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THE "SHAMBLES" IN THE WEST INDIES*

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ABSTRACT

None of the participants in the debates of the 1960s and 1970s concerning the economic development of the Caribbean could have foreseen how changes in information processing, communications, and transportation would integrate world capital and product markets. These technologies of globalization have resulted in an enhanced opportunity for Third World countries to participate effectively in the global economy. In turn, this has facilitated the development process, particularly in East Asia. This article reviews the obstacles to doing the same in the Caribbean and concludes that not even Trinidad and Tobago, the region's leading participant in the global economy, possesses sufficient human capital and physical infrastructure to ensure success in the new global economic environment.

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It is hard not to look back nostalgically at the 1960s and 1970s when, as Kari Polanyi Levitt writes, "The University of the West Indies was a vibrant center of intellectual ferment." It was then that the New World group flourished, taking advantage of, in Levitt's words, "the radical synergy within the University" (Levitt, 1996, p. xii). While the atmosphere was heady, and at times there was more than a whiff of danger in the air, it is far from clear that the policies advocated by the New World Group during those years, if implemented, would have promoted the economic development of the English-speaking Caribbean. Indeed, Lloyd Best believes that the policies derived from this intellectual ferment were responsible, at least in part, for the "shambles" which engulfs the region today (Best, 1996, p. 4).

In a November 1989 Symposium honoring George Beckford, Best recalls that the New World group believed that "only by delinking from the metropolitan economies could the Caribbean reverse the syndrome of persistent poverty in the region." As Best reminds us, the New World group "urged us to produce what we consume and consume what we produce." Among the items on New World's agenda of increased self-reliance, Best goes on, were "policies such as ownership and control of our national resources, occupation of the commanding heights of the economy, [and] the use of indigenous technologies..." (Best, 1996, p. 3). Rooted in the same commitment were regional integration studies synthesized by Clive Thomas and Havelock Brewster, studies described by Levitt as "the high point of forward looking independent thought" in the region (Thomas and Brewster, 1967; Levitt, 1996A, p. 203).

Best himself became a critic of both New World thought and of the Marxism which also influenced the region during the 1970s. At the Beckford Conference, Best recounted that "since 1975 I have been perhaps the most vehement Caribbean critic of the New World and Marxist schools," an opposition he defends by arguing that "The more faithfully the strategies deriving from these two visions have been followed, the more disastrous have been the consequences for the common people." Best asserts that Trinidad and Tobago followed the New World vision by assigning the government responsibility for economic activity—what he calls the "omni-competent state." Elsewhere, writes Best, Marxism "brought disaster to Guyana and catastrophe to Grenada." Furthermore, according to him, Jamaica fell between the two and in doing so "paid a horrific price." Best declares, "I want to start by admitting the essential thesis of Courtney Blackman that today we find ourselves in a complete shamble in the West Indies after twenty-seven years of independence in Trinidad and

Jamaica...." Blackman, he reiterates, "is essentially correct in identifying the shambles and we can do no less" (Best, 1996, p. 4).

Of the Marxist vision for the region, Best writes that Clive Thomas "was the most eloquent proponent... and Bernard Coard its most fanatical exponent" (Best, 1996, pp. 3-4). However, grouping Thomas and Coard together in this way does Thomas a grave disservice, especially if the subject under consideration is the advance of a democratic politics in the region. Thomas' record on the question of democratic governance is spotless, and there is no way that he can be held accountable for the paternalism practiced by the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) in Grenada or the party paramountcy associated with the People's National Congress (PNC) rule in Guyana.

Some of Thomas' economic views, however, did find expression in those two countries and even to some extent in Michael Manley's Jamaica. The argument in Thomas' *Dependence and Transformation* in particular concerning the need to create a convergence between production and basic needs, can be interpreted as requiring the kinds of restrictions on imports of certain consumer goods that both governments followed. The same is true with regard to Thomas' support for the nationalization of Guyana's bauxite industry (Thomas, 1974). Even in these cases, however, there is no doubt that Thomas stood in opposition to the arbitrary methods used by the PNC in imposing its import bans. Similarly, he cannot be considered an accomplice to the government's staffing policies in bauxite, which more valued party loyalty than technical competence.

