community. Guimbeau took a clear stand against certain politicians by defending Franco-Mauritians. Guimbeau remarked, "the politicians who attack the whites want to kick them out [of Mauritius] and take their place. It's revenge for the past" (interview with author). Interestingly, Paul Bérenger, now in the opposition, has largely held his tongue in this issue.

Politicians of non-Franco-Mauritian descent often stress that their intentions are not ethnically motivated and insist there is no white-bashing: "*Cette politique ne constitue pas une considération raciale et ethnique, un arbitraire idéologique ou une revanche sur l'histoire*" (O'Neill 2007).² However, the problem remains that Franco-Mauritians still have an unequal share of the island's wealth, and the intended democratization of the economy is thus easily 'ethnicized'. This is comparable to the late 1970s and early 1980s when, as Simmons (1982, 195) argues, anti-capitalism rhetoric in Mauritius appeared anti-white not because it was anti-white but because most whites were capitalists. It is, nevertheless, difficult to avoid resorting to exploiting resentment of the colonial origins of the Franco-Mauritian privileged position for political gain. The electoral campaign of 2005 and the attacks on Bérenger show how the present government, when it was in opposition, used 'white-bashing' in order to gain votes. Contradictory statements coming from the politicians involved further heightened these suspicions. The prime minister, for example, took the opportunity to associate Franco-Mauritian economic power with colonial injustices, when giving a speech at the British bicentenary celebration of the abolition of slavery in Hull in the UK:

In my own country, it has left us with a distribution of wealth that is still skewed in favour of those who *benefitted from slavery* [emphasis added]. One of the legacies of slavery, that continues to hamper development, is the concentration of ownership of assets. This concentration is unfair in a way but also gives rise to misallocation and inefficiency in the utilisation of resources, and impedes growth. My Government is aiming to reform the national economic structure and open doors of opportunity to the population at large. We will achieve this by enlarging participation in mainstream activities and opening access to land ownership. As we see it, the key to economic democratisation is empowerment. (Ramgoolam 2007)³

Obviously, this makes the sugar industry particularly vulnerable to government pressure due to its (symbolic) associations with the colonial period.

Pay off

Traditionally sugar has been the "country's cash cow" (Handley 2008, 108–9), which has even led to a pattern of applying economic power in the form of financial contributions and

² Translation: This policy is not racially and ethnically based, nor based on an arbitrary ideology or revenge for past history.

³ Prime minister Navin Ramgoolam is the son of Mauritius' first prime minister, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam.

donations paid by Franco-Mauritian businesses to government-related projects. For example, the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, founded by the Mauritian government in collaboration with the Indian government in 1970, which promotes (research on) Indo-Mauritian culture, is situated on a plot of land donated to the government by a large Franco-Mauritian sugar estate.

Today the sugar industry remains dominated by Franco-Mauritians, and the Franco-Mauritian-controlled sugar estates continue to be in a precarious political position. Despite the fact that the Mauritian economy nowadays relies far less on the sugar industry than before, agriculture, of which around half is sugarcane-related, now makes up only six per cent of Mauritian GDP.⁴ In densely populated Mauritius, land ownership, in particular, reinforces resentment—a general estimation suggests that Franco-Mauritians own approximately 36 percent of the total available land, while only about 10 percent of the island’s land is state-owned. Hence, a Mauritian journalist close to the Labor Party told me, “the unequal distribution of land is at the center of the problem; without a change nothing will happen” (interview with author). But the distribution of land is a complex matter on Mauritius because initially the land belonged to no one. Land distribution through expropriation cannot be justified as the reasoning for ‘unequal land ownership’, and thus has little (international) legal basis. In Zimbabwe, on the contrary, the land of the white (farmers) elite has been expropriated on the basis of land redistribution. Initially, there was a certain level of peaceful land distribution (Shaw 2003, 75–76), but once Robert Mugabe launched his aggressive land distribution campaign there was little the white minority could do. The Zimbabwean case, then, is illustrative of the limits of (peaceful) defensive power when confronted with a violent opponent.

In 2005, the sugar industry plunged into a recession. Reform was required which would involve the closing of mills and, subsequently, social programs for laid-off workers—in these cases the government often demands land from the sugar industry to bring these social programs to a successful conclusion. Initially, a deal was struck between the sugar estates, the government and the European Commission (EC) (which was willing to contribute financially to the reform). But the government stalled and brought the issue back to the negotiation table, demanding extra compensation of two thousand *arpents* (one *arpent*, an old French unit for measuring land, is about half a hectare) to be paid by the sugar industry for social projects, as it considered the deal to be too advantageous for the Franco-Mauritian sugar industry.

