

## **An Outmoded Notion of Sovereignty**

This Independence Day, most people will not want to reflect on the triumph of the Nationalist movement as it defeated British Imperialism, but will rather be planning a pleasant day at the beach. Is this a problem? What does it mean? Are we ungrateful? Is Independence anything to celebrate?

Reflecting on their own country's experience, Michael Witter and Omar Davies (1989) have bemoaned that Jamaica is more dependent today than it was at the beginning of Independence. While I agree, I do not find it necessarily lamentable. For this situation is not particular to Jamaica, the Caribbean, or "the South". It is the condition of the entire contemporary world. And while not all good, it is not all bad either. As Peter Drucker noted in 1986, all countries of the globe have become more dependent on the world economy -- including the United States, England and Japan. Not just *our* Nation-States, but all Nation-States are crumbling. A story on CNN (which I gladly receive through my cable subscription) related that a child was asked the question, "Do you know why we have a holiday on Independence Day?" The answer was given, "That's the day we defeated the aliens." Well. The idea that somehow we in the West Indies are more prone to forgetting our history than others, or that the Third World been spellbound into abandoning patriotism by cunning imperialist overlords is both inadequate and small-town. Our situation of weakened Nation-States and waning National sentiment is not the result of imperialist designs. It is the condition of the contemporary world. And not only is this true of economics. It is true of politics and culture as well. Farewell to age of the Nation and Independence.

### **Against Nationalism and Imperialism**

Being against Nationalism does not necessarily mean that one must support "internationalist capitalist imperialism". However, that is the impression one gets. This is because in the "Third World", Nationalism has been tied to progressive anti-imperialism. But growing up in Canada, I was against Nationalism because it was associated with anti-immigration stances, racism, and fascism/Nazism. This anti-nationalist position is consonant with an early strand of Socialist anti-imperialism. Socialists of the

19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were Internationalist, not nationalist. They opposed both Nationalism and Imperialism. Their vision was of a world Socialist government. Workers of the World, Unite! Thinkers like George Orwell [1984 (1940)], for example did not necessarily advocate the Independence of India, but rather a reworking of the relations that occurred within the British Empire – with India having the option of leaving if it wished. They saw National independence as illusory, for no nation is truly self-sufficient. Indeed, Independence can cut you off from needed connections. Even Butler was loyal to the British Empire, and I don't think he took that position primarily because he was uneducated. CLR James (1979:6) once said that “Independence... of Grenada, St. Lucia, Barbados, and the like as independent territories is an absurdity, and to analyse the future of their Independence is either immorality or sadism”. Britain built its wealth off the riches of Africa, the West Indies, and Asia. Why should we have left? What was theirs was ours, in a sense. Interestingly, the Communist Parties in Martinique and Guadeloupe do not advocate Independence, as far as I know. And their peoples might be better off for it.

When I was living in Jamaica a few years back, at the Independence holiday Wilmot “Mutt” Perkins, a controversial and influential radio talk show host, raised the important question, “What is there to celebrate about Independence?” Irreligiously, he asked whether Jamaica would be better off if it had remained a colony of the UK. The Cayman Islands were used as counter-example. In the 1950s Jamaica was much better off than the Cayman Islands. Indeed, Jamaica was charged with their administration for a while. Today after over thirty years of Independence, most Jamaicans would envy the quality of life in the Cayman Islands, who opted to stay with the UK. These difficult questions are often simply dismissed by our Regional intellectuals quite unconvincingly in my opinion. I hear older people echo the sentiment all the time, “Things was better when England did rule us”, or more jarringly, “when the white man did rule.” And our old people are not stupid. Intellectuals must be honest and admit uncomfortable truths.

