In *Envisioning Caribbean Futures: Jamaican Perspectives* (2007), Brian Meeks writes “in sympathy with the new social movements that have evolved in the past decade which assert boldly that ‘another world is possible’” (p. 2). His effort is “to explore the horizons for different approaches to social living in Jamaica and the Caribbean in the twenty-first century” (p. 2). In this, he “seeks to move beyond a statement of general principles to propose specific alternatives” in order to “stimulate a conversation that looks beyond the horizon of policy confines, yet is not so far removed as to appear hopelessly utopian” (p. 3). My hope with this essay is to advance that conversation, in the first place by reviewing and assessing Meeks’s contribution and then by extending the discussion to the role that Jamaica’s diaspora (and by extension that of the region’s generally) might play in moving the country, as Meeks puts it, from its current “state of crime and murder, and the broad undermining of the rule of law that pervades the society” (p. 71).

Central to Meeks’s thinking are Antonio Gramsci’s insights into the mechanisms by which ruling classes generate and retain legitimacy. Though a Marxist, Gramsci argued that class domination is not simply an economic phenomenon. Rather a ruling class is most successful when prevailing attitudes result in most people’s accepting their subordinate status as reasonable and normal. A functional system of class rule requires a political culture in which elite dominance is thought of as commonsensical. Gwynn Williams summarized Gramsci’s concept in the following terms: Hegemony is “an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout the society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all taste, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotations” (quoted in Genovese 1971:406).

In an article published in 2000, Meeks argued that Jamaica was in crisis because such an ideological consensus was absent in the country. He wrote that on one hand “the social bloc in charge of Jamaican society is no longer
ruling over a people convinced of its social superiority and its inherent right to, using the popular Jamaican phrase, ‘run things.’” But on the other hand though “the old hegemonic alliance is unable to rule in the accustomed way … alternative and competitive modes of hegemony from below are unable to decisively place their stamp on the new and fluid situation” (Meeks 2000:61, 64). Writing a decade later, he believes that the process of dissolution has intensified. Emigration now plays an important role in the continued decline. According to Meeks, the loss of skilled and educated Jamaicans to overseas markets “lies at the heart of advanced hegemonic dissolution.” He writes, “the middle classes … have not only withdrawn from their leadership role in shaping the contours of the ‘respectable’ Jamaican social order but have departed in massive numbers from the country itself” (p. 73).

Citing the work of Paget Henry, Obika Gray, and Deborah Thomas, Meeks today sees a “widening fissure, originating from below, from the ways and means of official Jamaican society.” Manifestations of this widening gap in attitudes between the Jamaican upper class and the rest of the country are to be found in the effort to raise the status of Jamaican patwa to that of an official language, in protests for justice and, as he writes, “most of all [in] the rising wave of ‘conscious’ lyrics that permeate the dancehall” (p. 77).

The problem for the country is that while the ideological hegemony of the wealthy classes in Jamaica has weakened, a counter-worldview – referred to by Meeks as a “subaltern insurgency” – is not well enough developed to undergird the construction of a new social order. The philosophy of the subalterns is “more imminent than apparent” and their alternative furthermore “has failed to forge commensurate institutional structures and processes to carry forward its agenda.” It is true, he writes, that “the popular social forces are on the cultural offensive but [they] have not developed an institutional programme.” The wealthy “are in social and cultural retreat,” but nonetheless maintain their grip politically, albeit a grip weakened by the fact their rule is not accorded the respect and deference it received in the past (p. 78).

With the breakdown of the rulers’ ideological authority and the weakness of the subaltern insurgency, Jamaica is in a period of “uncertainty and of aimless meandering.” It is experiencing “intense social frustration and the dangerously postponed birth of a popular alternative” (p. 78). The present moment is, as he puts it, “fraught” when “those who can afford it, turn to private security services to secure their homes and property. Those without property turn to the don. The gun – legal or illegal – becomes a common possession. Violence, when codes of conduct lose their salience, becomes the first resort in conflict resolution,” and that violence when repeated “raises its own threshold and constantly re-establishes new benchmarks as to what is permissible” (p. 78). In a legitimacy void and with the breakdown of accepted moral codes, “all segments of society look for ways to circumvent
the law.” This is the consequence of “the melting of social glue, of the erosion of even a paper-thin notion of common consent” (p. 116).

