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RECONSIDERING THE GRENADA REVOLUTION

Caribbean Revolutions and Revolutionary Theory: An Assessment of Cuba, Nicaragua and Grenada. BRIAN MEEKS. London: Macmillan Caribbean, 1993. ix + 210 pp. (Paper n.p.)

The Grenada Invasion: Politics, Law, and Foreign Policy Decision-making. ROBERT J. BECK. Boulder: Westview, 1993. xiv + 263 pp. (Cloth US\$ 49.95)

The Gorrión Tree: Cuba and the Grenada Revolution. JOHN WALTON COTMAN. New York: Peter Lang, 1993. xvi + 272 pp. (Cloth US\$ 48.95)

These three books might be thought of as a second generation of studies concerned with the rise, rule, and destruction of the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) in Grenada. The circumstances surrounding the accession to power in 1979 of the government led by Maurice Bishop, the nature of its rule, and its violent demise in 1983 resulted in the appearance during the mid-1980s of an extensive literature on the Grenada Revolution. Some of these works were scholarly, others polemical. But what they all had in common was the desire to examine, either critically or otherwise, something which was unique in the historical experience of the English-speaking Caribbean. Never, before the rule of the New JEWEL Movement (NJM) in Grenada, had a Leninist party come to power; never had a violent coup initiated a new political regime; never had a Caribbean government so explicitly rejected U.S. hegemony in the area; and never, before October 1983, had a government experienced quite so dramatic a crisis as that in Grenada, one which resulted in the killing of the Prime Minister and numerous others of his supporters.

This first generation of analysis was authored in a radically different geo-political environment from that of today. The political left in the region, whether Cheddi Jagan in Guyana, Michael Manley in Jamaica, Bishop in Grenada, or other less successful political efforts in countries such as St. Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago, all possessed a plausible expectation that they could secure external political patronage. Most often Cuba, but sometimes the Soviet Union itself or at least that country's political allies in Central and Eastern Europe, were looked to for political support, financial assistance, and in some cases ideological guidance. Because such help was potentially available, Third World socialism was a political force to be reckoned with even though the region was dominated by the United States. For that reason an experience like that in Grenada was viewed as doubly important. Not only was the PRG studied in its own right. In addition, the revolution in Grenada was, like Cuba in the 1960s, a laboratory in which left political, economic, and organizational theory could be examined.

These three books represent the emergence of a new trend in Grenada Revolution studies. The fact that we are ten years removed from the collapse of the Bishop government – and, just as importantly, that Soviet and communist patronage is no longer available to left political aspirants – has deprived the Grenada Revolution of its role as a case study of likely future political developments. With the United States the sole remaining super power, no one any longer believes that its regional dominance can be challenged as frontally as Bishop and the PRG did. In the new circumstances the PRG experience in Grenada, as well as that of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and even that of Cuba, are all but irrelevant to current political struggles. Whatever this might mean for politics, the result is that the way has been cleared for the appearance of new studies, dissociated from the preoccupations of the great contest between the Soviet bloc and the United States.

Of the three books under review here, Brian Meeks's is the most ambitious. Precisely in light of the hard times which have befallen Third World socialism, Meeks writes that "[t]here is need for the theoretical re-examination of the directions for Third World development." In his study of Grenada, Cuba, and Nicaragua, Meeks seeks to determine "whether the concept of revolution remains a useful category to explain political change and whether revolution as myth retains its potential as a liberating vision for intellectuals and countless scores of deprived people in the Third World" (pp. 4-5). As I read him, Meeks does not quite explicitly answer this question, though the general tone indicates that his answer would be in the negative. For Meeks, the Cuban and Grenada Revolutions were led

by "disenchanted, young, potential state-builders, whose avenue to power has been blocked by previous events." In Meeks's formulation these are people of the "middle" (p. 189). Marxism-Leninism and nationalism provided this group with an ideology of state-building, a perspective which Meeks notes he himself found attractive while teaching in Jamaica in the late 1970s (p. 192). Nonetheless, he concludes that Leninist strategies, especially those emanating from the former Soviet Union, proved to be "unworkable" (p. 192).

Meeks knows the Grenada Revolution better than that of Cuba or Nicaragua. His discussions of the latter two are almost entirely dependent on secondary sources. In contrast Meeks was acquainted with the personalities involved in the Grenada Revolution. At the time of the killing of Bishop and before the landing of U.S. troops, he reports his sense of loss since he "knew personally those who died and probably knew the soldiers who had killed them as well" (p. 165). As a result of this intimate familiarity, Meeks's discussion of Grenada is subtle and very informative. He is utterly convincing in arguing that the implosion of the Grenada Revolution was not the result of long-term conspiratorial activity by followers of Deputy Prime Minister Bernard Coard. Similarly Meeks demonstrates that, contrary to assertions made by Manning Marable and others, no major ideological differences separated the two principal antagonists, Bishop and Coard, in the four years preceding the Revolution's destructive crisis.

Rather, the Grenada Revolution confronted a crisis far more profound than a simple personality or political clash between two leading politicians. In 1982 and 1983 the Grenada Revolution faced intense economic pressures as external financial assistance started to dry up. At the same time, the ideologically hostile Reagan administration intensified its overt opposition to the Revolution. Both of these reinforced and contributed to an already impossible work load among the tiny membership of the NJM, a burden which had resulted in the collapse of the physical and mental health of many party cadres. In these circumstances Meeks is skeptical that the pro-Coard group's proposed solution to the crisis – joint leadership between Coard and Bishop – would have done much to resolve the Revolution's problems. Highly critical of the PRG's anti-democratic political practice, he writes that the members of the ruling party mistakenly believed that the solution to the revolution's crisis lay "in the nature of leadership, when what needed urgently to be addressed was the relationship of the entire leadership and party to the people as a whole" (p. 175).

