Genealogies of a miracle – A historical anthropology of the Mauritian Export Processing Zone

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Introduction

History, society, economy, and politics in independent Mauritius are inextricably linked with the macroeconomic success of the nation's export processing zone (EPZ) in the 1980s. Likewise, this EPZ success profoundly altered and continues to shape the international image of Mauritius as it earned the island status recognitions as "first African tiger" (Morna 1991) and "economic miracle" (Aladin 1993). Since then, the trajectory of independent Mauritius has become enshrined in the iconography of theories, policies, and best-practice recommendations for postcolonial development. This chapter reconstructs the Mauritian EPZ story, not only with a view to its international reception but also with an emphasis on the *longue durée* of the many variables that enabled such success. The new, critical light shed on the enshrinement of Mauritian development as a miracle brings to the fore those histories that have been out of focus in previous appraisals.

In order to advance this analysis, it is first and foremost important to identify those who fabricated the shrine for the Mauritian miracle. At the turn of the 1990s, two high-profile World Bank publications set the tone for a series of leading economists, development studies scholars, and political scientists descending on Mauritius to analyse the rapid growth rates in EPZ manufacturing since the mid-1980s (Subramanian and Roy 2001, Aladin 1993, World Bank 1990 [1989], 1992). Yet, most publications were the result of short-term visits with datasets limited to what the Mauritian Central Statistical Office and the many World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) surveys had produced on the heels of the supposedly successful, and thus rather unique structural adjustment programs of the early 1980s.

Those reports and publications came at the peak of the now worn-out and largely discredited neoliberal policies that brought the world the many national and regional financial crises continuing since 2008 and, what may be even worse than those crises, a ramping up of inequality across all tiers of national economies (Piketty 2014). Not surprisingly, given that the WB and the IMF were hotspots of neoliberal policy implementation across the globe, those reports on Mauritius very much reflected the neoliberal agenda and set out to whitewash histories of economic development in Mauritius by establishing a simplistic juxtaposition that does justice neither to the Mauritians whose daily labour shaped the growth rates that made for the "miracle" nor to the debates and struggles that paved the way for the economic policies required for capitalist world-market manufacturing to thrive in the Mauritian EPZ.[1]

What is more, a Mauritian success story has been nurtured since the early 1990s that ascribes clear-cut and largely mistaken roles of good guys and bad guys. IMF staffers Arvind Subramanian and Devish Roy were among the first to front a narrative that juxtaposed the rapid growth rates of the 1980s and 1990s with the analysis of a British colonial survey mission of the years 1959 and 1960 under the leadership of the renowned Keynesian later Nobel-laureate James Edward Meade. Simply put, and Subramanian and Roy put it very simple indeed, Meade was said to have predicted an inevitably bleak future for Mauritius, because limited access to external markets and a mono-crop sugar economy at peak capacity meant that rapid population growth would result in ever-increasing unemployment and shrinking per capita income and this would ultimately stipple any prospect for peaceful coexistence of a multi-ethnic population already ripe with internal political conflicts. Yet, “history, or rather Mauritius, proved the Nobel Prize winner, James Meade’s, dire prognostication (...) famously wrong” (Subramanian and Roy 2001, 4).

This narrative, juxtaposing the mistaken Keynesian development economist commissioned by the late colonial state with the postcolonial nation’s miraculous EPZ program, has been repeated time and again. Supatchai Panitchpakdi, then Director-General of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), offered Mauritian politicians and the nation’s wider public a slightly reworded version of that neoliberal success story when he spoke as honorary guest at the national independence celebrations of 2004. With a simple equation, he sought to soothe the pain that preferential export quota cessation in the wake of the 2005 changes to the WTO regime had caused for the island and its quota-dependent EPZ and sugar sector; never mind dozens of factory closures, tens of thousands of newly unemployed or further crisis scenarios, if world-leading economists such as Meade had been wrong in 1960, why should their dire predictions be right in the 2000s (Neveling 2016).