The result was a deadlock. The Franco-Mauritian sugar estates accused the government of making excessive demands and not respecting the rules of fair play; at no point had the extra compensation been brought up in the (initial) deal. The Franco-Mauritians defended themselves, but in the end they had to give in to government pressure. Then the government came back with yet additional demands. Again, the sugar industry said it could not possibly meet these demands, before eventually agreeing to satisfy a substantial part of them. The two sides subsequently came to an agreement. The final result: the sugar industry gave two thousand *arpents* of land for social programs and opened up 35 percent of the shareholding of the mills (Sooknah 2007). It was obvious that the Franco-Mauritians and the government were highly dependent on each other and needed to come to an agreement in order to safeguard the EC’s financial contribution to the restructuring program since the EC demanded that the Franco-Mauritian sugar industry and the government come to an

⁴ See: <http://www.gov.mu/portal/goc/cso/report/natacc/agri06/sumtab.pdf> (accessed 7 December 2009).

agreement (Roopun 2007). Arguably, the Franco-Mauritians conceded most, but not all the government's demands were met.

In essence, Franco-Mauritian economic power could not compete with the mobilization of political power by the government. Ceding resources (land) helped to appease the government, but government's latent pressure remains. In this conflict Franco-Mauritians perceived their position to be openly under threat and felt that they had to stand up for their rights. Therefore, they found themselves unable to avoid direct confrontation. A Franco-Mauritian businessman, without interests in the sugar industry, told me, "[the sugar estates] don't know what's next; they wonder what happens if they give in, 'will the government then come with other demands?'" (interview with author). In other words, their actions were (are) influenced by their perceptions of the politicians' potential power.

Franco-Mauritians perceive the whole democratization of the economy and the deadlock with the sugar industry as unjust and directly targeted at them.⁵ In private, many Franco-Mauritians argued that there was a further hidden agenda to democratization of the economy, namely consolidation of the prime minister's personal power. According to this view, his intention was to take the wealth from whites, in order to distribute it to his own community and other proxies. Many Franco-Mauritians said that, in principle, they adhered to the idea of the democratization of the economy, although this depended on what exactly this implied. They supported the idea of sharing the cake with everyone but opposed the idea of taking wealth from one person (i.e. Franco-Mauritians) and giving it to another (i.e. the prime minister's cronies and supporters). With respect to this issue, repeated comparisons have been made with Zimbabwe where Robert Mugabe expropriated the white farmers' land, causing the free-fall of the economy. It is hard to know if this comparison constitutes a strategy to instill anger against the government or a real fear. The rhetorical comparison with Zimbabwe could be being used by the Franco-Mauritian to label government's proposals as anti-white. The few 'dissident' voices in the Franco-Mauritian community who have pointed out the merit of some of the proposals are hardly heard. Franco-Mauritians say they are in favor of true democratization of the economy but by discrediting, rightly or not, the government's intentions, they end up simply resisting, without contributing, to this process. Playing the victim, however, appears to be a common strategy used by elites under siege. With regard to the situation in the Philippines, Billig (2003, 156) writes, "[o]ne would think by talking to the planters that they are the much-beleaguered objects of government conspiracy to undermine them in every possible way."

Conclusion

In terms of Weber's actor-oriented analysis of power, Franco-Mauritians primarily responded to the exercise of power by others, which forced them to act in a way they would otherwise not have done. They resisted relatively successfully the challenges to their dominance but eventually had to accept their loss of direct political power because they lacked the numbers and the popular support to maintain political power in an independent democratic Mauritius. Nevertheless, Franco-Mauritians were able to consolidate economic power by effectively

⁵ In 2006 the government also decided to change the conditions for the lease of the *campement* (i.e., seaside bungalow) sites. The *campements* and seaside life are a very significant element of Franco-Mauritian elite culture, and Franco-Mauritians considered the new policy to a threat to their life style. Franco-Mauritians argued that the increase in the lease price was exorbitant and that the government proposal was targeting them as whites.

giving part of their power away, thus going from being a hegemonic elite, to constituting a functional elite. Consequently, their elite position nowadays is remarkably different than previous times, and prolonging their position at the top is not self-evident.

Elites' use of defensive power, especially when they are an ethnic minority, appears mainly successful in the absence of violence—Zimbabwe constituting the obvious example of the limits of defensive power. Applying power defensively, however, is closely linked to the elite's perceptions of their opponents' capacity to use power, which may or may not be actualized. The Franco-Mauritanian elites, rightly or wrongly, perceive themselves to be under threat and (re)act accordingly. This reinforces their solidarity and elite cohesion, which, to a certain extent, contributes to securing their elite position. They may be losing power but their cohesion as an elite enables them, at the very least, to negotiate further decline.

In conclusion, I would agree with Scott that making sense of resistance is integral to understanding power and should figure in any comprehensive research agenda (Scott 2008, 40). However, I would also argue that the concept of defensive powers should constitute an integral part of understanding elite power. The end of the colonial period may, to a certain extent, be exceptional, as the overlap between an elite position and a shared ethnic background associated with colonial domination makes the position of white elites particularly strained. However, the Franco-Mauritanian case could be paradigmatic of declining, or threatened, elite power more generally. When analyzing elites under pressure social scientists should be alert to the possibility that an effective strategy for maintaining the status quo is to use power defensively, be it overt, one-dimensional power, or more subtle forms that entail the second and third dimension of power.

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