

## **Ideas and imagination**

### **Remarks on receipt of the George Beckford Award of the Association of Caribbean Economists, Martinique, November 9, 1999**

**- Norman Girvan -**

The receipt of this award has a deeply personal significance for me. First, because it comes from my peers and colleagues in the Association, men and women with whom I have forged bonds of friendship and of mutual respect, trust and affection over the past 18 years during which we have worked on this Enterprise. Forgive me if I make special mention of Judith Wedderburn of Jamaica, who could truly be called the “mother” of ACE, of Sergio Plasencia of Cuba, of Miguel Ceara Hatton of the Dominican Republic, of Charles Clermont of Haiti, of Pedro Rivera Guzman of Puerto Rico, of Dennis Pantin of Trinidad and Tobago, of Juan Castaner of Puerto Rico.

I am really sorry that Sergio Plasencia of Cuba could not be here for me to pay public tribute to him. He was there with me back in 1981 at the Congress of Third World Economists in Havana, when the late George Beckford convened a caucus of the Caribbean economists attending the Congress and launched the idea of what was then called the Caribbean Association of Political Economists—CAPE. Sergio has been an indefatigable worker for the fulfillment of our dream of an association of economists of all the language areas of the Caribbean and he is every bit as deserving of an award that bears the name of George Beckford as anyone else.

The deeper personal significance of this award to me is because it is named after a man for whom I have the greatest respect, admiration and love. George Beckford, affectionately known to his friends as “Gbeck” left us in 1990 and I am conscious that we are among a generation of economists that knew him only fleetingly, if at all; and that we are in a part of the Caribbean region where his name is not widely known. Forgive me, therefore, if I use this opportunity to tell you a little bit about this extraordinary Caribbean man.

George Beckford was born in 1934 in Jamaica, in a deeply rural part of one of the most rural parishes in the island, St Ann Parish. He was an intensely rural man with the personal style of a Jamaican peasant—earthy, direct, independent and proud, full of humour and a true lover of life. He became an internationally known agricultural economist and he took all these personal qualities to his work. Basic to that work was an unshakable belief in the capacity of the Caribbean peasantry to be responsible for their own economic and social betterment. This belief was extended to all black people in the New World, as among the most dispossessed of the groups occupying the hemispheric space and to the ordinary people of the Caribbean whatever their colour or ethnic origin.

In his path breaking book, *Persistent Poverty* (1972)—Gbeck sought to explain the chronic underdevelopment in the plantation economies of the Third World and the persistent poverty of the people inhabiting of these economies. These are the economies of the Caribbean islands and adjacent mainland areas, the Brazilian northeast, and U.S. south, and parts of Asia.

*Our study of plantation economy and society suggests that underdevelopment derives from the institutional environment—the nature of the economic, social and political organization. (P. v).*

The book is an extended development of this thesis.

Beckford was concerned with more than mere material development.

*I wish the make it clear....that when I refer to improvement in the welfare of Third World peoples, I do not mean just material welfare, but social welfare in general....material welfare is important only if it preserves the quality of life that people regard as important.(p. vii)*

Beckford here anticipates the human development approach of the UNDP 20 years before it came. But this is more than human development.

*An important but often neglected aspect of social welfare is, in my view, genuine independence—that is, the full freedom of a people to control the environment in which they live and to manipulate that environment in any way that they desire...To have to be dependent on others is dehumanizing...In my judgement, people would rather be poor but free than to be slaves living in material comfort... ” (vii).*

We can be sure that if George Beckford had been born on a slave plantation, he would have either died in a rebellion or ended up with the maroons, living off the land and blowing the Abeng. Indeed his peculiar *angst*, the demons that seemed to torment him towards the end of his too short life, stemmed from his profound sense that contemporary Jamaica was nothing more than the modern version of a colonial slave society, a society with which he was in constant intellectual contestation and psychological rebellion.

Because for him, the root cause of underdevelopment is the colonisation of the mind, and the path to true development begins with the liberation of the mind.

*Too often we view our problems through the ideas of metropolitan man; and our analyses of these problems depend too inordinately on analytical constructs developed for, and appropriate to, North Atlantic society but which may be inappropriate for the Third World(vi).*

And later

*Change must begin in the minds of people, relating to the concept that people have of themselves.... (233) The present dependency syndrome in our psychological makeup is a legacy of the system we are destroying. This provides the basis for becoming genuinely independent. It sets the stage for mobilizing the human resources of plantation society to take full control of our resources and to use these resources for the fullest advantage of all segments of the population. (234-235).*

Persistent Poverty therefore is not just a book of economics—although several of its chapters are economic in the traditional sense. It is a work of political economy, holistic in conception and multidisciplinary in its scope. None of the currently fashionable intellectual constructs applies to it—it is not post-modern, modern, pre-modern; post-colonial, colonial, pre-colonial. I feel sure that Beckford would have dismissed these categories with an earthy agricultural expletive. Beckford's life and work were guided by an orientation that is at once radical-- in the sense of going to root causes--and popular, in the sense of being rooted in the people.