As the Mauritian nation celebrates its fiftieth independence anniversary, this chapter seeks to set the record straight and proposes a genealogy of the Mauritian miracle that abandons schematic and mistaken neoliberal equations and instead highlights the achievements of all Mauritians and those who have helped the nation grow and prosper over the past decades.

The argument develops as follows. First, I introduce a genealogy for the Mauritian EPZ program that stretches back to the Meade mission and, further, to the colonial sugar sector and to the rising Mauritian labour movement, whose struggles forced the introduction of a pioneering labour law in the British Empire after the so-called Uba-riots of 1937. Second, I provide an overview of the research approach of the Meade mission and outline how policies and institutions

[1] With this in mind, I want to recommend the World Bank open-access repository of published and declassified reports to interested readers, nevertheless. Despite their often academic jargon and policy-driven assessments, Bank reports are mostly very readable historical sources on the Mauritian economy and give a good sense of the motivations for policies at a given time (for an introduction see Neveling 2017)

implemented on Meade's recommendation radically changed the political economy of Mauritius. Third, I show how the Mauritian EPZ Act of 1970 emerged from national and international efforts alike and, not least, how this benefitted from the rise of a new agency in the UN system, the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation, which gave important backing to the Mauritian government and private sector's push for international funding for an EPZ. Fourth, this chapter contends that Mauritian workers and their families, first and foremost, kept the EPZ going, as they not only provided the labour for the assembly lines, but also remained vigilant and resistant against escalating exploitation in the hundreds, if not thousands, of factories that have opened and closed shop in Mauritius in the decades since 1970. I conclude, that there was no Mauritian miracle and that we should instead dismantle the shrine that enforces those disembodied histories of Mauritian development detailed above. Instead, conclusive and future-oriented lessons to draw from the Mauritian developmental success emerge from viewing the 1980s peak period of EPZ growth as a convergence of favourable international and national conditions at the time coupled with the island's readiness for world-market production, which was owed to historical and contemporary struggles against escalating exploitation in Mauritius.

Setting the stage for change

Few would disagree that Mauritius was in a fairly dire and desperate situation at the turn to the 1960s. Sir Hilary Blood, Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Mauritius from 1949 to 1954, published a full-page stocktaking of the island's socio-economic condition and predicament in the London Times' British Colonies Review section in early July 1959, calling for a "New Deal for Mauritius" (Blood 04/07/1959). His elaborations illustrate well Britain's late imperial policies of the time, which focused not on maintaining imperial rule, but on creating conditions for colonies such as Mauritius to become independent and at the same time remain part of the capitalist arena of production and trade despite an increasingly tri-polar differentiation of the world into alliances between capitalist, socialist and non-aligned nations. In line with the neo-Malthusian approach of the 1950s, Blood identified rapid population growth as a problem across British colonies, especially so in small island colonies with limited capacities for economic expansion. Mauritius was a paradigmatic case to him. The contemporary output of 500,000 to 600,000 metric tons of sugar was the industry's limit both in terms of production and international marketing capacities. Yet, one ton of sugar provided the revenue to fund the basic social services for one inhabitant and with the island's population increasing from 500,000 in 1952 to 600,000 in 1958, the third-fastest growth rate worldwide, Mauritius was on the brink of collapse. The situation was aggravated by the threat of ethnic cleavages, a diagnosis Blood put forward by stating that Mauritians were "politically minded" and that the socio-political setting of Mauritius shaped by "differences in race, colour, economic conditions and religion".

Nevertheless, the problems that Blood identified for Mauritius in 1959 were the effect of nearly 150 years of British colonial rule, and not of an inherent tendency of humans to identify in terms of ethnicity alone and then go to war with each other over some imagined essential differences (this is a historical perspective on the common denominators approach to Mauritian ethnicity, see Eriksen 1998).