### **The Idea and Myth of “the Nation”**

Let us look at Nationalism a little closer. Nationalism has at its base an idea of an autonomous, self-contained National essence. If outsiders interfere in the Nation this is a violation of its natural integrity. This violation of the natural right to self-determination is therefore seen as being automatically

wrong. This is how we generally think about Independence and our existence in the world. But I disagree with the premise. Here is an example why. As a lecturer at the UWI I constantly hear students, following our mainline academic tradition, recite tired automatic phrases about how the ideas of Durkheim, Weber, or Marx are not suited to the Caribbean because we are a unique people and we need a unique theory developed for ourselves, by ourselves. This is no basis for criticism. Time, place and circumstance certainly need consideration but arguments for group uniqueness logically reach absurd points. Are people (including ourselves) reduced to only being relevant to the country in which they live? Is it not a simple logical step to go further and say that M.G. Smith's Pluralist Thesis is inapplicable to us because he was from Jamaica? Or that Lloyd Best is only partially appropriate because he is of African descent? Or that Panday – being from Princes Town -- is not relevant to Indians from Central? Where do we draw our lines? Wouldn't it follow the logic for more and more groups – Tobagonians, Indesh -- to declare their Independence? Ethnic cleansing is not far removed from this line of thought.

We need to get out of this problem. Rethinking the relation between Self and Other is helpful in this respect. In recent philosophy, psychology, and anthropology the ideas of a single, coherent, essential, independent Self has been undermined and in many circles discarded. There is a questioning of where the Self ends and the Other begins. In terms of National identity, we can point to the examples of England and tea (tea is from the Orient, not England), Italian pasta and tomato sauce (pasta came to Italy after Marco Polo visited China, tomatoes are from the New World), the Irish and potatoes (potatoes are from the Americas), the harmonium being a European instrument brought to India, and we could go on and on. "National characteristics" many times in fact are the cultural products of others. In the West Indies, this is most obvious. We speak European languages, are largely Christian, and have been central participants in the history of the Modern West from its birth in 1492. This is not shameful, as the cultural nationalists would declare. This is part of the human history of change and exchange – conquering, submitting, stealing, giving, creating. From this perspective, "defending" ourselves from "outside" influences seems parochial, paranoid, silly and limiting. Not that there are not things we must be on guard against. But just because things are "foreign" does not mean that they should be looked upon with suspicion.

## **West Indians as Global Citizens**

Our history makes us a more global conscious people than others. We can see this from education to entertainment to personal finances. At a wider level, West Indians have always been influenced by world events and we have also exerted considerable influence on these events – for example, through Eric Williams, Marcus Garvey, Frantz Fanon, CLR James, George Padmore, Louis Farrakhan, Malcolm X, and Bob Marley. Our frame of reference has never been confined to the islands on which we live. Even the most uneducated West Indians have always held a wider vision connecting to Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America. The term we use in Trinidad – that is, “local” – for things national nicely illustrates the point. “Local” in North America, for example, refers to things of the city, town, or even neighborhood. It is opposed to the Nation which is their larger reference. Things are local or national. We think bigger. Local refers to the *country*. And its apposite is not the Caribbean, but rather the *world*. For us, things are local or foreign – meaning global. That is our larger reference. We should not be criticized for that. Our feeling of connection is not a warped, perverse dependent self-loathing. Quite the opposite. It is very advanced.

## **The Myth of Western Imperial Power today**

Our connection to the world, however, has been characterized by most of our intellectuals in negative terms – colonialism, neo-colonialism, re-colonization, and imperialism. Indeed, the increasing economic involvement of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the 1980s and the political and military involvement of the United Nations in the 1990s is cited as evidence of this neo-colonialism. But despite these uncomfortable presences, I think that the idea of re-colonization is a serious misreading of the situation for two reasons. First, the United States and Europe – the arch-enemies of anti-imperialists – are not as powerful as they are made out to be. They do not and cannot control the world. The World Bank, the IMF, and the UN in many respects have an existence independent of the US and Europe. Second, global politics – the terrain of Imperialism -- are no longer primarily played in terms of the gains and losses of Nations – the winners and losers of Imperialism. Instead global power is generated, fought over and exercised by corporations, social groups, and other entities whose fortunes are

not necessarily tied to the fate of the Nation-State. We are not being re-colonized by the European Community or neo-colonized by the United States. International power games are being played on a different grid today.

