

THE POWER OF PHILOSOPHY

**Tribute to Norman Girvan, 9th SALISES annual conference;
'Reinventing the Political Economy Tradition in the
Caribbean'.**

Brian Meeks

The power of philosophy, floats thru my head
light like a feather...

Heavy as lead

Light like a feather

Heavy as lead

The time has come, I want you...

To straighten out my tomorrow

I want you to straighten out my tomorrow

Bob Marley, Misty Morning
Kaya, Island Records, 1978.

Bob Marley's 'Misty morning' on the Kaya album, presents itself as an enigma. On the one hand, following memorable tracks like 'Is this Love', 'She's gone' and 'Satisfy my soul', 'Misty Morning' seems to be just another love ballad, albeit crafted in the trademark Marley style. But on closer scrutiny, it is evident that

there are other things going on here. Marley is both speaking to a romantic notion of his love interest 'straightening him out' as he is simultaneously concerned with a more substantial excavation and repaving of the existential road of life. From this bend in the road, 'straightening out my tomorrow' refers to the entire agonized history of a people and the need for a new ontology, indeed, philosophy to re-imagine and construct and to straighten out the avenues to better tomorrows.

Kaya was released in 1978 and many of the tracks, including Misty Morning, were written a year earlier in 1977. With, perhaps, a little poetic compression of time, we can easily imagine that while Marley was writing 'Misty Morning' a small group of erstwhile university lecturers, some newly employed to the Government, were tracking up and down the hillsides of Jamaica, walking gingerly along the zinc lined gully walls of lower St Andrew and meeting, eventually, with tens of thousands of Jamaican men, women and children from all walks of life. These four young men, because young they still all were in 1977, George Beckford, Michael Witter, Louis Lindsay and Norman Girvan, were laying the foundation for the People's Plan, an attempt to sample the views of Jamaicans on a new direction for the Jamaican economy and a new future for the island, free from the shackles of neo-

colonial dependency. The People's Plan, completed in amazing time despite its deeply consultative process, was never implemented. The PNP government led by Michael Manley, chose to follow the route of IMF administered loans and structural adjustment, eventually losing power in the brutal and traumatic elections of 1980. But that is another story. This one is about the man who led that remarkable process and whom we honour today; Norman Paul Girvan.

Yet, to tell his story, we must return to the Plan, for in its conception and implementation we find all the constituent elements and purposes of the life of the fully fledged Norman. There is the passion and commitment to change the colonial architecture of Jamaica; the concern and respect for the Jamaican people, so evident in the reach of the consultative process; the commitment to public engagement and the fully developed notion that the role of the intellectual is only fulfilled when he or she is engaged with the people - what Yash Tandon, utilizing Gramsci, refers to as the 'organic intellectual'; and there is the notion of intellectual activity being not just an individual engagement, but a collective pursuit. These four, passion, respect, public commitment and collective engagement are the foundation stones of Norman Girvan's life and stand, rock steady, throughout his entire career.

But what brought him here? Undoubtedly his father, Thom Girvan, whose role in the building of Jamaican community in the early twentieth century is unsurpassed, was a profound influence. The hidden element, however, requiring further excavation beyond this brief précis, would be the story of his mother, though I suspect that the passion for social change of which we speak, probably traces its origins to her. The time of his birth – in the War years – is also significant. Girvan, along with Bob Marley and others of his generation, achieved adulthood together with the nation. They were the first inheritors of her promises and, therefore, the first to keenly feel the disappointment of her failure to fulfill them. Calabar High School certainly plays a role as the fecund seeding ground for a generation of young Jamaicans who went on to become leading public intellectuals, scholars and political figures. Norman himself hints at it in this short piece ‘One thing Led to Another’, but the definitive study as to what peculiar mix of students, teachers and leaders created that fertile womb on Red Hills Road, still remains to be written.

The University of the West Indies, which the young Girvan entered in 1959, was an obvious and profound influence. The Federation

had recently started and it was as though the entire cadre of brilliant young people from the West Indies had descended on Mona. Among his fellow undergraduates, Walter Rodney and Orlando Patterson were friends and had great sway. Among the faculty, Lloyd Best, Lloyd Brathwaite, Roy Augier, Alister McIntyre, Elsa Goveia and MG Smith among many others were central, as they in turn forged their respective disciplines of Caribbean history, economics, sociology and anthropology. CLR James's visit to Jamaica in the early Sixties, prolonged after a near fatal car accident, was also critical and Girvan readily admits to the profound intellectual impact of James on his life. Yet, if James's sheer brilliance and occasional dialectics left its mark, it is arguable that it was the arrogance and sense of intellectual proprietorship of another Trinidadian, Lloyd Best, which earns pride of place as the most important influence on the young Girvan. He joined the New World Group, which Best founded and in which George Beckford played a leading role and became one of its most effective disciples for a radical restructuring of Caribbean economies and the establishment of a more meaningful sovereignty.

Then, there was his doctoral research at the University of London at a time when London itself was in a moment of profound

upheaval, under the sway of the anti war, peace and civil rights movements. Indeed, the entire World was enveloped in the revolutionary upsurge of the Sixties, a hurricane of forces that impelled all but the most resistant into a movement for social change. As the Guyanese poet laureate Martin Carter suggests in his poem 'You are Involved'

This I have learnt:
Today a speck
Tomorrow a hero
Hero or monster
You are consumed!