After invading against limited French resistance in 1810 and once Napoleon had been defeated in 1815, the British rulers altered the island's economic trajectory profoundly. In contradistinction, they left the internal social and political stratification largely intact. Mauritius' thriving privateering economy of the eighteenth century and the Port Louis free port were shut down and the island turned into a plantation-only economy focusing increasingly on sugar cane as the single export crop. In the process, mainly French but also other European colonisers morphed into a self-declared "native" population and their leaders' position became structurally similar to that of other subjects under the British imperial system of indirect rule. As owners of plantations and mills, the island's resident capitalist class of foremost French origin entered into joint ventures with British businesses in shipping and trade. Those new Euro-Mauritian alliances reaped good profits from sugar, especially so after 1825, when Mauritian produce was awarded the preferential customs rates for sales to the British market that had previously been reserved for the Caribbean colonies. Yet, a conflict of interest remained and profitable business ventures seemed to matter little to the plantation owners' irrational, violent, armed uprising against the abolition of slavery, even though the latter earned them compensations of around two million Pound Sterling (Neveling 2013, North-Coombes 2000).

The supply of dependent, exploitable labourers was secured via the mostly seamless transition to the new regime of indentured labour from South Asia and Eastern Africa. Compensation fees furthered the globalisation of the Mauritian sugar sector as larger estates introduced the new global standard of vacuum pan extraction in the 1840s and mills centralised at ever-increasing capacity and yield from a 1863 peak of 303, processing an average of 450 metric tons of sugar, to 38 in 1937, processing an average of 8210 metric tons of sugar (combined data from Teelock 1998, 96, North-Coombes 2000, 141). In the process of nineteenth century globalisation, numerous smaller Euro-Mauritian establishments went bankrupt or were swallowed up by larger players during the fiscal crisis of the 1840s and during the El Nino waves of the 1870s. Whereas those bankrupt businesses released staff for higher management positions in the larger estates and mills, small and medium scale cane cultivation was increasingly outsourced to former indentured labourers, whose households bore the risks of bad crops from soil erosion and potential destruction of all yields during the annual cyclone season.

As owners of the majority of mills, the Euro-Mauritian bourgeoisie retained control of an important bottleneck in the sugar commodity chain; the processing that turned canes into commodities for export. The real estate market for smallholder plots boomed because rights to residence for indentured labourers after the ends of contracts were favourably tied to property ownership. With those wishing to stay in Mauritius somewhat pushed into compulsory land purchases, the *petite* and *grande morcellements* of the 1840s and 1870s were forerunners to the short-lived and tragic boom of Mauritian smallholders in the years before the end of indenture in 1923. The percentage of total acreage under cane held by smallholders rose from 26.61 in 1914 to 41.09 in 1922, only to decline rapidly to 30.83 per cent in 1930. The rapid decline of sugar prices on the world markets after 1923 pushed many new businesses went into receivership and of the 14,495 small and medium cane plantations operational in 1930, most were highly indebted and would suffer more with the continuing decline of global sugar prices during the 1930s (Neveling 2013, North-Coombes 2000).

Other authors have already hinted at the long historical roots of the Mauritian EPZ success story. Yet, the focus of Deborah Brautigam, Ryan Saylor, and Tania Diolle, and to some extent also of my own work, has been on the role of institutions and transcolonial and transnational networking of the Mauritian bourgeoisie (Saylor 2012, Bräutigam 2005, Bräutigam and Diolle 2009). While the emphasis on quota politics for sugar and their extension to EPZ manufacture exports under the multi-fibre arrangement of 1974 is crucial, as evidenced also in the introductory references of the speech by the WTO Director-General in 2004, the question of how the spoils from such preferable quota are divided and how this translates into the social fabric of colonial and postcolonial Mauritius is as important.