In a situation in which “none of the social classes is able to decisively take charge of the direction of the nation,” it is necessary, according to Meeks, to start afresh. What this requires, he thinks, is “to find pragmatic forms of collective mobilization and accompanying institutional arrangements” (p. 96). Such an approach necessitates a national strategy “based on a critical alliance between those social forces with an interest in the development of the island space of Jamaica, the region and its diaspora” (p. 97).

In seeking a basis upon which to construct a new social and political consensus, Meeks explicitly rules out an imposition from above. Could Jamaican society cohere using the authoritarianism that has been successfully employed in Singapore or China? His answer is a decisive no: “the historical memory of slavery, the more recent experience of multi-party elections and the relatively easy ability to migrate all militate against the authoritarian option.” Freedom, according to him, is a “powerful and irrepressible theme in Jamaica and Caribbean reality” (p. 117).

Meeks proposes three initiatives to build a foundation for a new social consensus. There would have to be a national process of reconciliation in order to exorcise the bitterness associated with the violence the country experienced during the late 1970s when Michael Manley was the prime minister. Second, an extensive land reform program is needed; a process that he believes would reduce poverty, slow the migration to the cities, and “provide the foundation for a new modality of popular democratic development” (p. 118). This would involve not merely the reallocation of a productive asset. As well it would deprive the landed class of a source of their privileged status in society. Both would advance the cause of greater equality in the nation. Third, he calls for the convening of an institution he names the Constituent Assembly of the Jamaican People at Home and Abroad. This would not be a legislative body – the House of Representatives would remain intact. Rather, as Meeks puts it, the Assembly would meet every ten years to “once again debate and discuss the terms of living and the agenda for the future.” As such it would “constantly reinvigorate the national debate, relegitimize a new responsive political order and bring new generations of active citizens into the centre of a broad and inclusive national discourse” (p. 130). Meeks’s suggested agenda items for the first Assembly would include deepening democracy, linking the economy to popular culture, the pursuit of a closer Caribbean union beyond the Caribbean Single Market and Economy, and a discussion of a new ethos for the nation (pp. 118-19).

Though Meeks presents reconciliation, land reform, and the convening of the Assembly as three equally important elements in a “foundation for a new beginning,” he nevertheless argues that “the work of the national reconciliation commission would precede everything else, and further progress in the build-
ing of national consensus would be contingent on its success” (p. 118). In this regard he refers to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission as the model to be followed to create “a template for truth and honesty in political behavior in further stages of the new national consensus” (p. 118).

Meeks’s discussion is insightful on two levels. His is the single best assessment of the conundrums that face Jamaican society that I know of. Much of its value derives from his skillful use of Gramscian concepts and his demonstration of the power that this form of revisionist Marxism possesses. The concepts of hegemony, counter-hegemony, and in this case failed hegemony allow Meeks to identify the inability of both the traditional elite and would-be alternatives to move the country forward. It is that dual inability that lies at the root of the problems that confront present-day Jamaica.

Reservations arise not with Meeks’s analysis of why Jamaica has failed to move forward. Instead, questions emerge concerning the suggestions that he offers to overcome that immobility. Specifically, there is only a low probability that his proposals will be adopted. Furthermore even if they were instituted, they are unlikely to possess the reconstructive impact that Meeks suggests they would have. In each case his anticipations are likely to be disappointed.

