Comment: *Bananas*

The banana was first so named in a European language in the later sixteenth century: it was what people in the Congo called it, so the Portuguese adventurers believed. Long before then, according to Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, the Greeks on Alexander the Great's invasion of India (327–326 BC) saw bananas; he quotes the name *pala*, still found in Malabar; and claims that the village sages sat under banana trees, eating the fruit (hence the botanical label *Musa sapientum*).

While over a hundred varieties have been identified, the Gros Michel is the one that counts. Eaten extensively throughout the tropical regions in which it grows, it has become very popular in the temperate zones to which it is exported. Having spread from south-east Asia as far as the west coast of Africa, it was taken from the Canaries to the Caribbean in the sixteenth century. It rapidly developed into a staple food in one island after another. In the early nineteenth century, bananas began to be cultivated for North American markets and, a little later, when steam ships could transport them, they sold just as well in western Europe. At first relatively expensive and regarded as somewhat exotic, the banana had become by the 1920s the most widely eaten and commercially successful fruit in history. As much as 22% carbohydrate, mainly sugar, a good source of vitamins A, B, C and G, now cheap, and, above all, easy to deal with at table: no juice, no sticky fingers, the favourite fruit of people who don't like fruit — that's bananas!

According to The *Guardian* (February 9), Europeans eat 2.5 billion tonnes of bananas every year. These come mostly from Central and Latin America, with about 7% from the Caribbean. In 1975, the European Union (as it has since become) made special arrangements for banana farmers in the Caribbean, with quotas, to protect them against competition from the cheaper Latin American crops. Caribbean bananas are still mostly grown on small, family-run farms, whereas Latin American bananas are cultivated on giant plantations, using pesticides, fertilizers and casual labour, all on a grand scale. The Europeans, France and the United Kingdom in particular, as the former colonial powers, no doubt had mixed motives but, among others, they have been aiming at allowing the islands to

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build up their economies with trade, rather than having to rely on aid, in the hope that they would gradually diversify so as not to be dependent on a single product. No one pretends that Caribbean banana farmers are well paid for their crops; they barely make a living as it is; but without some protection against their competitors in the world market the economies of these islands would collapse, with all the consequences for the health, education and political stability of the people.

The gigantic Latin American banana plantations are run by US-owned businesses. For years they have complained about the Caribbean quotas for the European markets. In 1997, finally, the billionaire owner of Chiquita, the largest US-owned company, lobbied Washington successfully and persuaded the US administration to challenge the legality of the quotas under World Trade Organization rules for free trade. (It so happens that the company had just made a very large donation to the Democratic Party.) The Europeans knee-jerked a new system into operation, which blocked the Caribbean farmers together with African and Pacific producers in a single quota. The US negotiators (if that is the word) have not been fooled. They insist that the rules demand an open market and, if that means that the economies of a few Caribbean islands suffer, so be it. Freedom rules. Meanwhile, to compensate for the 520 million dollars which the US loses every year (they say) from the EU's banana policy, Washington is now threatening to impose very high rates of tax on imports to the US of a range of European products: biscuits, bubble bath, candles, handbags, fountain pens, greeting cards, cashmere sweaters and pork.

Such a tax would soon lead to redundancies and closures in Scotland, for example, where making cashmere garments is a local tradition. But then, you might say, when making cashmere shawls, etc., started in Scotland, what happened in Kashmir? The open market for some always means closures for others. Freedom for the powerful, in the world economy, means loss of the means of production, and of their way of life — of freedom — on the part of the little people in faraway places. Bananas, indeed!

F.K.

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