The 1930s crisis and the plight of tens of thousands of smallholder households are focal points to answer that question and to better understand the success of the Mauritian EPZ. Historical research highlights the importance of the 1937 so-called Uba riots, an island-wide uprising that began in the Lalmatie region and took its name from a so-called small-planters cane. Until this day, historical research clads the riots in utilitarian terms. On one side are the small planters, who did not benefit in the same way as larger estates from the scientific crossing of cane varieties in the Royal Botanical Gardens of Pamplemousses and therefore engaged in their own clandestine cane breeding practices with the Uba cane emerging as a high net-weight and robust cane that guaranteed optimum revenues. On the other side are the millers, especially the Indian family owning the mill in the Lalmatie region, which for some time purchased the Uba canes at the same price as other canes despite their lower sucrose content. This caused them a loss, supposedly, which is why the further decline in sugar prices after 1935 forced them to lower the purchasing price for Uba canes (Storey 1997).

Yet, the story told so far is incomplete and completing it is crucial for our understanding of the development policies of the late colonial and the early postcolonial Mauritian state. A focus solely on scientific breeding techniques that yielded higher sucrose content and from which the small planters were excluded casts the miller’s price reductions in a rational and also somewhat benevolent light – they shouldered a loss as long as they could, whereas the small planters in somewhat clandestine ways had focused their efforts to better their situation on the breeding techniques alone and were thus likewise somewhat techno-centric utilitarians. Instead, millers and small planters alike were aware that the constant improvement of crushing and refining machines also improved sucrose extraction ratios across all cane varieties.

More importantly, while the crises of the 1920s and 1930s affected all actors in the Mauritian sugar sector, the colonial state's support initiatives catered first and foremost for the larger estates and millers. A conference on the future of the sugar sector pushed for tax rebates for larger estates, which were granted in 1927. When the 1930s crisis nullified the positive impact of these subsidies, the British finally set up the Mauritius Agricultural Bank (MAB) in 1937, which bailed out many estates held under receivership by offering new credit lines at much lower interest rates and the transfer of current loans from commercial banks to the MAB. Adding to this, the ratification of the International Sugar Agreement of 1937 by the leading European colonial powers of the time offered security for Mauritian preferential quota in a time of uncertainty. The 1938 report of the Hooper Commission, which had been appointed by the British colonial state for an enquiry into the Uba riots and their spread from Lalmatie across the island and into other sectors, was very explicit about the fact that nothing had been done for smaller and medium sized cane plantations (Hooper 1938, for a detailed analysis see Neveling 2012).

Perhaps the most important outcome of the Uba riots and the recommendations of the Hooper Commission was that the colonial administration for the first time in Mauritian history took the concerns of small business owners and workers seriously and thus shifted from facilitator of preferential market access for the sugar plantocracy and its umbrella organisation, the 1921-founded Mauritius Sugar Syndicate, to a however reluctant arbitrator for social justice and a however limited redistribution of wealth. Even though it excluded cane workers and many other professions, the Mauritian Trade Union Ordinance of 1938 allowed dockworkers and craftspeople to unionise and would become a blueprint for improved labour rights legislation across the British Empire. In other words, more than three decades before the beginning of the Mauritian EPZ-miracle, the struggles of Mauritian workers created what has rightly been identified as a "milestone in colonial trade union legislation" (Croucher and McIlroy 2013). Turning to the Meade Commission of 1959/60 in the following section reveals how the events of 1937 and after ushered in further pioneering changes that made the Mauritian EPZ boom possible.

Implementing change

The Second World War affected Mauritius in considerable ways. A German blockade and the bundling of the Empire's resources to support the war efforts in Europe and Asia radically changed the island's economy. Several estates freed considerable land for producing everyday foodstuffs and, as elsewhere across Sub-Saharan Africa, new industries emerged to substitute imports that were no longer available. While many of the latter vanished soon after 1945, some factories remained in operation into the 1970s. Yet, by the end of the 1950s it was already evident that none of these industries were viable alternatives that could generate significant revenues and employment alongside the sugar sector. The Quatre Bornes based government processing plant for aloe fibres, for example, continued to produce the hemp bags for packaging Mauritian sugar with significant government subsidies. Its closure in the early 1970s was the first major industrial dispute led by the rapidly expanding Mouvement Militante Mauricien (MMM), the then socialist party that would seek to put an end to Mauritian communalism in the 1970s and, for a short time in 1982/83 oversee the democratisation of national budget negotiations despite the increasing pressure from the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund imposed on Mauritius in exchange for keeping the cash-strapped nation afloat and secure imports of basic commodities.