With regard to the first issue, the Jamaican political context is not one in which it is likely that a truth and reconciliation effort will achieve significant results. As Rupert Lewis has noted, when that process was employed in South Africa it acted as a vehicle by which the incoming government of Nelson Mandela ensured that it would, in Lewis’s formulation, “not be sabotaged by elements in the military in particular and white extremists who wanted to create a separate white state.”1 In this it was successful. It allowed whites who had committed human rights violations to admit their violations and in turn be accorded amnesty. The Jamaican context however does not provide a comparable opportunity. To be sure, both major political parties in Jamaica should purge themselves of their ties to gangs and organized crime and thereby undertake a sea change in the political process. But as Lewis writes, both of the country’s major “parties have become compromised to such a large extent that they lack the capability for internal regulation or party cleansing.”2 With that the case, truth and reconciliation cannot play the role that Meeks hopes for it.

Meeks’s discussion of land reform raises similar doubts. There is no question that the ownership of land in Jamaica is grossly unequal. Providing land to landless farmers would result in greater equity and might, contingent upon the competence of the recipients, also result in enhanced output. But

while this is true, an effort to achieve land redistribution is certain to generate formidable opposition by the country’s still powerful land-owning class. This raises the question of whether the proponents of redistribution can be expected to generate a sufficient level of political support to overcome what almost certainly will be fierce landowner hostility. Unfortunately, the nature and strength of the resistance and what would be required to beat it back is a set of problems that makes success unlikely.

This omission of an assessment of how such a reforming coalition could be constructed is particularly troublesome because only 17 percent of the country’s labor force works in its agricultural sector. In order to be successful, land reform advocates therefore will have to find political backing from urban Jamaicans. There are grounds to believe that such a rural/urban alliance is possible. As Meeks puts it, not only would the rural poor benefit from land reform, “but all city dwellers would gain from a prosperous countryside, as urban drift would be radically reduced” (p. 173). This may well be true. But the fact that such a potential outcome can be identified is not sufficient to make the case that people in the cities will join politically with rural reformers. There is a great deal of history that suggests such a coalition is quite difficult to construct, and the Jamaican experience is no exception in this regard. This is all the more the case since “given Jamaica’s history of partisanship and patronage, any extensive land reform might simply evolve into a corrupt exercise to give land to the cronies and supporters of the dominant party” (p. 125). In short, more than a statement of potential common interests is needed to be convincing that land reform can be put on Jamaica’s agenda. What is required is evidence that the process of coalition-building is underway and that the resulting bloc – no matter how embryonic – shows some signs of viability. This Meeks does not do.

The obstacles to implementing land reform constitute only one instance of the difficulties that will undoubtedly be encountered in the effort to reduce upper-class privilege in Jamaica and achieve an alternative hegemony. Though Meeks’s discussion of this issue is quite brief, he does offer grounds for optimism. He thinks there will be at least some upper-class Jamaicans who will stay in the country and forego their dispensations. They will do so because “for all social classes, an economy in which windows of possibility were opening rather than slamming shut would engender social peace.” He writes, “the Jamaican wealthy and middle classes, who increasingly live in gated communities and spend large fractions of the day ferrying their children in air-conditioned cars to and from school, would once again be able to walk in public spaces” (p. 173). In addition, Meeks is hopeful that the mass emigration of middle-class and well-educated Jamaicans that disrupted

Democratic Socialism in the 1970s will not be repeated. He cites the fact that even wealthy émigrés to the United States are likely to find in the North a “disconnection from community, absence of recognition and prominence of race,” and joins that with his view that in the United States “national chauvinism and racism are waxing.” Meeks’s anticipation is that the Jamaican upper class, in calculating “the profound psychic benefits of a reinstated social freedom … against the inevitable loss of some hierarchical privileges” may refrain from a mass exodus (pp. 173-74).

Whatever might be said about the probability of the Jamaican upper class joining in the effort to achieve greater equality, there is an obvious difficulty with the claim that those remaining in the country will be reform supporters. It is only too easy to turn his argument around and arrive at a conclusion opposite from Meeks’s. On the grounds that Meeks cites – namely that the United States will not welcome wealthy Jamaicans as much in the future as it has in the past – those individuals, denied a safe harbor, would more likely join the opposition to reform at home than support a new hegemony. To be sure, the loss of human capital associated with the migration is socially damaging. But an elitist population that remains home with a strong incentive to resist egalitarian change would be likely to substantially strengthen the forces opposed to reform.