It is also doubtful whether the New World Group had as much influence as Best suggests concerning the "omni-competent state." The frustrations of public sector officials with the local private sector, more than New World doctrine, is the likely explanation of the ballooning of the public sector's economic role during the 1970s. Indeed, the relative importance of the public sector increased during these years in countries seemingly untouched by either Marxism or New Worldism. Thus, for example, the government's contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP) in Barbados grew from 9.6 percent to 14.3 percent between 1963 and 1984; in Dominica the increase was from 16.0 percent to 23.0 percent during the same period. As John Mayer put it in 1983 with respect to Barbados, "though basically conservative and capitalist, with a history of tolerance and laissez-faire attitudes, [it] has had a proliferation of statutory bodies over the past fifteen years" (Mandle, 1996, p. 91).

However, even during this period of left intellectual ascendancy, there were West Indian nationalists who were skeptical of its emphasis on self-sufficiency. Thus William Demas in March 1964 gave a series of four lectures at McGill University in which he argued that it was a mistake to believe that the economic development of small countries would follow the same path as that of large ones. Inevitably, he insisted, small economies would be more open than large ones—would have to, that is, engage proportionately more in international trade (Demas, 1965, p. 91). In this context, Demas had staked out an approach to regional development different from the one that emerged from the left economists. He openly embraced the need for active involvement in the international economy. There could be no missing the difference in emphasis in the two positions.

Neither side in this disagreement, however, could possibly have foreseen the way in which, in subsequent decades, the trajectory of change in the global economy would decisively confirm the validity of Demas' point of view. However, the process of globalization experienced during the last three decades did exactly that. In these years, dramatic advances have been achieved in the storage, retrieval and dissemination of information, principally as a result of the diffusion of computerization. These changes, as well as advances in transportation technology, have rendered geographic boundaries progressively less important in the flow of goods, capital, and people. At its root globalization is a technologically-driven process by which the integration of world markets is made possible to an unprecedented extent. What this means is that, increasingly, the advocacy of self-sufficiency is anachronistic. The world is simply too integrated for the benefits of trade, specialization, and capital flows to be eschewed. None of this could easily be accommodated by the New World or Marxist reasoning. Virtually without exception both groups adopted a position of skepticism, if not hostility to international trade and to investment by multinational corporations. They saw in each mechanisms of exploitation by metropolitan nations and firms.

The irony is that this skepticism concerning international trade is present in the developed countries as well as in the relatively underdeveloped Caribbean. The labor movement in the United States, for example, sees a threat to its interests in the global economy. But in a mirror image of the attitude in the poor countries, the threat there was viewed as emanating from the Third World—from countries like those in the Caribbean. The worry was that the wages of workers in the developed world would undergo downward pressure as the industries in which they worked were forced to compete with imports produced with relatively low cost labor (Faux, 1996, p. 165). The Left in both regions in short was hostile to globalization, but for diametrically opposite reasons. The Third World Left, such as New World and Caribbean Marxists, feared being exploited; labor and its liberal allies in the rich nations were worried about job loss and eroding wages resulting from Third World sales.

Neither view adequately values the opportunities created by an increasingly integrated global economy. The experience of poor countries since the 1970s has demonstrated that the global economy can be a stimulant to development. This is the case even though that same global economy, as presently structured, is vulnerable to the kinds of financial crises that have preoccupied the world in recent years. Trade with poor countries has not inflicted the extensive dislocations about which liberals in the United States worry. Those costs that have been incurred could have been further reduced if progressive domestic policies, facilitating the necessary process of adjustment, had been implemented (Mandle, 1998, pp. 77-80). Above all, what the Left in both places has failed to come to terms with is the importance of an open global economy for small nations. Even a "basic needs" strategy, one specifically designed to serve the needs of the poor, would require countries such as those in the Caribbean to have access to overseas markets. As Carl Stone wrote, "The basic-needs model in a small open economy...does not reduce the centrality of survival by exports." Indeed, because of concern for the well-being of the disadvantaged, it likely would have the opposite effect. Providing for the basic needs of the poor would, according to Stone, increase "the number of persons brought into the effective domestic market," the successful implementation of such a strategy would raise the need for foreign exchange earnings. Providing for the poor would require more income than could be generated from the local market (Stone, 1986, p. 118).

