

Let's dialogue

Welcome to my blog

That the mission of *Caribbean Trajectories* is similar to that of the up-coming SALISES Conference--as highlighted by the two announcements above—is surely more than mere coincidence. Indeed, readers of the special issue of *Race and Class* will note that it follows ‘in the footsteps of the systematic and sharp critiques launched from the 1960s through the 1980s by movements like the New World Group, Workers' Party of Jamaica, Working People's Alliance of Guyana and Tapia, (embracing) a spirit of diagnosis and contestation’. This also resonates with the approach taken by the SALISES Conference—see for example the Call for Papers. So are we in the midst of a revival of critical social thought in the region, drawing on the legacy of the past?

There are several earlier signs that this may be happening. We have seen a succession of annual conferences of the Mona-based Centre for Caribbean Thought devoted to retrospectives on the work of Sylvia Wynter, George Lamming, Stuart Hall, Richard Hart and the New World Group. The work of Walter Rodney, C.L.R. James, George Beckford and Lloyd Best has also been celebrated in conferences and publications. *Small Axe* has published retrospective interviews and exchanges. Last year Kari Polanyi Levitt published her essays on *Reclaiming Development: Independent Thought and Caribbean Community*, Brian Meeks's *Envisioning Caribbean Futures* has just appeared; and this is to be followed in 2008 by books on New World thought, the long overdue Best-Levitt essays on plantation economy, and a reprint of the issues of *New World Quarterly* published in 1963-1972. And now *Caribbean Trajectories* and the SALISES 2008 Conference.

This is not a purely Caribbean phenomenon. My sense is that there is far greater plurality of thinking in the world than there was say, 18 years ago at the fall of the ‘Wall’. One reason for this is that neo-liberal globalization has fallen into some intellectual disrepute. Although still politically powerful, people everywhere are no longer convinced it is the panacea it was held out to be. Inequalities have widened to obscene levels, both within and between countries. Furthermore, there is a sense of tremendous disorder in world affairs. We have a global imperial power that believes it has the right to act with utter impunity—simply put, no one knows what these crazy people will do next. There is rising religious fundamentalism in the West and the East. The world's climate is spinning out of control. Transnational crime has become a huge global enterprise beyond the control of most governments. A sophisticated global media apparatus constantly trivializes, sensationalizes, manipulates and mystifies. Such an unjust and unsustainable global dis/order opens space for critical analysis of a fundamental kind.

The trends noted above are mirrored in our own region. Caribbean societies have always been highly exposed to global influences, of course; but now perhaps, more than ever before. We see rising violence--poor-on-poor, poor-on-not-so-poor; state-on-poor; community-on-community. We see a constant hemorrhage of people and skills, making a lie of the promises of ‘Independence’ to re-shape our societies in the interest of all. The

blurb for *Caribbean Trajectories* states that Caribbean elites treat the masses as expendable; that assertion, though it may appear harsh to some, is not made without good cause. And in many ways that expendability is consistent with a model of global economic apartheid that has become an accepted principle in the organization of world society. How else can we make sense of the fact that some 25,000 people—the equivalent of eight 9/11s—die each day from preventable hunger and diseases; that an HIV/AIDS pandemic can rage in Black Africa even though the world has more than enough resources to put an end to it; that so many poor souls from the South meet miserable deaths in their desperate attempts to cross barriers of land and sea to find a better life; while the majority of us who live here take refuge behind gated communities, tacitly condone state violence on the poor and excluded, or rely on the local ‘Don’ for our physical security?

This is not to overlook the fact that the Caribbean version of this model is in many respects *sui generis*. It is of course rooted in our special history and role in the birth and consolidation of capitalist globalization. Yet is noticeable that in the current round of electoral games in the region, there is a marked absence of public discussion on the character and future of these societies in terms of underlying ethical values or quality of life. The tide of anti-neoliberal globalization sentiment that is sweeping much of Latin America has yet to wash the shores of the Caribbean, even if we have benefited from its political spill-overs in the form of Chavista petro-largesse and Cuban solidarity programmes. Rampant individualism has replaced sense of community; self-seeking has trumped volunteerism; and any ideology other than that of the market is passé.

This may well be because the memories are still fresh of Jamaica in the 1970s, the Grenadian tragedy, and the excesses of Burnham’s Guyana. No one, least of all the so-called ‘masses’, wants a return to the polarising conflicts that have marked much of the region’s brief post-colonial history: blood, once spilled, cannot be unspilled, and the consequences can poison relations within national communities for generations. In reviving the radical intellectual tradition, therefore, one lesson of recent history may well be to emphasize constructive processes of understanding and awareness, of social negotiation and consensus-building; lest we inadvertently unleash destructive forces that can all too easily take an unanticipated and unintended course.

In this bewildering scenario Lenin’s timeless question, ‘What is to be Done’, posed in somewhat different circumstances a century ago, assumes new meaning and significance. To this the only answer I can think of is, ‘do what you can, and hope for the best’. The Caribbean intelligentsia, at home and abroad, has a special responsibility to play in the search for answers—although sober realism about the extent to which it can and will impact the actual course of events is also necessary. How it will play out, nobody knows and no one can tell. But this is not a reason for inaction. To paraphrase Lloyd Best, thought, and critical comment, is action for us.

A notable feature of the search for revival of the critical tradition is the significant role being played by Diaspora-based thinkers. Truth be told, this is not a new phenomenon. From Garvey in the early 20th century to the UK-based West Indian political and

intellectual activists of the 1930s-1950s generation; the Caribbean Diaspora has been integral to the politics of the region. In the 1960s-1970s of course, there was a shift 'to within' associated with New World, Black Power, and Caribbean Marxism. This had much to do not only with the arrival of political 'independence' but also with the role of the University of the West Indies in providing an institutional base. This trend was arrested, if not totally reversed, by events in the 1980s. Political traumas aside, we should not under-estimate the impact of the economic crises in decimating the material base of the native intellectual class; rendering it increasingly dependent on consultancies from international organisations, the state and local business; and prone to migration. The Diaspora-based thinker, perhaps less stressed by these economic pressures and benefiting from the detachment lent by physical distance, is positioned to play a key role. On the other hand those who are locally-based live the daily reality, they have--or ought to have--their eyes and ears 'closer to the ground'; and hence may be better infused with a sense of the nuances, possibilities and constraints of local realities.

What is of paramount importance is that the two parts of the Caribbean extended family engage in productive interaction and exchange. I have already ordered copies of *Caribbean Trajectories* and have urged the University Bookshop, St Augustine, to order several more. I hope that colleagues on other campuses and centres including Guyana do the same. It would be good if the book could be launched in the region, not in one place but in several. On the other side, I hope that the authors of *Caribbean Trajectories*, inter alia, respond to the Call for Papers for the SALISES 2008 Conference--not because of my personal connection with that event, but because its theme coincides largely with their own preoccupation—and to all such opportunities for dialogue in the future.

Indeed, this is already happening. The party has been going on for some time. We need to increase the tempo. Let's dialogue!

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