Yet, in between these two major external interventions in the Mauritian political economy came a series of small and medium-scale interventions in which Mauritians had a much more significant say than they had had during the war and the SAP. Most of these interventions had to do with the successive implementation of the Meade mission's recommendations during the 1960s and the establishment of the EPZ in 1970.

Several scholars have written about the rather informal beginnings of the EPZ in 1965, when the Mauritian entrepreneur Jose Poncini opened Micro Jewels and established an early export-oriented enterprise processing parts for Swiss watches in Mauritius, an undertaking for which he received crucial backing from Meade with obtaining permits from the London Colonial Office (Burn 1996, Dommen and Dommen 1999, Neveling 2014, Hein 1989, Yin et al. 1992). The same authors have also emphasised the pioneering efforts of Mauritian economist Edouard Lim Fat, who brought home recommendations for opening an EPZ from survey missions to rapidly industrialising territories of the time, such as Hong Kong, Puerto Rico and Taiwan, which he published prominently in the *Revue Agricole* and the sugar industry's *PROsi-Magazine* in an effort to convince Mauritian sugar magnates and politicians to pave the way for industrial expansion via state-backed diversification (for a detailed analysis Neveling 2017, original publications are Lim Fat 1969, Lim Fat November 1969).

Yet, so far only Bridget and Edward Dommen, Meade's daughter and son in law respectively, and YeungLamKo (YeungLamKo 1998) have given more detailed consideration to the relevance of the commission's recommendations for what would later be known as the Mauritian miracle. In fact, YeungLamKo goes as far as suggesting that Mauritius' independence day on March 12, 1968, may have been chosen to mark the day of the arrival of the members of the Meade commission in Mauritius (YeungLamKo 1998, 1). While we cannot be certain whether he used this as a rhetorical figure or whether that date in any way motivated the decisions in 1968, there is a lot to be gained from a closer examination of the commission's preparation for and their actual research in Mauritius.

A visit to the archives of the London School of Economics, where the Meade collection of personal papers and notes is held alongside the collections of many other famous economists, will bring to light for the interested researcher a total of twelve well-stocked boxes on Mauritius with notes, correspondences, research papers and drafts informing the 1961 published Meade report. These include, for example, around 40 letters and statements received by Meade and his five collaborators in response to advertisements they had placed in Mauritian newspapers in 1959. Those advertisements invited all Mauritians to share their views on the major blockages to economic prosperity and to suggest measures for improving the situation. The answers received are witness to a people with diverse, engaged, and highly developed views on the island's economy and its problematic embedding in the global system. One company suggested to resolve transport problem by importing used Goggomobiles, microcars produced by a German manufacturer in Bavaria from 1955 to 1969, to Mauritius and they argued that this would also create good business for garages and other car repair and service outlets. Another company, Happy World Foods, alerted Meade to the fact that Mauritius was lacking cold storage facilities and suggested the subsidised import of freezers to broaden the scope of foodstuffs on offer. Coincidentally, Happy World Foods is now the Altima Group and the largest food and grocery wholesale distributor in Mauritius.[2]

The correspondences with Meade's employer, the London Colonial Office, seem much less innovative in comparison to these letters. The commission's tasks are detailed in a letter dated July 13, 1959, and largely mirror what Blood had said in his London Times op-ed. In fact, the Colonial Administration had been aware of the Mauritian crisis for quite some time and a five-year plan to stimulate economic development and diversification had been implemented in 1957 already. Yet, despite such awareness, the Meade commission's report might have had the same limited impact as many other similar endeavours of the European late colonial powers and the wider project of industry-driven development during the Cold War decades.