Nobody in this region needs to be reminded that the mere fact of participation in international markets does not in and of itself ensure prosperity. It is the nature of that participation which is crucial. Maximum benefit from trade is obtained when a flexible production structure identifies market niches where demand is strong and prices therefore relatively high, and fills that gap with goods or services made by highly productive labor. Failure to satisfy these criteria is the reason, for example, that sugar—the quintessential internationally marketed staple—produced so little dynamism in the region. The Caribbean never found a way to produce this crop with highly productive labor, even as it continued to concentrate in sugar production long after that market was signaling that Caribbean producers should diversify their production.

Similar problems are present with respect to the dominant contemporary export as well. Beyond doubt tourism in the West Indies is an industry where the region has a comparative advantage. Its sand, sea and sun represent a combination which successfully finds markets in the developed nations of North America and Europe. Despite the strength of demand, tourism does not represent an industry which facilitates entry into the world of modern technology and high levels of productivity. The problem lies in the way this service is produced. Its employment opportunities, with the exception of a few positions in the front office and kitchen, tend to be at the low skill end of the job distribution. Tourist work, that is, does not provide the region's labor force with the opportunity to become more productive by utilizing modern technology. For that reason, tourism should be thought of exclusively as an ancillary industry, one which, based on the region's natural factor endowments, can generate significant income. However, because of its rudimentary technology and skill content, it should never be thought of as a leading sector in the development process.

Acknowledgment of the potential and opportunities in the global economy for small poor countries does not imply acceptance of International Monetary Fund (IMF) type austerity programs or neo-liberal claims made on behalf of unfettered markets. Globalization is driven by advances in technology, but programs and claims such as these have more to do with the economic interests of what Jagdish Bhagwati refers to as the "Wall Street-Treasury Complex" than they do with the requirements of a globalized economy (Bhagwati, 1998, p. 10). Though the United States presses for open capital markets, it is very far from clear that making it easier and less costly for portfolio investment to move from one capital market to another is the most efficient way to manage the world economy. Bhagwati is an ardent defender of free trade in goods and services. But according to him, "When we penetrate the fog of implausible assertions that surrounds the case for free capital mobility, we realize that the idea and the ideology of free trade and its benefits ...have, in effect been hijacked by the proponents of capital mobility" (Bhagwati, 1998, p. 11). The former Chief Economist at the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz, agrees. He is on public record as declaring that "The time is ripe for an open debate and discussion on the advantages and limitations of a variety of approaches, including some form of taxes, regulations or restraints on international capital flows" (Stiglitz, 1998, p. 12).

Private economists are also increasingly turning from orthodoxy. The reaction to Malaysia's imposition of capital controls is instructive. Not long ago such controls would have called forth denunciation from all directions. But when they were imposed during the Asian financial crisis, Robert Barro, the eminent growth theorist attached to the conservative Hoover Institution, reacted in a remarkably positive way. In his *Business Week* column Barro wrote that "The Malaysians are probably right that the usual policy sanctioned by the International Monetary Fund of sterilized intervention coupled with high interest rates would be worse than capital controls in the present environment" (Barro, 1998, p. 26). It thus is beginning to be understood that globalization does not require, much less is synonymous with, neo-liberalism. Though the case for open markets for goods and services remains very strong, it is increasingly obvious that regulatory mechanisms will have to be put in place to govern international flows of capital. Doing so would help to overcome the fragility of the global financial system and in that way strengthen the global economy.