Third and finally, Meeks does not grapple sufficiently with the question of whether a broadly representative segment of the Jamaican population will find his suggestions for a Constituent Assembly attractive. For such an institution to be effective, Meeks believes that there will have to be “a global conversation on the future of Jamaica and Jamaicans, which can only take place through a series of encounters by representatives and as many people as possible within the island and the diaspora” (p. 118). But it is not at all certain that the subaltern worldview that is present in the country today is consistent with the kind of deliberative body that Meeks has in mind. David Scott’s assessment of Zeeks, one of the inner-city dons who dominate urban life, points to doubts in that regard. Scott writes that in dealing with such dons it will be necessary “to give up the idea that consensus can be underwritten by a universalist and rationalist moral-politics of improvement.” Damagingly for this dimension of Meeks’s project, Scott reports that it is not likely that “the indigestible and inassimilable identities Zeeks and his supporters embody are to be re-educated for middle class civility” (Scott 2000:298). The difficulty here is that it is just that kind civility that will be required if an Assembly is to serve its deliberative function. Indeed Meeks seems to acknowledge the incompatibility between the deliberation that he advocates and the authoritarian nature of garrison community culture. Though he believes that an accommodation is possible between the state with its systems of debate and the don’s unilateral power, he acknowledges that such an agreement could be implemented only “while ruling certain forms of behavior [on the part of
the dons] entirely out of court.” For Meeks’s vision to be implemented, the leaders of the garrison communities will have to change in ways that Scott warns are unlikely.

Near the end of his study, Meeks asks “can such a project of social and political renewal gain traction and support in the world of Jamaican real-politik?” (p. 174). His answer is a tentative affirmative. His hope is that the impetus for building an egalitarian democracy will come from “among the community residents who demonstrate for justice and fairness, the new middle-class recruits who join the political parties to initiate constitutional change and the organized working class, who have never been happy with globalization’s race to the bottom” (p. 175). Perhaps. But the dynamic of contemporary Jamaican society suggests that such an outcome is a long shot at best. Notwithstanding its weaknesses, the Jamaican elite’s dominance will not be downsized without a struggle. At the same time, those who might someday be in position to dismantle the country’s structure of wealth and power posses a worldview that is more likely to result in a populist authoritarianism than in the deliberative democracy that is Meeks’s goal. The sad fact is that neither of the two contending forces present in Jamaica today is likely to undertake the kind of social reconstruction that the country so badly needs. The wealthy elite is in decline, eroded from within by migration, while its nationalist mandate has been tarnished by slow economic growth, a growing drugs culture, and criminal violence. At the same time, however the subordinate classes do not possess a cultural apparatus that would allow them to lead a country that can succeed in the information age.

Though there is little reason to believe that positive change will find a domestic source, a basis for hope lies in Jamaica’s expatriate community. The possibility that Jamaican émigrés could become transformative agents of change exists because of the size and composition of the outflow of people that has occurred in recent years. The United States Bureau of the Census reported that in 2006 there were 622,748 people living in the United States who were born in Jamaica.4 With Jamaica’s population estimated at about 2,700,000, this means that almost one-fourth of the people who reasonably can be called Jamaican were resident in the United States. But what is even more remarkable than the size of this migration is its composition. Frédéric Docquier and Abdselam Marfouk (2005:Tables A.1-1, A.1-2) estimate that 85.1 percent of Jamaicans with a college education were resident outside of the country between 1990 and 2000. Even by Caribbean standards this is a remarkably high rate of loss of human capital.

