Envisioning the Future using the Dreams of the Past: Caribbean Historiography and Decolonizing Development in the Caribbean

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the connection between the ways in which history in the Caribbean is written and understood, and between revolutionary movements and thought today in the Anglophone Caribbean, are explored. It is argued that it is not possible to achieve a decolonized Caribbean, a necessary condition for the inclusive development of the region, when histories of revolution and development remain thoroughly steeped in colonial biases and imbalances of power. Through examining the colonial context of knowledge production and consumption while also acknowledging that the past is often used as a model for the future, it is concluded that a focus on writing decolonized histories is essential to imagining a decolonized future in the Caribbean.

BIO

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Introduction

When I learned about the discovery of oil in Guyana last year, I did not feel particularly joyful. If anything, I felt a mixture of hope and dread: hope that the current administration would be interested in utilizing this discovery to improve life for ordinary Guyanese, and dread about the media circus. I expected this discovery would bring the corruption that would welcome neocolonial forms of investment that continue to ignore the needs of the subaltern. While theoretically these are not the only results that are possible when countries in the region make comparable discoveries, for some, it seems like common sense that these are the most likely. Why? What contributes to the belief that current inequalities and silences will only be reinforced by attempts to develop in the region?

In this paper, I reflect on this question by considering the importance of historiography from a decolonial perspective. Defined as the study of historical writing, historiography recognizes the impact historical perspectives have on our contemporary understandings of cultural, and socio-political perspectives. In the context of this research, I argue that colonial modes of knowledge production impact our conceptualization of the social change and revolutionary ideals needed in the region as well as our record of subaltern contributions. By exploring the historiography of the twentieth century Anglophone Caribbean from a decolonial perspective, this research argues that in many instances true decolonization and development of the region requires a a reframing of the region's history that highlights lessons the contributions of subaltern actors and transitions away from History. Considering three regional examples of Grenada, this paper considers the systems of colonialism that were introduced by European colonial powers as well as those of neocolonialism and neoliberalism that persists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries due to the regions continued dependence on colonial modes. Using the definition of 'Colonial' posited by George J. Sefa Dei, as anything imposed and dominating,[1] I argue that colonial modes of knowledge production are those that deliberately ignore the contributions of subaltern actors. A colonial mode of knowledge production will refer to systems of creating knowledge, such as through writing, that reinforces the domination of the subaltern .The writing of the history from a decolonial and revolutionary perspective, however, provides both the inspiration and intellectual frameworks for future thought and movements that place equal weight on the contributions of the subaltern. Similarly, the writing of history within colonial systems of knowledge production means that social change is limited in scope by misguided and often idealized understandings of colonial structures of power which have not benefited the peoples of the region.

[1] George J Sefa Dei, "Introduction: Mapping the Terrain - Towards a New Politics of Resistance," in Colonialism and Education: The Politics of Resistance, ed. Sefa Dei, George J., and Arlo Kempf (SENSE Publishers: 2006), 7.

Trends in Caribbean Historiography

In order to understand the current conceptualization of Caribbean history it is useful to understand its focuses, periodizations and methodology. The history of the Anglophone Caribbean, there are two major watershed moments. The first occurs in 1838 at the official end of slavery and the start of the post-emancipation period (1838-1865)[2], and the second begins in the 1930s, when a series of labour protests in the region results in a shift in social, political and economic conditions[3] The latter similarly marks a shift in the phases of decolonization. Pre-1930, the region was primarily composed of colonies some of which maintained representative government, from 1934 to 1962 was the period of labour rebellions and constitutional decolonization begins, and 1962 to the 1980s, where most former Caribbean colonies became independent states.[4]

Caribbean history is usually written with a focus on social history (history centered around race, ethnicity, class, gender etc.) and is usually written based on archival documents created by colonial governments, oral histories and popular writing like colonial-era Caribbean newspapers.[6] While different scholars of course have their own ideas and angles that they utilize when writing history, the major difference between scholars writing Caribbean history has been pro-colonial and anti-colonial perspectives. The latter has become dominant (in the sense that writing has gone from praising colonial rule to being extremely critical of it), a shift that is generally considered to have happened in the 1950s and 1960s.[7] This periodization is of course contested, and as a result the transition between pro-colonial and [de]colonial periods may be seen as overlapping, with both always existing but one becoming dominant at some period in time.[8]

Caribbean History, Historical Imagination and the Connections between Past and Present

Caribbean historiography and the regions historical constructs reflect colonial distributions of power and knowledge production. In some instances, historians that write this history are embedded within the processes of colonial knowledge creation while others, through their writing, stand opposed to these frameworks. Those that are educated in Western universities in the countries of former colonial powers, speak the languages of colonialism and live in societies whose structures bear the marks of hundreds of years of domination are also not immune