Like a jig
Shakes the loom;
Like a web
Is spun the pattern
All are involved!
All are consumed!

When Norman returned to the Caribbean in 1966, the hurricane was blowing with full force. The Rodney riots in October 1968 set

the pace, but it was the Trinidad Black Power revolution of 1970 where the flames at first burnt brightest. The movement in Trinidad was eventually doused, but the declaration of democratic Socialism in Jamaica in 1974, created a new firestorm for popular engagement which led, ultimately, to 1977 and the moment of the People's Plan. But that apogee, as we have said, was followed by defeat and the tragedy of 1980.

Yet, throughout and beyond it all, Norman Girvan has built on his four cornered foundation a solid intellectual structure of impressive dimensions. This has branched out from the study of the mineral sector and the deleterious effects of multinational corporations; to the role of the IMF and its flawed policies of structural adjustment; to questions of technology's central place in development; to matters pertaining to integration in the Caribbean and the relationship of Caricom to the greater region; to the political economy of the South; and to Caribbean thought and the intellectual direction of Caribbean thinkers. In relation to the last and perhaps as a capstone of his entire legacy, Norman has memorably said "I subscribe to the view that true sovereignty begins with independent and critical thought...this must remain the goal for those who have been subjected to centuries of colonization and metropolitan imposition of one kind or another". These ideas

are gathered in an impressive collection of some eleven books, seven edited volumes and 108 articles and book chapters.

Any of these grand themes in and of themselves would be remarkable for an entire intellectual career. Together, they constitute a legacy that will engage many a PhD student and, hopefully, much wider circles of inquisitive people in the Caribbean and beyond, long after Norman has exited (stage left, naturally). More so, they immeasurably strengthen the intellectual heritage of Jamaica and the Caribbean, providing a wellspring of confidence along with points of reference and tools of engagement for the inevitable intellectual and political battles in the struggle to ‘straighten out our new tomorrows’.

The story, however, doesn’t end here. Unlike some scholars who stay safely within the bounds of the academy for their entire career, Girvan, impelled by his sense of public service, but also as he will readily admit, by serendipity, has ventured forth, playing leading roles in a number of national, regional and international organizations, including, the United Nations Institute for Development and Planning in Dakar, Senegal, Director of the Planning Institute of Jamaica, Researcher at the United Nations Center on Transnational Corporations in New York and more

recently, Secretary General of the Association of Caribbean States in Port of Spain, a post which ended in 2004 and which was the inspiration for his most recent volume *Cooperation in the Greater Caribbean: The Role of the Association of Caribbean States*.

Between all of this, Norman has fully engaged in academic life as a teacher and administrator in the Department of Economics at Mona and the Institute of International Relations at St Augustine, though perhaps, his most lasting contribution was his stint as faculty member and then Director of the Consortium Graduate School of the Social Sciences from 1985 until 2000. Under Norman's leadership, the CGS, one of the progenitors of SALISES, developed an enviable programme of interdisciplinary teaching. Its over 100 graduates, some of whom are here tonight, continue to play leading roles in government, the public service, business and academic life throughout the Caribbean and beyond.

There is one further dimension of Norman Girvan that it would be seriously remiss not to mention and that is his role as a family man. The feminist activists and scholars, to their everlasting merit, introduced the notion that the personal is political, forever compromising the idea that true success can be achieved at the expense of the family. I have had the privilege to be allowed the

occasional peak into the life of the Girvan household and I can say without fear of contradiction, that here is a husband who has given Jasmine the space to develop her highly creative talents; here is a father who has found time for Alexander and Alatashe, despite his punishing schedule. His 2003 'Letter to Alex', written to help him prepare for exams, but more profoundly to connect him to the recent history and culture of the Caribbean is a gem and a model. Its self-descriptive title, requiring no further comment, is: 'Our Story: Why we need to understand the History of the 20th century from the Perspective of the South and why Beyond a Boundary by CLR James is a good Place to Start'.

And with all of this, Norman Girvan's work continues apace. He teaches as a Professorial fellow in Trinidad; he remains engaged with CARICOM as a consultant; his new website, as one would expect, is a site of engagement and contestation with a variety of contemporary concerns as it is also a tool to link with a new generation of young and energetic academics. Most recently, there is his critical intervention in the debates surrounding the Economic Partnership Agreement between Europe and Cariforum, calling, in the first instance, for greater transparency. This is entirely consistent with the central tenets of his philosophy, which from Port of Spain to Kingston, bauxite in Jamaica to copper in Chile,

People's Plan to Caribbean Integration, resonate with the slogans of transparency, democracy and popular inclusion.

I end with Kamau Brathwaite, a contemporary of Norman's though from a different discipline and a parish of the Caribbean nation to the South and East of Jamaica:

I

Must be given words to shape my name

To the syllable of trees

I

Must be given words to refashion futures

Like a healer's hand

I must be given words so that the bees

In my blood's buzzing brain of memory

Will make flowers, will make flocks of birds

Will make sky, will make heaven

The heaven open to the thunderstone and the volcano

And the unfolding land

Continue to make your beautiful flowers, Norman and may your flock of birds flourish and fly. Long may you live and long may

the words flow from your healer's hand; and as the Welsh poet
Dylan Thomas demands, with his own passion,
Do not go gentle into that good night
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Mona, March 28, 2008