The situation and setting changed radically, however, when two deadly and devastating cyclones, Carol and Alix, struck Mauritius in early 1960, only weeks before Meade and his team arrived. Around 40 per cent of all dwellings were destroyed, many lost their lives and vital supplies could only be secured following a major relief effort by the British Air Force and a wave of donations and support letters coming from the UK mainland (Times; 03/03/1960). Significant funding was released for reconstruction and the coverage in the London Times and other leading UK newspapers shows that Mauritius became a paradigmatic case; the Empire wanted to show that although it was crumbling and ridden with conflict, a colony in dire need could nevertheless be salvaged. Meade and his team were thus at the heart of a disaster relief effort and became involved in a major rebuilding project. This ranged from plans for the Victoria power station, funded by the first ever World Bank credit line to Mauritius, secured by the UK government and

[2] All letters referenced can be found at: London School of Economics Archives, Meade Collection, Box 5/9.

underwritten on the London markets in 1963, to the establishment of the Mauritius Housing Corporation (MHC) in 1960, which would build the many cités across the island that were to finally give a home to the many landless families that had settled on the outskirts of the cities in the aftermath of the 1920s and 1930s crises in the sugar sector (for the story of such a cité and the conditions of living see Delforge 1971).

Yet, it would still be a long way to move from rebuilding the island to setting up an EPZ. Planning for economic diversification so that Mauritius would have a second pillar for export commodities and employment beyond sugar would prove an arduous task as this required an institutional layout, selecting the right measures from a number of policies available, and convincing both the Colonial Office and the Mauritian bourgeoisie to lend their support. The flurry of policies and debates circulating at the time is evidenced, for example, in the letters that Meade exchanged with the nascent development agencies of other British colonies. A first indication towards the plans for an EPZ comes to light in the Jamaican development corporation's very positive response to Meade's query about the success of their tax rebates and other subsidies for new industries. The Jamaican programme of 10-year tax and customs holidays and state-funded building of industrial estates may have well served as the template for the pioneering industries programme that the Colonial Office implemented on Meade's recommendation. These measures, plus Meade's recommendations to fuse the MAB and the MHC in the 1964 founded Development Bank of Mauritius (DBM) so that Mauritius would have an industrial development bank, paved the way for the Mauritian parliament's EPZ-Act in 1970.

Yet, the Jamaican policies were the brainchild of a US-marketing corporation, Arthur D. Little Inc., who had been the driving force behind the opening of the world's first EPZ in Puerto Rico in 1947 and carried Puerto Rican policies forward to Jamaica upon a contract with the local government in 1957 (Neveling 2015). This means that when Mauritian economist Edouard Lim Fat went to survey the Puerto Rican economic success story of the time in the mid-1960s, he was not looking at something radically different from Meade's pioneering industries policies, as the World Bank narrative outlined in my introduction would have it, but instead Lim Fat returned to the roots of the same export-oriented industrialisation policies that Meade had encountered in his exchange of letters with the Jamaican authorities. In fact, the export-oriented development policies in the EPZs of Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong that Lim Fat also surveyed likewise originated in the Puerto Rican programme of 1947.

The Mauritian shift from the Pioneering Industries Act of the early 1960s to the EPZ-Act of 1970 was therefore a gradual one. Rather than initiating a radical reversal, the paramount achievement of Lim Fat and others working towards the zone policies was to commit the leading figures in the sugar sector and in the early postcolonial administrations to carry forward in more explicit ways what Meade had begun in 1960. Beyond that, the uphill path towards creating a viable EPZ in Mauritius had to do with convincing international development organisations to commit credit lines and technical assistance to the EPZ. As Deborah Brautigam and Tania Diolle have pointed out, a World Bank technical assistance mission had voiced concerns about the feasibility of an EPZ in Mauritius (Bräutigam and Diolle 2009).