Unavoidably, the global economy of the future will be a rule-based system. To date that system has not been fully formed. Current rules are embodied in the provisions of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) as adopted by the World Trade Organization (WTO). But that process is as yet incomplete. Obviously, for example, at some time in the future new rules will have to be agreed upon concerning capital flight. An increasingly integrated global economy simply cannot function without a codification of how the relationships in it are to be enforced and managed.

However, there is nothing neutral about rules. Interested parties vie with each other concerning their shape, recognizing that competitive advantages are at stake. The Caribbean region has already seen the downside of this phenomenon in its dispute with the United States over the marketing of its bananas in Europe (Mandle, 1999). The worry, therefore, is that as the global economy becomes more rules-based and institutionalized, the Caribbean might find itself as disadvantaged as it would have been under a laissez-faire regime where the large and rich dominate the small and poor. This is because the region is likely to find it difficult to influence global negotiations, or even gain effective access to the negotiation process.

Norman Girvan's review of CARICOM's recent trade diplomacy illustrates this point. The region as a whole sought, but was unable to achieve, "NAFTA parity." When that effort failed, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago sought individual membership for themselves, but those efforts were unsuccessful as well. The countries of the region did win, within the Free Trade of the America (FTAA) framework, a grudging concession from the United States that "special consideration" will be paid to their needs. But in the negotiations concerning these needs, the Caribbean countries involved will not be permitted to negotiate as a group. Since such talks will be highly technical and complex, Girvan writes that "...the smaller economies face a formidable task in these negotiations...The process will be highly technical and the realities of bargaining power mean that these countries could easily be sidelined to the role of spectators to the negotiations among the major players" (Girvan, 1998, p. 5).

Girvan, of course, is right when he underlines the inherently weak bargaining position of small countries in trade negotiations with the United States and the wider hemisphere. But not all of this weakness is attributable to smallness of size. There is, in addition, a problem of adequate preparation. Alister McIntyre, the Chief Technical Advisor of the CARICOM [Trade] Negotiating Team, has warned of the need to strengthen the Team's technical competence. McIntyre was quoted in the regional press as saying that "we have to put a research capacity in place since several of the subjects coming up in the negotiations" were little known in the region (CANA, 1998). In a detailed review of the problem of the region's weaknesses in this regard, Frank Rampersad and his associates concluded that: (1) the region is poorly equipped to deal with the proliferation of trading blocs and associations which have come into existence in recent years; (2) it does not know where its own comparative advantages lie and in what industries it should concentrate; and (3) it is vulnerable to trade sanctions because it has lagged behind in addressing environmental concerns, particularly in its resource-based industries (Rampersad, 1997, pp. 53-59).

At the moment Trinidad and Tobago is the country in the region which seems best positioned to participate successfully in the global economy. Indeed, Foreign Affairs Minister Ralph Maraj is quoted by CANA as saying that

"Trinidad and Tobago is emerging as a major diplomatic and economic center of the region" (Duke-Westfield, 1998, p. 12). However, it is not only its government which sees in Trinidad and Tobago a success in the emerging global economy. The country has been cited by *The New York Times*, as well. In its business section on September 4, 1998 its regional correspondent, Larry Rohter, reported from Port of Spain that "Trinidad is rapidly emerging as the region's foremost economic success story." Rohter approvingly quotes Krishma Persad, identified as "a leading Trinidadian oil and gas industry consultant," as saying "this country is becoming industrialized" and turning into a Caribbean tiger, adding that "if only 50 percent of what is being talked about actually comes to pass, you're going to be seeing a Singapore in the Western Hemisphere..." (Rohter, 1998, p. C1).