[2] Bridget Brereton, "Recent Development in Historiography of the Post-Emancipation Anglophone Caribbean," in Beyond Fragmentation : Perspectives on Caribbean History, ed. by Juanita De Barros, Audra. Diptee, and David Vincent Trotman, (Princeton NJ: M. Wiener Publishers, 2006), 187.
[3] Brereton, 188.
[4] O. Nigel Bolland, "Historiography of Decolonisation in the Anglophone Caribbean" in Beyond Fragmentation : Perspectives on Caribbean History ed. by Juanita De Barros, Audra. Diptee, and David Vincent Trotman, (Princeton NJ: M. Wiener Publishers, 2006), 265.
[5] Brereton, 197.
[6] Brereton, 195-196.
[7] Bolland, 267.
[8] Bolland, 269.

to continuing the process of colonial knowledge production. Similar to the way we think about the future being influenced by our ideas, our thinking about the past is impacted by our thoughts about the present and the future. This is especially true when discussing revolutions. They ask questions about potential, which relates them to the future because they are both tied to the unknown, but also relates them to the past because they draw upon memory.[9]

History is a collection of historical concepts, which are constructions historians make and "insert into the past" in order to capture the significance of the patterns they see.[10] Historical concepts are a reflection of individual historians' worldviews, which are a product of the ways in which they experience power. As a result, historical writing is a reflection of current power relations. Power, in a Foucauldian sense, is "relational and circulates among groups"[11]. It is not something held exclusively by those identified as being at the top of the social hierarchy, but instead is wielded in different spheres and by different peoples. By being written within contexts where colonial relations of power continue to shape the world, Caribbean historical writing has the current way power is distributed imprinted onto it. documents in comparison to other sources, such as oral histories. This is a feature of Western thought. This then helps to produce a history that is written from the view of European colonizers and their values,[12] since what they decided to record would be what was found significant to them. In this value system, the wellbeing and development of the Caribbean and its people were not prized.

The focus on social history magnifies this, since writing about social relations is at the heart of Caribbean scholarship. Therefore, the writing will be even more reflective of current historians' specific models and thoughts about the relative importance of certain groups in society. For example, the absences in writing about Grenada's revolutions reflect patriarchal constructs that are closely tied to modes of colonial thought about women. These beliefs place women as being secondary in importance and capability when compared to men and instead relegates them to supporting roles. In Grenada, women in the revolution's historiography, similar to women in colonial and post-colonial societies, are largely ignored unless they are attached to men in some way. Black women like Jacqueline Creft, an activist and education minister within Grenada's People's Revolutionary Government (PRG), are not treated as acting from positions of power but instead as if they only play supporting roles.[13]

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[9] Anthony Bogues, "HISTORY, DECOLONIZATION AND THE MAKING OF REVOLUTION: Reflections on Writing the Popular History of the Jamaican Events of 1938." Interventions 12, no. 1 (2010): 84.
[10] D.J. Stanley, Historical Imagination, (Routledge, 2020), 40-41.
[11] Michel Foucault, 1980, 1989 as cited by George J Sefa Dei, "INTRODUCTION:
MAPPING THE TERRAIN – TOWARDS A NEW POLITICS OF RESISTANCE," in Colonialism and Education: The Politics of Resistance edited by Sefa Dei, George J., and Arlo Kempf (SENSE Publishers: 2006), 8.
[12] Brereton, 194.
[13] Shalinee Bahadur, Raegan Gibbings and Amilcar Sanatan, "Forward Ever With Jacqueline Creft: the Paradox of Women's Liberation in the Caribbean Revolutionary Left," History in Action 6, no.1 (2018): 31.

Our beliefs about progress and prosperity also shape constructions. In Caribbean studies, this can be seen in economic analyses of the region's revolutions and efforts to decolonize, which perpetuate colonial distributions of wealth that existed at the time of writing. In a largely capitalist post-colonial West, historical writings often exhibit a bias towards popular forms of capitalism. This is a reflection of neocolonial thought about the superiority of American economic systems. For example, in writing about Michael Manley's economic troubles in Jamaica, Carlene J. Edie states that other academic writing on the topic at the time did not consider the effects of removing foreign capital on the country's ability to improve the economy, and instead focused on the incompatibility of socialism with economic development.[14] However, in the development space, Manley's ideas would be totally accepted (for example, universal education) and are in fact encouraged today in countries trying to develop, although they are always presented within a capitalist framework, implying that the analyses themselves were not necessarily grounded in economic realities and data. Instead, they are a reflection of the time period (Edie's article was written in 1986). The influence of the "Washington Consensus" (a set of neoliberal economic policies that were popular in the 1980s), a hallmark of American hegemony, was being reflected in the writing of these historians. Therefore, it is seen that in various aspects of Caribbean historiography, writing about history is not necessarily only grounded in the happenings of the past, but are also shaped by the writer's present.

