

Towards a New Ferment: Review of "The Thought of New World"

Prepared for the launch of the book at the Conference of the Caribbean Centre for Thought, "*Freedom and Power in the Caribbean: The Work of Gordon K. Lewis*", October 1, 2010, by:

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The book

The book, "The Thought of New World: The Quest for Decolonization" is a compilation of some of the documents from the fourth Caribbean reasonings Conference, June 2005, Mona, under the same theme, along with an extensive interview with Lloyd Best. That conference brought together the living principals of the New World group, and the wider movement around it. I attended some of the sessions, and I recall meeting and greeting:

(1) Best, Millette, Girvan, DeCaires, Polanyi-Levitt, from the core of the Group

(2) McIntyre, and others in the wider intellectual orbit of the group

It was also important for students to put faces to names, and to make the people more real in their consciousness.

The conference also drew the attention of several Caribbean Scholars, some of them of the next two generations who in one way or another were influenced by the "Thought" of New World, and the spirit of the times when it flourished. In this regard, I think of:

(3) Dennis Pantin, who did more than most to extract the macro-economic model of Plantation Economy

(4) Brian Meeks, the organizers of the conference and one of the editors of this volume, and Tony Bagues one of the interviewers of Best

(5) Kirk Meighoo, with connections to inheritors of New World, according to Lloyd, such as the Trinidad and Tobago Review and Tapia

(6) Mikey Critchlow and Pat Northover, two of the current generation of scholars opening new paths of social analysis

Structure of the book

The book is "In tres partes divisibus, a la Caesar's Gaul". The three parts are:

Part One: *Reflecting* - led by Norman Girvan's recount of New World and its Critics, James Millette's Historical Perspective of the Group, and Kari Polanyi Levitt's account of the Montreal New World Group. These essays were supported by David De Caires' piece on intellectuals and Vaughan Lewis' sketch of the new challenges for Caribbean intellectuals in a changing world order

Part Two: *Imagining* - led off by Pantin's sketch of the "rentier economy", and followed by 4 essays, two endorsing, one extending, and one rejecting what they thought were the essential ideas of New World. In all cases, "engaging" the ideas, as Lloyd would have had it.

Part Three: *Remembering* - a long interview of Best on New World by Brian Meeks, Tony Bogues and Norman Girvan, that focused inescapably on Best.

My own connection with the ideas of New World began when I found the 4 well-circulated black bound manuscripts in the garbage of one of my professors while I was writing my thesis on what I thought was a fairly original idea – export economies. Of course, my mind was blown, first by that discovery, and subsequently, by Samir Amin’s “Centre-Periphery” essay, also in another pile of discarded literature.

Subsequently, I enjoyed 17 years of collaboration with George Beckford in economic critique, and more broadly social analysis, in the Caribbean. I have been privileged to work with Norman Girvan in public policy. Indeed, I regard the period of attempting to steer Michael Manley away from the IMF in 1977 as one of the high points of my contribution to Jamaica and the Caribbean, and to Caribbean thought in particular. Norman, George Beckford and Louis Lindsay were my seniors in this project. Many times during 1977-1980 in particular, but in the years leading up to Beckford’s death in 1991, I found myself in continuations of discussions that had their origin in New World, and had to ask for clarification of the context, and sometimes the personalities referred to.

Finally, I have also enjoyed many years of collaboration with Kari Polanyi Levitt in picking up the pieces of Plantation Economy, and sharing critical perspectives in development policy in general, and in particular, for the Caribbean

I learned a lot from the book. This evening I wish to draw attention to the following highlights of the book.

The Historiography of New World, “about 42 years as a living entity”, by Millette’s “reckoning”, but “effectively, it existed for about 5 or 6 years”. That after 4 decades, the ideas generated by this Group, and its extensions, can still sustain conferences, papers and books is testament in itself of their contribution to Caribbean thought, and more broadly, human thought.

The context of New World’s coming into being - a “boiling pot” according to Lloyd Best – was the intersection of the global, regional and national ferments. The ideas sprung from their times, and in turn stirred the “boiling pot” of their times.

The principal dramatis personae were quite varied, more like a network of intellectuals, business persons, labour leaders, journalists, cricketers, politicians, and many others – a broad cross-section of Caribbean people

The beginnings, and the endings of New World are still open to debate, at all levels. The beginnings are arbitrarily dated – 1963, said Lloyd, but Millette said it “was imagined in the late 1950s/early 1960s, and conceived in Guyana in 1963”. The endings, the motives for which are disputed – “died in its youth in 1968”, said Millette, but struggled on till 1972 in Jamaica; “imploded and self-destructed said Girvan” – how would that compare with the implosion of the New Jewel Movement 15 years later?; said Lloyd, on November 7, 1968, “I didn’t hink we were going anywhere, and we better do something different, and I am prepared to do something different”, and called a meeting for the following week at which Tapia – an inheritor – was founded

The achievements and the legacy constitute almost a paradigm for economic development, in opposition to Lewis, within the Dependency/Structuralist/even Radical stream of thought. There were disappointments as well for many because of its lack of quantifiable models, its incomplete policy recommendations, and failed to provide all the answers that were expected from ideas about economic development. As such, New World thought is a legitimate area for further enquiry.