The basis for this ebullient attitude towards Trinidad and Tobago's economic future has been the capital investment which has occurred in petrochemicals in recent years. This investment is responsible for the discovery of and creates the market for very large reserves of natural gas in the country. Current estimates, according to the *Economist Intelligence Unit*, place natural gas reserves at 30 trillion cubic feet; just five years ago this figure was 8.9 trillion cubic feet (*Economist Intelligence Unit*, 1999, p. 20). Furthermore, Rohter cites estimates indicating that in the future reserves could rise to between 42 and 75 trillion feet. The President of the Amoco Energy Company of Trinidad and Tobago suggests, in this regard, that "Whatever the numbers turn out to be, they are big, comparable to anywhere in the world" (Rohter, 1998, pp. C1-C2). What is so important about natural gas is that in addition to its being directly exported, it provides a low cost fuel for industrial projects such as the iron and steel complex at Point Lisas and the raw material for other products. Because of the presence of abundant natural gas, Trinidad and Tobago now produces ammonia and urea (from which fertilizers are produced) ethylene (used in manufacturing anti-freeze) and methanol (from which formaldehyde is produced).

The fact that this is Trinidad and Tobago's second run at jump-starting development is lost on no one. The quadrupling of petroleum prices during the 1970s dramatically raised the income levels received in the country, fueling a consumption boom. But despite the fact that, as a result, the financing of new industrial projects ceased to be an important obstacle to growth and diversification, the 1970s came and went and Trinidad still remained an oil exporting country, having achieved little structural transformation. With the fall in oil prices in the 1980s, the country was left to impose austerity on itself, to bring consumption down to its now-reduced level of income. The moment of opportunity had been squandered. This outcome, the current government vows to avoid. *The New York Times* article quotes Vishnu Ramlogan, the president of the country's Industrial Development Corporation, as saying that "We know it's rare to get a second chance, and we are trying very hard not to make the same mistakes as in the past. We're not going to let inflation and conspicuous consumption run away and overheat the economy. This time there is a consensus our new-found wealth must be prudently managed" (Rohter, 1998, p. C2).

Both domestically and internationally much has changed since the 1970s. Internally a protracted era of structural adjustment has reduced the role of the public sector in productive activities, made the legal and institutional environment more attractive to foreign investors, resulted in a more austere fiscal policy, and produced a liberalized foreign exchange regime. However, until the natural gas discoveries, it was very far from certain that these policies would bear fruit in economic expansion. After two years of economic growth in 1990 and 1991, the economy declined by 1.7 and 1.4 percent in 1992 and 1993, respectively—threatening a resumption of the sickening decline that had been experienced between 1983 and 1989 (*Economics Intelligence Unit*, 1997-1998, p. 19). Since then, however, growth has occurred for five consecutive years and in three of those years exceeding the three percent level (*Economist Intelligence Unit*, 1999, p. 9).

Perhaps it can convincingly be argued that the recent growth, based as it is on the Point Lisas complex, is a delayed response to the new and more positive attitude toward foreign investors that has characterized all governments in the region since the mid-1980s. It might be true that explorations were more extensive and subsequent investments greater as a result of the presence of a more favorable investment climate than was present earlier. *The Economist Intelligence Unit* seems to suggest as much when it reports that "The structural adjustment program has increased the involvement of multinational corporations (MNCs) in the national development strategy" and further points out that "The restructuring of the national economy has removed barriers and created incentives designed to stimulate foreign direct investment" (*Economist Intelligence Unit*, 1997-98, p. 26). *The New York Times* supports this view when it argues that "The high regard in which Trinidad is held by foreign investors contrasts sharply with the image it had two decades ago... (Rohter, 1998, p. C2).

However, even if it were true that these adjustments have made Trinidad and Tobago more attractive to foreign investors, it does not follow that thereby the country is firmly on the path to sustained economic expansion, much less becoming a second Singapore. The current industrialization, much like the earlier era of growth, is resource-based. In the past, petroleum provided impetus to the economy; now it is natural gas upon which the growth is generated. There are grounds, however, for grave worry about whether these down-stream industries that have been built upon the natural gas discoveries provide what is necessary for success in the global economy. The foundation for success in the emerging economy is not the availability of natural resources, but skills and particularly competence in information processing. What is necessary is a technically competent labor force and the physical infrastructure necessary to support the high speed flow of information. Thomas L. Friedman writes that "Globalization has its own defining technologies: computerization, miniaturization, digitization, satellite communications, fiber optics and the Internet." As a result, he continues, "The defining measurement of the globalization system is speed—speed of commerce, travel, communication and innovation" (Friedman, 1999, pp. 8-9). The problem is that at the moment at least, Trinidad and Tobago is very poorly prepared to participate successfully in these industries and processes. The risk is that once again even the region's most prosperous nation will be confined to economic activities more suited to the past than the future.