When another mission, this time funded by the newly founded United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO), recommended an EPZ the World Bank made a U-turn and opened credit lines for completing work on the industrial zone in Plaine Lauzun and for developing the estate in Coromandel. While the DBM that Meade had recommended became the main liaison for handling World Bank money on the Mauritian side, the location for the Coromandel zone was chosen with explicit reference to the *cités* nearby, whose inhabitants would make for the workforce and have a short walk to and from home. On an international level, technical assistance to the Mauritian EPZ would serve UNIDO to showcase their consultancy work and, hence, Mauritius again became somewhat of a blueprint for a trend across the Third World (Neveling 2015, 2017).

Maintaining change

During the 1990s, Mauritian scholars distinguished four phases of EPZ development. Take-off years during the 1970s, crisis years from the late 1970s to around 1982, boom years from 1983, and efforts at consolidating the high growth rates in the EPZ during the 1990s (Yin et al. 1992, Hein 1996). From the vantage point of 2018, 50 years after Mauritian independence, two further phases can be identified. The decline of EPZ employment from around 1999 to 2005, and the recent revival of EPZ-like operations, now in close collaboration with the People's Republic of China.

A closer look at these phases brings to light the interlinked development of postcolonial Mauritius and its EPZ. The zone was always a particular one in global comparison as from the early stages onward it was never a clearly demarcated zone, confined to a given number of fenced off industrial estates. Instead, the legal provision that an EPZ enterprise could be registered anywhere on the island meant that the zone businesses could not but embed themselves into the everyday life on the island. During the take-off phase in the 1970s, the number of EPZ workers grew rapidly to around 20,000. Zone workers soon engaged in the struggles for a better life led by the MMM and became known as Amazons when they confronted riot police with great bravery during the strike waves of the 1970s. Major points of contention were very bad working conditions and the lack of social security provisions that Mauritians had won successively since the struggles of the late 1930s. Also in those years, Mauritian sugar businesses, flush with cash due to the high sugar prices from the 1973 world food crisis, entered EPZ operations with numerous joint ventures, commonly with European and Hong Kong based textile and garment corporations. Workers would soon be sought after and factories offered prize draws for applicants.

Fortunes seemed to change for good with the second oil crisis of 1978 and 1979 and the rapid decline of sugar prices after 1975. The first and second Ramgoolam administrations spent heavily on social housing in an effort to appease the growing discontent among a population that was longing for betterment of their lives in the postcolonial state. Yet, 130,000 jobs promised at the beginning of the 1970s had not materialised in 1980 and instead the island was facing debt default and struggling to import basic commodities. When the 1982 landslide victory gave the MMM all openly elected seats in parliament, Mauritius was already under control of the World Bank and the IMF. While structural adjustment forced EPZs onto the governments of many other African and Latin American countries during the 1980s and 1990s, it may have been a blessing that Mauritius already had set up such a zone on rather independent terms and during a period when workers were fairly strong and able to limit the worst excesses in labour rights violations that have made EPZs ill-famous worldwide as sweatshops where the life of a worker or a trade unionist counts for little.

Along with the economies in the US and the UK picking up steam from 1983 onward, the Mauritian zone entered the very boom phase that earned it the label “miracle”. The relocation of businesses from Hong Kong to Mauritius in the early wake of the 1998 handover to the PR China has often been listed as another important factors for the boom (Meisenhelder 1997). While this certainly has merit, it is important to again reference a global system of quota allocation that played into the cards of Mauritius. With the multi-fibre arrangement of 1974, Western countries had introduced import quota for textiles and garments in order to protect their own industries and to reward firm alliances of Third World nations with the capitalist bloc during the Cold War heydays. As a close ally, Mauritius had received beneficial quota and with the EPZ-nations/regions Hong Kong, Singapore and Sri Lanka reaching quota limits (and plunging into civil war in the latter case), Mauritius became a highly attractive destination. The boom also meant that workers’ wages rose considerably and the Mauritian government (on recommendation of the World Bank) waved minimum wage differentials between the zone and the “normal” national economy, which facilitated the larger scale entry of male workers. Another significant development of those years was the opening of numerous factories in rural regions, again an effect of companies struggling to find workers (Neveling 2012).