There is much more that I could tell you about George Beckford. I could tell you about the time when the Government of Jamaica cancelled his passport and refused permission for him to travel abroad, back in 1965. This was after Beckford had visited Cuba and came back to speak and write approvingly of the land reform and mass education programmes of the Cuban Revolution. There was a huge public outcry and eventually the embarrassment was so great that the Government sent a message to Beck that they would return his passport provided that he did not make a public statement about it. Beckford refused—in fact he told the messenger to go to another world that is both hot and inhospitable. He continued to languish in Jamaica for several years until the Government restored his travelling privileges with no strings attached. Beckford was not a man to compromise on principle.

I could tell you about his work as Editor of *New World Quarterly*, the journal of the late 1960s and early 1970s that projected a view of the Caribbean that transcended the boundaries of language inherited from the colonial experience—the Anglophone, the Francophone, the Hispanic, Dutch, Creole, patois, papiamentu—all with the common experience of colonialism and the plantation system, slavery and indentureship, a journal founded by the Trinidadian scholar Lloyd Best, that sought to establish the linkage between intellectual thought and Caribbean freedom. For Beckford, publication of ideas was an essential tool for the liberation of the mind that is the precondition for true development. He practiced what he preached.

I could tell you about his work in *Abeng*, the radical Black Nationalist weekly newspaper published in Jamaica in after the Rodney riot in 1968 that gave voice to the poor and dispossessed masses of Jamaica in their struggle with an oppressive neo-colonial regime. For Beckford there was no division between the academic, the political and the personal.

I could tell you about his work in agricultural economics and on tropical agriculture, and on land reform--work that formed the professional basis for his political work and earned him the professional respect of his colleagues in the Caribbean and internationally.

I could tell you about his work on Caribbean economic integration with a focus on the agricultural sector and on the banana industry. For Beckford the Caribbean was one nation: “the people of the Caribbean are already integrated” he liked to say. “The only people who don’t know it are the politicians”.

I could tell you about his conceiving the idea of Community Enterprise Organisations—enterprises owned by the people at the base of rural and urban communities, based on resources coming from within the community and serving the needs of the people within the communities. Community Enterprise Organisations were the basis of the People’s Plan for Jamaica in 1977, a plan developed by means of popular participation which aimed to take Jamaica out of the clutches of the International Monetary Fund.

I could tell you about these things at length because I had the privilege of collaborating with Gbeck personally on many of these activities over a period of 24 years—in the studies on Caribbean Economic Integration, in the New World Group, in Abeng, in the People’s Plan for Jamaica, in the struggle for a relevant economics in the University of the West Indies, in the resistance against racism at that institution. Our final collaboration, in the 1980s, was in the establishment of the Caribbean Association of Political Economy in a meeting in Havana in 1981, which later became the Association of Caribbean Economists, launched in Kingston in 1987.

This is the man and these are the ideas whose memory is honoured on each occasion this award is made. My heartfelt wish and desire is that the work of George Beckford and what he stood for is preserved for future generations of Caribbean people. This is a precious part of our heritage that belongs to all Caribbean people, regardless of language or ethnicity. May I suggest that the best way to do this is for his work to be used in courses in economics, political economy and the history of economic thought in Universities throughout the Caribbean.

Let me close by looking to the future. If you are like me, you must be fed up over all the hype and all the cliches about the new millennium, which in any case is being celebrated one year early, primarily for commercial reasons. The other day I came across a piece of writing on this subject that was so perfect for the occasion that I was moved to bring it to this meeting to share with you. It is by the Uruguayan poet, Eduardo Galeano. The translation into English is mine; I hope I have done him justice.

He calls it “El derecho al delirio” which means literally, the right to delirium—to imagine a world that is so different from the one we have that we might be thought to be mad. I believe Gbeck would have approved of it.