Robert J. Beck's book is a study of the role of international law in the

Reagan administration's decision to invade Grenada. Very little, frankly, is learned using this perspective. There is no surprise to hear that "international legal considerations were not determinative of policy" (p. 207). The most positive thing Beck can argue is that legal considerations were at work when a delay in the request by the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) set back the timetable for the invasion. Even here the effect was weak, for as Beck himself argues, "the Reagan administration would likely have taken some sort of action even lacking a formal request for military assistance" (p. 207). With regard to this last, Beck finds the only legal justification offered for the intervention that has merit is related to United States' concerns for its nationals in Grenada. Beck believes that "an American action *solely* to evacuate nationals would have been legally permissible" (p. 215, his emphasis). Obviously, however, this is a weak reed upon which to rest U.S. policy. The "rescue" of the medical students on the island was not by any means the sole activity engaged in by the U.S. military. Indeed, Beck himself noted that "when considering *only* the rather pathetic way in which they were rescued, the safety of the American students on Grenada would seem to have been a lesser priority in Washington" (p. 33, his emphasis).

From Beck we learn that the Reagan administration's concern for the medical students on the island was in large part the result of its fear that it would become enmeshed in the kind of hostage-taking which had so debilitated the Carter administration. So unfamiliar with Grenada was the U.S. leadership, however, that it bungled its efforts at rescuing those students (p. 22). The U.S. military had practically no idea where the students were and when Army Rangers landed at the True Blue Campus "they discovered to their chagrin that another still larger campus existed" (p. 22). When, on October 27, President Reagan announced that the invasion had been a success, it remained the case that over two hundred students had not yet been contacted and removed from the island.

While not much is to be learned from Beck's international law theorizing, the detailed narrative he provides of the Reagan administration's decision-making is just fascinating. Based on the memoirs of the participants and extensive interviewing, his Chapters 4 and 5 provide at times an hour by hour chronicling of meetings, discussions, and diplomatic deceptions during the thirteen days preceding the invasion. To my knowledge, no such extensive record has been provided by any other author. For this, if not for his conclusions concerning the importance of international law in the Grenada crisis, Beck's book will assume an important place in the Grenada literature.

In the course of this narrative, Beck's book provides insight into the

reasons that the nations of the region failed to devise a solution to the Grenada problem themselves. At a CARICOM Heads of Government meeting in Trinidad on the Saturday before the Tuesday invasion, Eugenia Charles of Dominica, Jamaica's Edward Seaga, Vere Bird from Antigua, and the Foreign Minister of Barbados failed to inform their colleagues that they had already requested military intervention by the United States. Deceived by the reticence of these and other OECS leaders, the Prime Ministers of the Bahamas, Belize, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago – Pindling, Price, Burnham, and Chambers – achieved what they thought was a regional consensus with four elements: a government of national reconciliation would be formed in Grenada and elections would be scheduled; a CARICOM fact-finding mission would be organized; arrangements to ensure the safety of foreign nationals would be put in place, and a peace-keeping force composed of contingents provided by CARICOM countries would be deployed. This regional solution to a regional problem was subverted when the next day the countries that advocated U.S. intervention reneged on the CARICOM agreement (pp. 140–41). My own view is that a regional effort would have been desirable in solving the problem at hand. But in addition to helping Grenada, a CARICOM intervention would have represented a dramatic advance in West Indies co-operation. Seen in this perspective, the U.S. intervention represented a lost opportunity for regional integration and in that sense a set-back for Caribbean nation-building.

The third of these specialized studies is John Walton Cotman's book about Cuba's impact on the Grenada Revolution. It is, however, the least successful. Cotman has picked a rather easy target to attack, but in doing so avoided a set of more difficult issues. It is no problem for him to demonstrate that Cuba's activities in Grenada under the PRG did not constitute external interference in the internal affairs of a country. In dismissing such claims, Cotman is able to cite both Grenada's desire for such assistance and the discretion exercised by the Cubans in extending their efforts. But what he does not do is examine the validity and appropriateness of the theoretical basis for the assistance that was provided. Cotman believes that "the social transformation envisaged by the New JEWEL Movement and set in motion by the People's Revolutionary Government was stymied by a crucial political weakness – authoritarianism" (p. 3). But without an examination of the relationship between that authoritarianism and the Leninist ideology that was the basis upon which the relationship between Cuba and Grenada was constructed, this study is seriously incomplete. The Cubans, of course, did not impose Leninism on Grenada. But the assistance that came from Cuba and the

Soviet bloc was predicated on the PRG's Leninist politics. It thus really does seem that Cotman has gotten things backward when he writes that "Cuban political advice proved incapable of forestalling NJM's drift toward authoritarian rule" (p. 3). It more nearly is the opposite: the NJM leadership was eager to demonstrate its commitment to Leninist principles, and the authoritarianism those principles imply, in order to secure much needed assistance. In that way, the Cubans did have something to do with the failure of the Grenada Revolution. Cotman's blindness to the Leninist sources of the PRG's authoritarianism means that this important element in the Grenada-Cuba relationship has gone unexamined.

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