Consolidation from around 1990 onward was facilitated when the Mauritian government opened the EPZ to contract workers from South Asia and later also PR China and Eastern Africa. These workers were often employed under harshest conditions, which drew comparison with the situation of indentured workers in Mauritius during the nineteenth century. Yet, their low wages and hard labour kept the zone competitive in an international setting that saw the entry of an increasing number of postcolonial nations. In this period, many male workers left the zone for the construction sector and the bustling tourism sector offered more attractive employment to young Mauritians with higher education.

Yet, higher education had often been funded by the wages that mothers had earned in the EPZ and when the zone went into crisis as the WTO regimes introduced the phasing out of preferential quota from 1997 onward, two entire generations of workers still employed in the EPZ faced a bleak future. The government responded in the 2000s with a *Textile Emergency Support Team* (TEST) and offered vocational training and microcredit schemes. Many of the women workers I spoke to during my year of ethnographic research from 2003 to 2004 emphasised, however, that at 40 years of age and beyond they could neither see any realistic chances for a second career in tourism nor as independent shop owners (on this period see Ramtohul 2008). Thus, as Mauritius turned 40 in 2008, the nation looked back on recent years also as a period when every closure of a larger EPZ factory, not least those of Mauritian flagship companies such as Floreal Knitwear, had sent shockwaves across the island. Other than during the wildcat strikes of the 1970s, however, it did not seem feasible to imagine a future for the Mauritian EPZ and this, in my view, gave the protests against the closures during the mid-2000s an atmosphere of a nation saying farewell to the development policy scheme that had helped it out of the dependency on sugar and doing so at the same time as the sugar industry itself was also facing closures of mills and estates due to the quota ending in that sector, too.

A window into the future

Tourism, the Ebène cyber-city, and the tax haven status acquired in the early 1990s have certainly added many pillars to the Mauritian economy. It is nowadays virtually impossible to imagine the island could ever again enter into a crisis scenario similar to those of the turn to the 1960s or of the early 1980s. Still, as more new sectors may become established on the island, it is important to remember that the Mauritian EPZ never generated a “miracle” in the strict sense of the term. Instead, what I hoped to show with the above was that the 1980s boom years have genealogies that stretch back to the early 1800s as regards the links of Mauritius with beneficial quota systems for export commodities. Another strand of that genealogy goes back to the 1930s when Mauritians, only recently freed of the chains of indenture, became very explicit about their discontent with the immediate suffering they were experiencing during the global crisis of the time and due to the lack of attention that the colonial administration paid to their plight. In a sense, the wildcat strikes in the EPZ and the wider national uprising of the 1970s could be regarded as structurally similar, for, again, Mauritians had won a great new sense of liberty with independence and yet there was a global economic crisis and a government and a private sector that were both too busy with themselves to show sufficient care little for their plight. In both periods of struggle in the face of global crises, then, Mauritians not only won rights that made their own lives better but they won rights that helped the island move forward and made it the template for changes across the global south.

Referencing the EPZ success story merely as a “miracle” does little justice to those struggles and their lasting impact. Likewise, it is important to remember that there are many good explanations for the 1980s boom-years. In fact, in percentage figures, the growth rates in the EPZ during the 1970s were probably higher than those of the 1980s. What is more, the neoliberal narrative emerging in the 1990s that has the economists err and Mauritians prevail may be true only in the sense that Mauritians, and others, not least the members of the Meade commission, took the time to carefully analyse the past, present and future prospects of their island’s economy and thus prevailed over the supposedly invisible hands of global markets. I would hope these endeavours might continue as Mauritius moves towards the centenary of its independence in 2068.

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