There are of course compensating resource flows resulting from this migration. Meeks himself writes of “their remittances, investments, barrels of goods and regular visits home.” And he adds that overseas Jamaicans “continue to play a key role in national life through the financial support of thousands of young people who are able to go to school and university because of the funds provided by overseas-based relatives” (p. 142). But when Prachi Mishra (2006) estimated the losses associated with the emigration and compared them to the gains that resulted from resource flows back to the country, her results were unambiguously negative. Between 1980 and 2002 she calculated that while remittances as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product came to 7.4 percent, the country’s losses came to 20.4 percent. Migration, Mishra (2006:17) estimates, cost Jamaica 13.0 percent of its GDP over this period.

And Meeks is concerned that these costs might actually increase in the future. He writes that “unless there is an attempt to forge a more structured, organic link between those at home and those abroad, the full potential of this relationship will be squandered in the short-run and the salience of the diaspora may dissipate with time” (p. 142). However, Meeks makes very little attempt to identify that full potential. His discussion is confined to the suggestion that “an organized diaspora might more actively lobby on behalf of its home constituency in the Caribbean” in exchange for which the Jamaican government “might more actively defend the overseas interests of its migrants,” thereby gaining their greater loyalty (p. 143).

One possibility that Meeks does not take up is that overseas-based Jamaican managers and entrepreneurs might become active participants in the domestic Jamaican economy. Jamaica’s economic growth between 1990 and 2008 was unsatisfactorily slow, averaging 1.7 percent annually, only about half the rate of growth of the other “upper-middle income” countries. Since Jamaica’s doldrums, at least in part, can be traced to its relative economic stagnation, one strategy that should be considered to accelerate the country’s economic growth is to gain access to and employ the human capital resident in the diaspora. According to estimates prepared by the United States Census Bureau, 21.3 percent of native Jamaicans resident in the United States have earned a Bachelor’s Degree or higher with 27.7 percent classified as working in management, professional, and related occupations. What is at issue here is whether Jamaica can gain access to the entrepreneurship present among émigrés and thereby substantially accelerate its process of economic modernization.

There is a growing scholarly literature concerning the promotion of economic growth in this way. Thus Andres Solimano (2008) writes that in contrast to the past when there was widespread concern about a brain drain only

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somewhat offset by remittances, today “we think more in terms of brain cir-
culation, a two-way (or multiple directional) movement of talented individu-
als ... What is now highlighted is the way that there can be a ‘beneficial brain
drain’” (Solimano 2008:2). Similarly, AnnaLee Saxenian (2006) reports that
enhanced opportunities have emerged for countries once considered to be on
the periphery to be the sources of technological innovation. In this she writes,
“the key actors ... are neither policymakers nor multinational corporations
acting in isolation, although both certainly play a role, but rather commu-
nities of technically skilled immigrants with work experience and connec-
tions to Silicon Valley and related American technology centers” (Saxenian
2006:4). These are the “new Argonauts.” They are people who, once part of
the brain drain, became successful in a country like the United States and
then transplanted their expertise to their home country (Saxenian 2006:14).

Countries that have been most successful in reversing the outflow of
human capital are China, India, South Korea, and Israel. Success in this
project requires, among other things, that a nation invest heavily in tertiary
education, something which as Saxenian notes most poor countries have not
done. She reports further that countries that focus their development efforts
on either attracting foreign direct investment as opposed to building up
domestic human capital, or those that lack political stability are unlikely to
attract high-level returnees. But when emigrants find that the institutional
structure in their country of origin provides adequate incentives for them
to fill an entrepreneurial role and that there is an adequate educational and
institutional base to support such efforts, then the return of well-educated
migrants becomes a realistic possibility (Saxenian 2006:6-7).

This has not occurred in Jamaica or the Caribbean. A substantial return
flow of technologically sophisticated entrepreneurs has not materialized and
the region has not become a hub from which new products or new production
processes have emerged. Yet given the human capital that is present abroad,
it is not difficult to imagine that the region could be the beneficiary of the
return of its own Argonauts. In such a process the University of the West
Indies could both provide the location where technologically sophisticated
entrepreneurs could set up as researchers and act as an incubator for global
market-penetrating start up firms. To date, however, though the Jamaican
government has reached out to its overseas citizens, it has not focused on an
Argonaut strategy. Its vision for the role of the diaspora has been confined to
attracting funds rather than entrepreneurial talent.