The data in Table1 make a comparison between Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica, on one hand, and Hong Kong and Singapore, on the other hand, with regard to variables essential for success in an information technology based economy. Data concerning newspaper copies and scientists and technicians are measures of the adequacy of the education and human capital present in the country. Telephone lines, internet hosts and personal computer availability are indicators of the extent to which the infrastructure necessary for participation in the global economy is present. With regard to both sets of data the gap between the two groups of countries is genuinely alarming. Singapore has ten times the number of scientists and technicians per capita as Trinidad and Tobago, while Jamaica has just about none. Much less reading gets done in the Caribbean than in Hong Kong and Singapore, at least as measured by per capita newspaper copies. Hopes that the region can become a telecommunications center will have to confront the inadequacy of its capacity, as measured by telephone main lines per capita: while Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica, respectively, have 168 and 142 lines per 1000 people, those numbers in Hong Kong and Singapore are 547 and 513. Finally, compared to the East Asians, the people of the West Indies have barely entered the computer age. As measured by both internet hosts and the availability of personal computers, Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica do not come close to the standards in the other two locations. The data in short are unambiguous. Trinidad and Tobago in particular and the West Indies in general are very poorly prepared to compete successfully in the industries characteristic of the new global economy.

Here then is the root of the West Indian lag in economic development and the threat that Trinidad and Tobago's boom may prove to be short-lived. These problems exist not because of the presence of multinationals, the existence of regional trade blocs, or the hyper-mobility of capital. The threat to the future of the region resides in the fact that even in the most advanced country in CARICOM, there is insufficient human capital and inadequate physical infrastructure to support modern information technology. These inadequate local capacities more than external problems explain why even in Trinidad and Tobago the future may not be as bright as currently appears to be the case.

Table One: Indicators of Social Development for Selected Countries

Country and Population	Newspaper Copies per 100 People, 1994	Tertiary School Enrollment Rate, 1993	R&D Scientists and Technicians per 1000 People, 1988-1995	Main Telephone Lines per 100 People
Hong Kong 6.2	72	21	na	54.0
Singapore 3.0	36	16*	2.2	45.5
Trinidad and Tobago 1.3	14	8	0.2	15.8
Jamaica 2.5	7	12*	0.1	10.0
Barbados 0.3	16	na	na	32.7

* estimated

Sources: Population: *World Development Report 1998*, Tables 1 and 1a; Newspaper Copies per 100 People: *World Development Report 1997*, Table 7;
Tertiary School Enrollment Rate: *World Development Report 1998*, Table 7;
R&D Scientists and Technicians per 1000 People: *Human Development Report 1997*, Table 15; Telephone Lines per 100 People: *Human Development Report 1997*, Table 17.

It is in this sense that the New World call for greater self-reliance not only can be justified but is critical to achieve. The New World group and the Marxists were wrong in believing that self-sufficiency in production, capital or markets was either desirable or achievable. The self-reliance associated with knowledge and technical mastery represents the core of development. To date that has not been achieved. Development will not become a reality until an indigenous technological capacity at a far higher level than is presently the case exists in the region.

The New World advocacy of decoupling from the global economy was mistaken. The West Indies needs access to overseas markets and sources of capital. Achieving those objectives will require a concerted diplomatic effort beyond what it has been able to mobilize to date. Equally important, the region simply must increase its pool of high level personnel and increase its mastery of modern technology. Some combination of increased local tertiary education and the repatriation of individuals educated elsewhere is essential for regional development to be achieved. Economic development cannot be achieved by invitation alone.

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