If one does not agree with the above, however, I think that we have to be realistic and modest about our international value. Let's face it, Europe and North America do not need or want us. We do not have much to offer them. We are not the Chinese or Indians with local markets of a billion people. We are not South Africans with diamonds. Yes, we have oil, but not nearly as much as the Arabs. True, Barbados was once more important to the English than all 13 American Colonies, but after sugar cane declined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that was the end for our economic importance in the world. In the unhealthy paranoia of the Cold War, we did receive some political recognition from the Superpowers. But the Cold War is over now. Let us not think of ourselves as more important than we are. They do not have time to waste planning elaborate schemes to keep us in their imperial (or white supremacist) clutches. They have enough problems of their own to worry about.

It is my opinion that the intellectual tradition founded on the Plantation and Dependency theories unwittingly contributes to the illusion of the power of the West. The US is not godlike and invincible. They cannot control the world. Hell, they cannot even run their own country. Militia groups and right-wing terrorist groups bombing churches and government buildings, political parties shutting down the government, race riots, natural disasters, sexual scandal in the military, massive government corruption, and economic displacement are just some of the well-known examples that illustrate the precarious position that it just barely is able to hold. As far as Europe is concerned, since World War II it has not recovered its dominance in world affairs. And it never will. Their time has passed.

What we should recognize, however, is that Asia, particularly East Asia, is at present the economic and social centre of the world. And it will be even more powerfully in the next century. Dependency intellectuals often dismiss this fact, claiming that East Asia's progress is not as great as claimed. It is as if the Dependistas really want the US and Europe to "maintain" their dominance so that their ideas can be proven right. It is like a pact between God and the Devil. But East Asia must be given its due. Surendra Patel (1991, 1993) gives us a glimpse of the incredible social and economic advances

that are occurring in that part of the world. Never before in world history has any region – including Europe during the Industrial Revolution -- made such a massive transformation in so little time. Indeed, taking the time frame of 1950-1990, this is true for most of the peoples of Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean (think about Trinidad in the 1960s, or when your parents or grandparents were growing up). But in East Asia the transformation is most awesome. This once quiet, backward place is now where the world's automobiles, CD players, computers, and video games are being made and invented. They are advancing the entire world with their technology. And we only get what they want to give us. There is so much there that we never see, much of it out going of style before it gets a chance to reach us. Through a Japanese friend of mine (and more recently through watching the AMP show on MTV) I was able to get a glimpse of the incredible ways that technological invention has transformed East Asia. And we must remember this is where most of the world's people live. Billions of them. Most of the world's trade just goes on between themselves, without any need for involvement of the West. Today their Gross Domestic Product equals that of Western Europe and North America. However, they are growing at a much faster rate, with a youthful population. On the other hand, the West is growing slowly with an aging people. In the next few years, the West will be outshined by the East in every way. As Patel notes, Japan was only the first example. There will be more spectacular breakthroughs in the coming years. We know of the US's massive trade deficit with Japan. But now it is with China, that massive country of a billion people, that the US has its largest trade deficit. Not Japan, but China is the giant monster terrifying the US today. And yet the myth of the dominance of the West is held on to and sustained by those committed to our Dependency theories of the 1960s and 1970s. We must rethink international power.

### **Beyond the Nation-State**

When we do this rethinking, however, we will have to face an even more radical fact of the Postmodern world: the end of the Nation-State as a meaningful political, economic, cultural, and social unit. At least the end of us thinking of it in the same way we did over the past century. Norman Girvan (1991) has used the example of Jamaican migrants living in the United States to illustrate this point. He noted how their quick and efficient organization of huge amounts of aid to send to Jamaica after

Hurricane Gilbert demonstrated to him that Jamaica's economic resources truly extend beyond its geographic borders. He asks, what does this mean when we make our economic evaluations of National assets and liabilities? Furthermore, he asks, are Jamaicans who go overseas to better themselves to be counted as a loss or a plus in the development process? (I myself was born in the US to Trinidadians of modest means who later migrated to Canada in the 1960s. My parents remain in Canada where they have improved their position considerably, but I made a decision some years ago to migrate to Trinidad where I now lecture at the UWI. Would there have been as many gains had they stayed in Trinidad?) What are the economic, political, cultural and social relations between Jamaicans who have migrated and the Jamaican Nation-State? Girvan's questions urge us to think beyond the geographic boundaries that define the Nation-State.