Over the long term, the presence of Caribbean Argonauts would mean that
the dynamic of the Jamaican economy could be greatly enhanced. Business
initiatives could move the country closer to the global technological frontier
than it is at present. Their potential profitability would be enhanced because
the large Caribbean population in the United States could provide a favorable
market environment. Jamaican-based businesses could test-market to poten-
tial consumers whose tastes and preferences they know well. On this basis, it is not unreasonable to project that Jamaica could become an exporting hub for the region as a whole.

But what would be just as important as the Argonauts’ economic impact would be their providing an impetus for a breakdown of the logjam that has stymied the country. If the New Argonauts were successful, their very success would be the foundation from which a new ideological hegemony could emerge. Their presence and voice would make the inadequacy of the traditional elite clear, while the paternalism of the garrison culture would be revealed as deeply dysfunctional in a changing world.

It is not possible to specify in any detail the content of a new worldview that would emerge in such a setting. Issues such as the extent to which the new entrepreneurs should – or should be allowed to – ensconce themselves as powers in the electoral system as well as economic and cultural leaders will become a contentious issue. It is one thing to say that a new constituency can be expected to vie for influence. It is entirely another issue to allow returning migrants to use their wealth to try to seize disproportionate electoral influence. The kinds of democratic reforms that Meeks advocates – in particular the control of money in political campaigns – would have to be adopted to constrain the reach of the new entrepreneurs (pp. 139-40).

Left unanswered in this discussion is who will promote the policy initiatives that can tap into and unleash the potential residing in the diaspora. Such initiatives can be expected to be forthcoming from neither the urban dispossessed and their leaders nor the retreating elite. It is true, as Meeks reports, that the economic recession has pressured the government to move in directions different from the neo-liberalism of the International Monetary Fund (p. 94). But to date this rethinking has not resulted in a strategic reformulation. The group upon whom the burden rests to persuade the country of the necessity of encouraging diaspora-initiated growth is the country’s intellectuals, particularly those at the university. They are best positioned to envision such a future and, both as citizens and members of the university community, are best located to work to delineate and achieve the policy innovations that are required. But for them to do so they must shed the long-held view that in the global system of capitalism countries like Jamaica are assigned permanently to dependency. Meeks comes close to breaking with that tradition when he comments that scholars such as Immanuel Wallerstein and Robert Brenner have not seriously enough considered the international impact of China’s economic growth (p. 88). This statement however is at a high level of generalization, and it is not clear how thoroughly he thinks that world systems theory has to be laid aside in order for Jamaica to shape its own niche in that international economy.

The diaspora strategy represents a policy departure that could be deployed to thrust Jamaica into economic modernity. However, the mobilizing of New
Argonauts will not occur unless there are opinion leaders who identify doing so as a way to break Jamaica’s ideological logjam. It is true that if such an approach were adopted, the country’s politics and culture would change. Such a path of change is risky. The new strategy might not work. And even if it did, it could well have negative unintended consequences. But the risks associated with the status quo for Jamaica and the region are much greater than those that come with innovation and change.

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I am thankful to Jay Mandle for his careful and very generous response to my book. It is perhaps an indicator of the depth of hegemonic dissolution in Jamaica and its attendant atmosphere of multiple distractions that more than three years after its publication there has been no major national or even university-wide discussion surrounding its content and extensive list of proposals.

That aside and to avoid unnecessary repetition of points with which we both agree, I think that Mandle is absolutely right in his main argument that there is a lacuna in the book on the potential economic role of the diaspora. Envisioning certainly makes an energetic case for the importance of overseas Jamaicans at the political levels and in the formulating of new terms of engagement through the “Constituent Assembly of Jamaican People at Home and Abroad.” However, the critical notion of Jamaicans and other Caribbean nationals actually investing and returning to play central entrepreneurial, technical, and administrative roles in the reconstruction of Jamaica, while hinted at, is insufficiently elaborated. In a context as he correctly asserts, where 27 percent of overseas Jamaican nationals are employed in professional or managerial capacities and where some 85 percent of all Jamaicans with tertiary education live overseas and particularly where there are vivid examples in India, China, and elsewhere of their diasporas playing crucial economic roles in national development, it is important that we should consider and reflect on Mandle’s “Argonaut” strategy.

