

# Essays On The Theory of Plantation Economy, by Lloyd Best and Kari Polanyi Levitt

Foreword by Norman Girvan

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## Reviewed by Bryan Khan

On February 25<sup>th</sup> 2010, the University of the West Indies celebrated the launch of the much anticipated – *Essays On The Theory of Plantation Economy* – by Lloyd Best and Kari Levitt. This publication, some four decades in the making, marks a distinct moment in the timeline of Caribbean academia, and congratulations must be related to Professor Levitt, the Estate of Lloyd Best, the publishers, the University of the West Indies, and all other entities involved in the production of the book.

Our journey throughout the history of the body of literature that is Caribbean Economic thought, and the ideology that has emerged from such, is one which had stirred the passion of many a generation of Caribbean intellectuals. It has now been many decades since Caribbean scholars have acknowledged that the theoretical explanations offered by mainstream academics have been too generalized to adequately capture the essence of the realities of the Caribbean experience. This has been a journey which has drawn on the intellectual capacities of some of the region’s greatest historians, political scientists, sociologists, and of course, economists. What is interesting to note, is that many of the major contributions to Caribbean thought are attributed to works which have blurred the lines between these different disciplines.

A significant opportunity arises when a literary work is able to transcend these lines, and contribute to the development of not only its primary discipline, but to a uniquely relevant Caribbean ideology. It is in this context that the concept of the Plantation Economy Model stands out as a key piece of the mosaic that is Caribbean society. While the Plantation Economy is at heart, an economic model, its implications and adaptations have transcended the traditional economic framework, and have significantly contributed to the emergence of a holistic and continuously evolving developmental paradigm.

By establishing the premise that the history of our region cannot be isolated from our economic context, the Theory of the Plantation Economy has given us a construct in which we are able to analyze our positions. By shifting our focus towards a theoretical construct which is explicitly based on the unique context of our colonial heritage and history, the idea of the Plantation Economy is one which has propelled independent Caribbean thought to its rightful place.

*Essays on the theory of Plantation Economy* is a significant literary work which I am sure will find its way into the reading lists and course curricula of regional academics, and hopefully, also into the hands of any casual reader, interested in understanding the historical evolution of the Caribbean economic framework. While the various discourses in this book have been discussed, and in many instances published, at various points in the past, it is a significant accomplishment to have compiled these essays into a single cohesive literary work.

It is very pleasing to note that this publication is listed in the catalogues of many major online book distributors, including Amazon, Barnes and Nobel, and Europeanbookstore.com. I believe that it would also be excellent if an electronic version of this publication were available for

digital distribution, so that this important piece of literature may reach as wide an audience as possible.

I would also like to highlight the fact this publication is certainly more than the sum of the individual essays of which it is comprised. It begins with a comprehensive and insightful Foreword by Professor Norman Girvan, appropriately titled '*The Plantation Economy in the Age of Globalization*' which aptly sets the tone of the text, introducing the theme of the book not only from its historical viewpoint, but also adopting a contemporary perspective. Chapter one is an appropriate opening - Best's '*On the Teaching of Economics*', first presented at the *1973 Conference of Secondary School Teachers of Economics*. The book derives its tagline from Chapter two's title - '*A Historical and Institutional Approach to Caribbean Economic Development*'. Like Chapter two, Chapters three to five are Best-Levitt collaborations, taking the reader through a discourse on the Legacy of the Plantation and the Structures of Caribbean Economies, where the core construct of the Plantation Model is explored in the '*Revised and Expanded Model of Pure Plantation Economy*' - a comprehensive and seminal paper, accounting for almost a third of the book's content. It is at this point, that the work identifies the plantation economy as a hinterland, characterized by subordination and dependency on the dominant metropole.

After being presented with the Best-Levitt '*Accounting Framework for the Plantation Economy*', the reader is seamlessly drawn into Levitt's construction of '*A System of National Accounts for Trinidad and Tobago*', complete with a fold out insert of the detailed Accounting Framework attached as an Appendix. This methodical arrangement of chapters demonstrates the well managed editing process behind the book's publication.

With the emphasis on the historical continuities of dependency established, Levitt seeks to address the question of the requisite changes which would allow for the break with dependency, in *'In Search for Model IV'*, or the connotatively labeled 'anti-model'. The last chapter of the publication reverts to the Best-Levitt formulation, and provides a *Critical Review of the Contributions of Lewis and Seers*, with specific reference to *Issues of Industrialization and Employment in the Caribbean*; rounding off the book's theme of Caribbean Development, and leaving the reader to contemplate the evolution of perspectives within Caribbean Economic Thought. Even the Bibliography of this publication in itself is a great resource, potentially serving as an expansive reading list for any regional student interested in Developmental Economics.

The theory of the Plantation Economy drew on various elements of existing schools of thought, as well as introduced many new and innovative constructs. By attempting to explain the structural constraints which appear to restrict the development and transformation of Caribbean economies, the Best-Levitt literature forced a reconsideration of the historical and institutional characteristics which define our regional realities. What we have now come to consider, is that the shift away from a literal plantation model towards other economic modes - has not been complimented by a shift away from the institutional constraints faced by our economies.

This leads us to the concept of the Plantation Legacy, in which plantation-esque institutions still prevail, manifesting in the dominance of multi-national corporations, the exploitation of local labor sources, and dependence on externally produced goods and services.

With the global and regional economies quickly evolving via the technological progress characterized by today's world, we are once again faced with a critical consideration:

- *"What is the impact and significance of the Plantation Legacy within our evolving economic landscape?"*

While the Best-Levitt generation of economic thought has given us a construct in which we can explain and understand our regional economies, discourse on the appropriate way forward still rages on. The Plantation Economy is one important tool, of course within the greater collection of economic literature, available to the researcher in order to develop policy prescriptions aimed at the transformation of our economies, and paving the path towards sustainable development. But what exactly are these policy prescriptions? ...This is an issue to be debated by today's generation of economists and policy-makers, as well as tomorrow's. The importance of this book is that it provides a single documented point of reference for the Plantation Model to inform and condition these debates.

Any exercise in intellectual debate is of course but purely academic, if the information and ideas that are generated are not disseminated to a wider civil society. It is for this reason, that we may envision *'Essays on the Theory of Plantation Economy'* becoming a quintessential resource in libraries and bookshelves across our region.

This publication serves as a testament to the foundations of an evolving Caribbean paradigm, and is an appropriate tribute to the memory of the late Doctor Best - and shall perpetuate the legacy of independent Caribbean thought which he embodied. It is fascinating to consider the state of mind of the authors some odd decades ago, when it was declared necessary to develop a body of inherently Caribbean-centric economic theory. This approach is what gives the Plantation Economy Theory its ideological significance, serving as a case in point for Caribbean empowerment and a source of inspiration for generations of intellectuals to come.

While this book provides a thorough account of the conceptual underpinnings of the model, one cannot help but to be fascinated by the motivation behind these developments; i.e the insatiable need to define a Caribbean identity, the desire to push existing intellectual boundaries, and the resulting discovery - that at least in the case of our region - economic policy cannot be a consideration made independent of historical context. This is why [the](#) publication of this book is not just a commemoration of academic progress, but a celebration of Independent Caribbean Thought.

St. Augustine, February 25, 2010