### **Global Economy for a Global People**

But these radical activities are undervalued or belittled by our intellectual models. As people move more freely across boundaries, so do products in this era of globalisation. It is commonplace to hear our journalists, academics, trade union leaders, social activists and other intellectuals speak of this as re-colonization and imperialism, particularly "American Imperialism". I think that this is wrong. Global products are not forced on us against our will. We want cable. We want Nike shoes. We want Hondas. We want computers. We want literature. And as Norman Girvan (1991) has pointed out, when these things have been denied to us by nationalistic well-meaning governments, we find countless creative ways of maneuvering around the rules so that we can get them. Are we, then, a pathologically dependent people? Are our tastes and choices warped? According to the intellectual tradition of the Plantation and Dependency schools, I think the logical conclusion would be "yes". They would claim that we have been so deeply scarred by colonialism and are so vulnerable to Western propaganda that we do not realize the harm we do to ourselves. To me, then the logical solution that extends from this evaluation is for those enlightened individuals to control what we eat, drink, wear, watch, and read for the good of our national development. They know best.

It should be obvious to you that I disagree. At a basic level, I stand for the freedom to make one's own mistakes but following that line of thought would take me too far off topic. Instead I would like to critique the idea that our tastes are dominated by foreigners. The intellectual basis for my disagreement starts with CLR James. We in the West Indies are an integral part of Modern Western civilization. Europe has been fundamentally shaped by the complex history of the rise and fall of sugar, slavery, and imperialism. We have both shaped and been shaped by the West. We are just as much a part of the West as citizens of Omaha, Nebraska. Maybe even more. Our desire for Western products, then, is not a longing for things foreign. Not any more than a Texan's desire for Christmas trees. We are not outside the West. We are Western and have a Westerner's right to the best that the West has to offer.

In any case, I would like to challenge the assertion that we really do value foreign products more than our own. It is often asserted that if you put a foreign tag on a local item, the item will sell quicker. The only empirical evidence that I have seen goes against this popular idea. Errol Simms and Marilyn Narine (1994:133) in their survey of Trinidadian grocery shoppers found that "consumers on the whole were indifferent between foreign and local brands of a product." In fact Brand Name (Kellogg's etc.) ranked among the least significant factors influencing brand purchased, being less important than the date of manufacture, the total price, nutritional value, net weight or volume, food additives, and even the list of ingredients. What matters then is not the place of origin, but the quality of the product. That makes good sense in my opinion. If that means being "unpatriotic" then so be it. But Trinidadian businesspeople, in my opinion, are quite competitive and produce quality goods. I mean, McDonald's, the symbol of American consumer imperialism, did not march triumphantly into Trinidad converting us to Big Mac lovers. They are working hard, trying to maintain their business here. Pizza Boys, Mario's, and Royal Castle are beating them at the fast food game it seems to me. (KFC, however, is a different story. But the local chains are giving them strong competition.) We do not need to fear foreign goods and companies. Unfortunately, I think the overly defensive Third World Nationalist schools of thought encourage us to deal with the world in ways that are anxious and apprehensive rather than hardy and venturesome.