The Importance of History in the Future of Development in the Caribbean

Now that we have examined the mechanism through which the present constructs the past, we can shift to examining how the past constructs the future. What we know about the past helps us model the future, because this provides a jumping off point for future scholarship. In the realm of development, this is especially true as current regimes of development rely heavily on the results of previous experiments and data. Writing about Caribbean revolutions reflects colonial modes of knowledge production and dissemination creates an issue for the imagining of the future development of the region because it implies future development will be limited in how much it can be decolonized. This is harmful because colonialism keeps the subaltern (whether the lower classes or the Global South) underdeveloped for the enrichment of the colonizer, and so if future development is neocolonial then its impacts will be felt extremely unequally.

In Caribbean historiography, models of revolutionary development focus on the leadership and contributions of middle-class leadership, foreign education and top-down led economic planning. This is a reflection of and reinforces colonial systems of merit that emphasize the importance of Western education, language and knowledge.[15] This is not to say that Western knowledge is necessarily bad, but rather that it is presented as universal, which helps to dominate and

[14] Carlene Edie, "Domestic Politics and External Relations in Jamaica under Michael Manley, 1972–1980," Studies in Comparative International Development 21, no. 1 (March 1, 1986): 72.
[15] Arlo Kempf "Anti-Colonial Historiography: Interrogating Colonial Education," in Colonialism and Education: The Politics of Resistance edited by George J. Sefa Dei and Arlo Kempf (SENSE Publishers: 2006), 135.

delegitimize non-Western 'Others' as well as obscures the fact that sometimes its application is inappropriate, or harmful, in some contexts.

This tendency is seen in Caribbean writing about revolution, which is usually written as follows: the turnover of power within current Caribbean states when they went from colonies to countries resulted in power being concentrated in a new Caribbean petty bourgeoisie[16], whose political and educational development provided the foundation for new nationalisms and political experiments during the third period of decolonization. As a result, future development in the region also falls to a new, educated middle class. This is not unique to the Caribbean. Writing about the history of nation-building during the global third wave of decolonization is often, though not always, characterized by focusing on the contributions of an educated middle class that developed through attending well-known schools that emphasized the superiority of Western-style education, fuelled by the influence of Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities. However, to what extent did the middle class alone really shape the revolutionary path?

Are these arguments just a reflection of historical reality, or could this focus overemphasize middle class contributions due to beliefs about the greater intellectual and leadership capacities of an educated middle class? An example of this tension is seen in Anthony Bogues' 2010 article "History, Decolonization and the Making of Revolution: Reflections on Writing the Popular History of the Jamaican Events of 1938.", where he compares two analyses of the 1938 labour unrest in Jamaica. The analysis done by scholar and Africanist Ken Post aims to frame the events as a workers' rebellion[17], denying the importance of vanguard leadership in the event, which contrasts other characterizations by writers like Arthur Lewis, who treated the event as a disorganized workers' rebellion (led by workers).[18] In examining the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches, he notes that the latter tends to imply the need for a paternalistic kind of guidance was needed for the workers and that similar accounts are often not written with the perspectives of workers, the revolutionaries themselves, in mind.[19] Ultimately, he concludes that Caribbean history by nature must be organized around the history of the subaltern to truly illuminate the past.[20] It is seen that both approaches are not necessarily incorrect or too imaginative, but rather build on different aspects of the revolt that the authors found significant. However, because of the tendency to dismiss the importance of ordinary Caribbean peoples in political change, Alex Lewis' constructions became more dominant and were taken to demonstrate the lack of leadership ability among the workers, when this is not necessarily true. In this way, the way in which History in the Caribbean is written can fail to recognize the importance of the subaltern in the region's development.

[16] Alex Dupuy, "Race and Class in the Postcolonial Caribbean: The Views of Walter Rodney," LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES 89, no.2 (1996): 127.
[17] Bogues, 79.
[18] Bogues, 82.
[19] Bogues, 83.
[20] Bogues, 83-85.

While I do not deny the importance of the educated middle class in leading revolutions, writing in this manner ignores the importance of the masses, contributing to their being sidelined in discussions about change. In other revolts and experiments, the lower classes provided the necessary support needed to shape the tide of the revolutions through their support or rejection of the revolutionaries. The experiments in Guyana, Grenada and Jamaica were shaped by the people, even if they were not given power in the aftermath. As a result, the relative importance of middle-class leadership is overstated. This is seen in scholarship in the Grenada revolution which focuses on the ideological and planning failures of the PRG, and analyses of Jamaica's economic experiments under Manley which discuss the tensions between the main political factions. These revolutions were fuelled and upheld by the willingness and efforts of the masses, either in adhering to new economic models or through systems of patronage. Continuing to write like this perpetuates the domination of one class because thought about future development will mirror the same class divisions; those advocating for change will be looking for the next Jagan, Bishop or Manley. The result of this is the elevation of the middle and upper classes' interests and achievements, and the continued disengagement of everyone else.

