

Lloyd Best and the birth of the New World Group

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Note: in 2008 the University of the West Indies Press will republish all 12 issues of New World Quarterly that were originally published between 1963 and 1972. This is an extract from the Introduction to the volume.

The 1960s in the Anglophone Caribbean was a time of transition—psychological, no less than political. The old colonial order was in dying, but there was much debate over what would replace it. What kind of societies and economies could, and should, be shaped once political independence was attained? Was Westminster democracy an appropriate form of government for the West Indies? Could politicians be trusted with their newly-acquired power? Could economic regionalism be a substitute for the failed West Indies Federation? Was there such a thing as a ‘West Indian identity’ and what was the role of the artist in reflecting and shaping it? What about Rastafarianism and pan-Africanism?

The Cold War had entered the region forcefully, as Cuba’s young revolution cemented an alliance with the Soviet Union and Dr. Jagan in Guyana proclaimed himself to be a Marxist socialist; while other West Indian political leaders had opted for Western-style democracy and mixed economies. What role did socialism have to play in building the new societies, and what foreign policy should independent West Indian states adopt? These were the kinds of questions that preoccupied young West Indian scholars and political leaders-in-waiting, now working in increasing numbers at the Mona Campus.

Lloyd Best

Lloyd Best was the central figure in the West Indian Society for the Study of Social Issues (WISSI) that emerged on the Mona Campus in 1960s, the forerunner of the New World Group. He had come to Mona in 1958 after training in economics in Britain. Brilliant, original, insightful, provocative, irreverent and not a little arrogant, Best was an exemplar *par excellence* of the charismatic intellectual. He was to become intellectual

mentor to several generations of West Indian students, scholars, journalists and political leaders. Among his talents was the ability to coin a phrase that provoked an alternative perspective on a familiar problem; examples are ‘Plantation Economy’, ‘Doctor Politics’ and ‘Industrialization by Invitation’, which have entered the language of everyday intellectual discourse.

Best’s articles in *New World Quarterly* are an excellent record of the political, social, economic and epistemic philosophy that he was to articulate consistently for throughout his life. Five will be reviewed here, all appearing between 1963 and 1968. The first, ‘Working Notes Towards the Unification of Guyana’, appeared in the first issue. It was published under the name of ‘some New World Associates’, but was actually co-authored by Best with the Guyanese lawyer Miles Fitzpatrick. *Working Notes* argued that the root of the political crisis in Guyana lay in the importation of foreign ideologies from the West and the East—ideologies that are alien to the West Indian experience. In other words, both Western-style capitalism/democracy and Soviet-style centrally planned economy could not work to produce development in Guyana, and commitment to either by the two main political parties was making the problem worse.

The essay proposed a locally designed development programme as the basis for a coalition government. The programme would be free of ideological bias, and informed by a careful study of the history, sociology and economic structures of the country. The initiative was rejected, and Guyana continued its descent into ethno-political polarization that persists to this day. Over forty years later, this document continues to have relevance in the basic principles informing the proposals.

Best’s ‘Chaguaramas to Slavery?’ was published in the Dead Season 1965 issue of *New World Quarterly*. The title reversed, for polemical effect, that of one of Dr. Williams’s most famous lectures, ‘From Slavery to Chaguaramas’, which had been delivered at the University of Woodford Square at the height of Williams’s campaign to have the U.S. naval base at Chaguaramas released for the use as the site of the capital of the West Indies Federation. Lloyd’s article was a polemic critique of Williams for the

abandonment of the campaign through an agreement with the United States in return for a package of economic assistance; and of William's withdrawal from the WI Federation after Jamaica voted for secession, on the grounds that "one from ten leave nought".

Lloyd argued that the retreat of Dr. Williams on the two issues amounted to a failure to seize a rare historic opportunity for the 'shifting of responsibility from outside and to the West Indian people'. For him, this was the true meaning and purpose of political independence. The theme of self-responsibility is a constant of Bestian thought.

'Independent Thought and Caribbean Freedom', published in the *Cropover* 1967 issue, is probably the best-known of Best's articles. Its pan-Caribbean vision, derived from the historical influence of the plantation system, its critique of economic dependency and of government industrialisation strategies, its vigorous rejection of the metropolitan imperialism of both the West and the East, its critique of orthodox Marxism as a kind of Catholic 'church', its thesis that social change begins with ideas and that 'thought is action for us', and hence that 'independent thought' *is the means of attaining* Caribbean freedom--all these are now recognised as distinctive features of Best's contribution to Caribbean thought.

In 'Thought and Freedom' Best charged that the younger members of his generation who were impatient to take political power were ill-equipped and unprepared for the task. He returned to theme in article published in the *Dead Season* 1967 issue entitled 'Whither New World?'. Once again, Lloyd rebutted the critics who were pressing for New World to become a political organization. It was necessary, he argued, to 'erode the intellectual and philosophical foundations of the old order so as to guard against the mere substitution of one political elite for another.

However, in 'The Next Round', published in the following year (*Crop Time* 1968), we can discern a significant change in tone and emphasis. In this article he announced the political arrival of 'the generation born since Moyne...the men who constitute the decisive cohort for the next round'. The piece ended with a ringing declaration:

Dessalines and Duvalier, no! radical reform, si! Yes, social and economic revolution, a fundamental change in regime, in system of society. (993).

To his contemporaries, this must have sounded very much like a political call to arms. It proved to be Lloyd Best's last article in *New World Quarterly*. Shortly afterwards there was the split in the the Trinidad New World Group, Lloyd's leaving to form *Tapia*, the Rodney Riot in Jamaica and the Black Power revolution in Trinidad.