## **THE RIGHT TO DELIRIUM**

- **EDUARDO GALEANO<sup>1</sup>** -

*The new millennium is upon us. We shouldn't take it too seriously: after all, the year 2001 of the Christians is the year 1379 of the Muslims, 5114 of the Mayas and 5762 of the Jews. The new millennium starts on January 1<sup>st</sup> thanks to the caprice of the senators of Imperial Rome who decided one fine day to break with the tradition of celebrating the New Year at the beginning of spring. And the annual count of the Christian era derives from another caprice: one fine day, the Pope of Rome decided to fix the date of the birth of Christ, although nobody really knew when He was born.*

### ***An invitation to flight***

*Millennium comes and millennium goes, but the occasion is an opportunity for the worshippers of that terrifying word to pontificate on the destiny of humanity, and for the spokespersons of the wrath of God to announce the end of the world and generalised destruction, while everything continues as before, the rest of us must shut up and continue our long march through the mystery of eternity.*

*And yet, arbitrary though the date might be, few of us can resist the temptation of wondering what the world of the future will be like. And somebody will be there to know it. We can be certain of one thing: in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, if we are still here, we will all be people from the past century and worse still, from the past millennium!*

*Although we cannot foretell the future, at least we have the right to imagine what we would like it to be. In 1948 and in 1976, the United Nations proclaimed an extensive list of human rights. But the vast majority of humanity has no other rights other than to see, to hear and to keep quiet. What if we were to exercise the as yet undeclared right to dream? What if we were to fantasise, even for a moment? Let's project our vision beyond the current world of infamy and imagine another possible world: a world*

*Where the air will be clean of every poison that doesn't come from human fears and human passions;*

*Where in the streets, the automobiles will be run over by the dogs;*

*Where people will not be driven by the automobile, or programmed by the computer, or watched by the television;*

*Where the TV will no longer be the most important member of the family, but will be treated like the clothes iron or the washing machine;*

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<sup>1</sup> Eduardo Galeano, "El derecho al delirio", from the journal *Archipiélago: Revista Cultural de Nuestra América*. No. 22/23, March-June 1999. Informal English translation by Norman Girvan.

*Where people will work to live and will not live to work;*

*Where there will be a law that makes it a crime to be stupid, which is defined as living for the sake of possession or of gain, instead of living for the celebration of life itself, like the bird that sings without knowing what it sings and the child who plays without knowing what game it is playing;*

*Where no country will make prisoners of young men who refuse military service, only of those who wish to undertake it;*

*Where economists will not call the level of consumption “the standard of living”, nor will they confuse the quantity of things with the quality of life;*

*Where cooks will not believe that lobsters just love to be boiled alive;*

*And historians will not believe that countries just love to be invaded;*

*And politicians will not believe that poor people just love to eat promises;*

*Where solemnity will not be a virtue and nobody will take seriously those who cannot jest;*

*Where death and money will have lost their magical powers, so that thieves and oppressors do not magically become gentlemen of virtue merely because they have died and left a great deal of money;*

*Where no one will be thought to be a hero, or a fool, for doing what she thinks is right instead of what is convenient;*

*Where the world will not be at war with the poor, but against poverty, and to ensure victory the military industrial complex will need only to liquidate itself;*

*Where food will not be a commodity, or communication a business, because food and communication will be human rights;*

*Where nobody will die of hunger, because nobody will die of indigestion;*

*Where street children will not be treated like garbage, because there will be no street children;*

*Where rich children will not be treated like money, because there will be no rich children;*

*Where education will not be a privilege of those who can pay for it;*

*Nor will the police be the curse of those who cannot buy them;*

*Where justice and liberty, Siamese twins now condemned to live apart, will once more be joined together, cemented, shoulder to shoulder;*

*Where a woman, black, will be President of Brazil, and another woman, black, will be President of the United States; where an Indian woman will rule Guatemala and another, Peru;*

*And in Argentina, the “mad women” of the Plaza de Mayo will be seen as an example of sanity, because they refused to forget in a time of compulsory amnesia;*

*Where the Holy Mother Church will correct the printing errors in the Tablet of Moses, and the Sixth Commandment will be an injunction to celebrate the body;*

*Where the Church has also added another commandment, which God forgot: “Love thee Nature, of which thou formest a part”;*

*Where the deserts of the world are reforested, as are the deserts of the soul;*

*Where those who despair have hope, and those who are lost are found, for they who despair are those who hope for much and they who are lost are those who seek for much;*

*Where we are the compatriots and contemporaries of all who want justice and beauty in the world; no matter where they were born and when they lived, without the slightest regard for the boundaries of time and space;*

*Where perfection will continue to be the absurd privilege of the gods, but in this untidy and pitiful world, every night is lived as if it is the last and every day as if it is the first.*

Thank you, Eduardo Galeano. Thank you, George Beckford. And thank you, ACE, for this award.