## **Unexpected Global Politics**



An enterprising mode of thinking, however, can encourage us to enter perilous arrangements in which we may emerge as losers. But we must not be afraid of danger and risk. At a political level, there are outstanding examples where this globalized, post-national field of politics has been taken advantage of by Caribbean peoples. For example, the American intervention in Haiti, while problematic, was for the better. Subaltern Haitians cleverly used the international political climate for their own advantage against their National oppressors. In Guyana, too, the international observers benefited politically innovative subaltern Guyanese in their fight against election fraud by the government. In these cases, international help was openly solicited and mobilized to fight local battles. International intervention -- even military ones by the Americans -- is not always “reactionary” or Imperialist in the contemporary configuration of power. We can no longer make such easy and quick judgments. Indeed a United Nations report done in the early 1990s indicated that military conflicts no longer occurred primarily between Nations, but within them. This must make us think again about the Nation-State and the globe.

### **Beyond Independence?**

In this context, we should look at the US Shiprider agreement. This agreement has stimulated explicit debate on Nationalism and Independence in the Region. Prime Ministers Patterson of Jamaica and Arthur of Barbados have criticized the arrangement while our Prime Minister Panday has embraced it. The Regional debate surrounding Shiprider has the negative side affirming self-determination and subtly critiquing American Imperialism, and the affirmative side speaking of global interdependence and “outmoded notions of sovereignty”. While I do not dismiss the critiques of Imperialism and I admire the idea of independence, if I were in government I believe that I would enter into the Shiprider agreement with the Americans. But I would try to milk as much as I possibly could from the US. If this arrangement is important to them, then I would imagine that we have some high cards in our hand. I would attempt to make it a condition that they to help our Coast Guard with equipment, vehicles and/or training, and to support the defense of Trinidadian fishermen against Venezuela, for example. We could possibly get a great deal from the Americans.

Although I embrace the possibilities of the present world, I am not wholly on the side of those Politicians who speak of Global Interdependence and those CEOs who embrace Globalization. I agree with them that we are playing in an open field and we must learn to play well. However, I do not agree with the implicit assumption there are not powerful interests against which we have to contend. This puts me on the side of the Dependency/Nationalist school. But where I strongly differ with them is that in my assessment, all the power is not on the side of the West, and neither is it all in the hands of Governments and Corporations. I do not think we are inherently doomed to failure if we participate in the world economy and its politics. The West, and their Governments and Corporations are less mighty than they make themselves out to be. We must not be fooled by the claims of the powerful. We must learn to see when the Emperor has no clothes, and to be skeptical when shiny likenesses are presented to us by the Wizard of Oz.

I believe that we live a complex world with multiple sites of power that are fluid – constantly being created, influenced, shifted, and destroyed. Governments and Corporations are not the only influential actors on the International scene. NGOs, social movements, artistic and cultural movements, ethnic and religious movements, e-mail cybercommunities, philosophic and lifestyle movements, all help shape local and global events in today's world. And in the postmodern economy it is information, leisure and symbols that are most important, making these groups even more powerful – cultural icons determine production and value now, not the other way around. And politically, power is generated, fought over, and exercised by a whole new set of groups today.

But our power in the world is not an entirely new possibility. Louise Bennet has celebrated aspects of power that West Indians have over Europe and North America -- something that Dependency thinkers keep ignoring – in her poem “Colonization in Reverse”. (“What a joyful news, Miss Mattie;/ Ah feel like me heart gwine burs –/ Jamaica people colonizin/ Englan in reverse... What a islan! What a people!/ Man and woman, ole an young/ Jussa pack dem bag an baggage/ An tun history upside dung!” (in Cooper 1995:175).) Jamaicans certainly have been in the forefront of this. Today we see this in the worldwide spread of Rastafarianism and the dreadlocks hairstyle, the almost universal love of Reggae music, and the influence of Jamaican rude boy culture in lower-class cultures around the world.

Trinidadian Roti Shops and Carnival type festivals have their importance, too. And in speaking of these things, I am not referring to the soothing of homesick immigrants, but their transforming of the culture, politics, society, and economics of Europe and North America. For us to take full advantage of the process, our leaders and intellectuals must boldly think beyond the Nation-State and “outmoded notions of sovereignty” like our DJs, vendors, Rastas, criminal drug posses, churches and Chutney artists do. We must be prepared to risk a little “sovereignty” in the short run.

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