The gaps for future scholarship are aching to be filled. What were the impacts in the non-Anglo Caribbean, for example? Only last year was The Theory of Plantation Economy published, and it was first published in Spanish by Casa de las Americas in Cuba. What are to be done with the original manuscripts? I have found several original drafts of the Plantation Economy papers with the corrections and edits in the handwriting of the authors which are to be sent to a special collection that McGill University is organizing for this work. But what is being done here in the Caribbean, and especially at the UWI? What were New World’s influences on other social movements, both positively and negatively, such as the Black Power movement in the region, and the PNP in Jamaica in the 1970s, for example? There are many other connections in the region to be documented. What was New World’s impact on public policy, by way of critical review of the implementation of these ideas, and or derivatives and versions of them, in Guyana, Jamaica and perhaps Grenada?

Norman's synthesis

Norman Girvan has the art of distilling succinctly the essential content of any set of ideas. Here he summarizes the seven theses of new World thought, briefly outlines the group's history, and presents what he sees as the four thematic areas in which critique of New World thought fall. It is ideally placed at the front of the volume so as to help the reader to put what follows into intellectual and historical context. Here, I can only direct you to this excellent authentic statement from someone who was within the paradigm.

Imagining

This section began with a piece by the late People's Scholar Dennis Pantin who extracted a model of a "Rentier" economy from Best's work in New World. He often used it to show the inevitability of corruption in such an economy when everyone has to compete for public expenditure.

It is followed by papers by scholars from the next two generations. Meighoo celebrates Lloyd's uniqueness, as Lloyd would have done himself.

Northover and Critchlow argue that Lloyd was on the right track, but needed to go further. Their paper's arguments are quite dense, and seem to represent one possible avenue of the now generation to "engage", as Lloyd would have said, his particular interpretation of the contribution of New World to Caribbean thought. They rely on a body of ideas called "critical realism", in an essay that was heavily influenced by Foucault. Some years ago at the conference to celebrate the work of George Beckford, I had occasion to respond to the keynote speech by Lloyd. As I gasped, "How could anyone think that!", I recalled Foucault's admonition in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*: To ask how can anyone think that, immediately identifies the limits of one's own consciousness. I reacted to the essay by these two young scholars in the same way as I did to Lloyd, which I think puts them in good company, while giving me more homework to do.

Yet another attempt to extend the Best-Levitt theses was made by Paget Henry, within a framework that sees global capitalism in a new phase. He uses the Prospero-Caliban metaphor in every which way possible, so much so as to force me to re-read the *Tempest* to grasp his nuances.

Finally, David Wong declares that the futility of future attempts at nationalist development is self-evident, that is, to himself. And, with some apology, he proposes what I understand to be offshore business services as the development model for Jamaica, which seems to me to run counter to the spirit of New World thought

Millette's reflections vs Lloyd's remembering

Read together, Millette's reflections and Lloyd's remembering do pose the tension in New World between theory – 'Thought as action' – and praxis by way of political organization. Millette's blistering critique of Lloyd is worth several readings. First, it should be read by itself, then after Lloyd's interview, and perhaps several times thereafter. He is deeply concerned about the neo-colonial nature of the Caribbean and the failure of New World to become the political force to counter this.

Lloyd's interview is equally deserving of several readings, especially with regard to the importance of, and the efforts at, theorizing Caribbean reality. In both cases, it is necessary to read for the personality differences to understand the not so subtle dynamics of New World, and it is also necessary to read beyond these differences for the valuable insights in social theorizing and praxis in the Caribbean that can easily get lost.

A new ferment

This is a rich collection for graduate students whose work requires knowledge of the intellectual traditions of Caribbean thought. In noting this, I wonder at how few students who are interested in Caribbean thought there seems to be at today's UWI.

There are more issues today - climate change, ICT implications and applications, the EPA, for example - than then, and perhaps, with more urgency. There is far more access to information, for the analysis of Caribbean reality. There is now much more experience with governance and policy initiatives, to guide the transformation of that reality.

What is needed is even more courage than the New World leaders and other participants had, to think creatively, to challenge the neo-colonial structures, and in particular, the definitions of Caribbean identity from the outside.

This book should help to stimulate a new ferment. It is a text rich with ideas for students. It is a good collection to remember the conference for those who attended, and it is an excellent collection to give to those who did not attend both a flavour of the conference, and the flavour of the discourses of New World, then and now.

I wish it had more pictures of the participants to leave readers with images to label ideas. Perhaps, the next edition can do that.