On a global scale, our current development discourse does the same. Instead of writing about the leadership of the middle class, it is enabled by writing about the historical and inherent difference between the Global North and South.[21] Technocrats from the North or South (but educated in the North) become "saviours" because they have made the Other into a person to be saved. And this will continue in new schemes of development that are created, because it is difficult to conceive of development occurring in any other way. Contemporary writing about development and development schemes still focuses on emulating the models and achievements of the Global North without considering the needs and ideas of the subaltern. Therefore, writing about Caribbean history reflects colonial and neocolonial modes of domination, which are harmful for future change in the Caribbean. This can specifically be seen in discourse about development: a historical focus on the importance of an elite that are upheld by colonial beliefs about the superiority of certain types of education and knowledge will result in future inequality as the region develops.

Looking Forward

After considering the issues and effects of the issues of current Caribbean historiography, it is difficult to think of ways to move forward because while it is clear that we need to acknowledge and elevate the subaltern, successful models of this engagement are limited because of the way in which official histories are written, as discussed earlier. We often do not have the language and the history to consider a completely different way of thinking. However, there are some ways to at least start changing thought.

[21] Catherine Moffat, "Development Unmoored," in Colonialism and Education: The Politics of Resistance, edited by George J. Sefa Dei and Arlo Kempf (SENSE Publishers: 2006): 212.

First, the obvious answer is to look towards new histories and language that treat visions of revolution being by and of the people as having equal validity to revolution being led by a very small group of people. Language is powerful as a tool for decolonization, since the ability to name an issue while giving one the "cultural and political capital" to challenge it.[22]As a result, developing new conceptual frameworks and terms for understanding the transition between old and new forms of domination that the Caribbean faces helps to combat colonial constructions of the subaltern. In this way, even in the consideration of the before-mentioned texts as primary sources that tend to reproduce colonial power dynamics, we can minimize the harm that could be created. In addition to this, the writing of history should continue to be viewed as more of a dialogue between Official histories and the histories of the subaltern, rather than an argument for one or the other, which Arlo Kempf suggests can help to "reveal the bad and celebrate the good."[23] This can help to illuminate the work and importance of other groups in the creation of revolution, which can help further future development that is more inclusive and successful for ordinary peoples.

Finally, in development discourse specifically, we must consider that difference is not synonymous with backwardness, and to consider forms of knowledge that we would not consider conventional. Knowledge that originated and is written in Europe and North America needs to be "provincialized"[24](treated as being from a certain place and time, rather than common and universal knowledge). Doing so helps us to conceive that there are other spheres of knowledge that could have solutions to the problems being faced.

Ultimately, development is a term that reaches far beyond material gains but rather having the capacity and ability to direct one's life while creating a history than one may take pride in, something that is not compatible with colonized mindsets. Breaking away from the colonial past and present requires doing away with ways of thinking entirely. In order to do that, we must consider new ways of doing things, and that requires questioning old ways.

To conclude, the way history is written is not an impartial rendering of facts, but rather a process in which patterns are taken and made into narratives based on the historian's own world views. In histories about revolution in the Anglophone Caribbean (specifically in Guyana, Jamaica and Grenada), the history reflects colonial and neocolonial constructions of the world, simply because the historians writing are immersed in them. The impact of this is to perpetuate colonial imbalances of power, and in the realm of development, models of top-down development that elevate the status of those who can identify most with the West and ignore everyone else. In a circular way, this creates an environment for development in the Caribbean that does the same. The colonial present is imposed onto writing about the past through historians' biases,

22 Sefa Dei, 11.
23 Kempf, 134.
24 Peggy Levitt, Maurice Crul, Michal Buchowski, Subhadra Mitra Channa, Jasna Čapo, Ger Duijzings, Michael P. K. Okyerefo, Maree Pardy i Noel B. Salazar, "Deconstructing and Reconstructing. Embracing Alternative Ways of Producing, Classifying and Disseminating Knowledge," Etnološka tribina 48,(2018): 5.

and then the colonial past is used to create a colonial future. In order to break this cycle, I argue that literature about the history of Caribbean decolonization and revolution must be further decolonized.

I will admit that I am skeptical of being able to fully decolonize, because we will never be fully aware of the full extent to which we are caught in colonialism's grasp: we must use its language to navigate the world it helped to shape, and so are in some ways doomed to remain attached to colonial discourses, even if we widen their boundaries. As a result, instead of looking to completely do away with colonialisms, being mindful of the considerations raised and critical of dominant histories allows for meaningful movement towards decolonization. Hopefully, this will allow for better, more inclusive and more compatible discourse to be given space to be considered in the region's future plans.

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