My problem therefore is not at all with the strategy itself but rather the steps required in establishing the foundation for its implementation. Mandle, in developing his diaspora-led strategy eliminates both the truth commission and land reform on the basis that the alliance of social forces necessary to bring these two into being is neither manifest nor likely to develop in the short run. Therefore, he proposes that we need to shift from a political strategy of attempting to accumulate forces to a frontally economic one of encouraging the investment of diaspora capital and the return of skilled and
capable citizens. This approach, he argues, is to be advocated and encouraged by university academics who, presumably, have the voice and influence to shift policy decisively in this new direction.

There seem to be two very serious problems with this approach. The first is that I think he vastly overestimates the influence of the university with its disparate and often contradictory voices. University academics have been severely battered by the economic and ideological winds of neoliberalism and are less of a consistent and coherent voice than at any time in post-independence history. While individual academics may very well have a role to play in any advocacy of a policy of renewal, I am pessimistic that they possess the coherency and sense of common purpose to act as a group. More profoundly, however, I suggest that Mandle has provided nothing new that would entice and encourage overseas nationals to invest in, much less return to Jamaica. If there is anything to be garnered from the notion of advanced hegemonic dissolution it is that the country is an unstable place for investment and a relatively insecure environment for someone accustomed to the much lower murder and crime rates of London, Boston, or New York. Beyond the advocacy of the strategy, there is a prior action that seems to be required to build trust and lay some foundation of greater social peace that along with the appropriate (and justly administered) forensic and security measures would provide a minimal set of conditions under which the Argonauts might feel comfortable to set sail for home. It is the necessity for this prior action that is the main thrust of Envisioning and derives directly from the initial discussion that Mandle supports, which argues that the country is in a moment of unprecedented socioeconomic crisis and political stasis. If hegemonic dissolution is indeed the case, then the answer cannot be simply located in a set of new policy proposals, but in an unprecedented political move that might release the proverbial logjam and allow the new policies to work.

Where Envisioning decisively falls short is that it does not sufficiently describe and elaborate on the nature of the social forces that will push for and implement this programme of prior action. This however, is an acknowledged weakness which is stated up front, recognizing that in the past the failure to see immediate political solutions has been used as a roadblock to altogether postpone the imagining of alternative futures. I suspect that it is precisely this shortfall that leads Mandle to the pessimistic conclusion that there are no coalitions capable of leading such a renewal (whether initiated via truth commission, land reform, advocacy of a constituent assembly or all the above) and that the way forward is through administrative decisions coming from enlightened university-based intellectuals and implemented by (presumably) enlightened government officials.

Let us for a moment then return to the substantial though limited reference in the conclusion which discusses the potential constituent elements in a new social coalition. In denying that change will come primarily from the
political parties whose members are too compromised from their entanglements with the old system, I go on to propose:

The impetus for change is unlikely to come from this source but from the ranks of the population at large. It is from among the community residents who demonstrate for justice and fairness, the new middle class recruits who join the political parties to initiate constitutional change and the organised working class, who have never been happy with globalization’s race to the bottom, that the call for change is likely to emerge. (p. 175)

If there is a substantial pivot around which there are differences with Mandle’s analysis, it is here. He essentially has a pessimistic view of the possibilities of a “progressive” coalition, while mine are far more optimistic. Where Mandle seems to be in error is in his simplification of the nature of the social forces in Jamaica. On the one side of his analysis are the wealthy classes, which remain powerful and retain a keen interest in keeping things the way they are. On the other side are the garrison communities which, using David Scott’s assessment, are seen as so profoundly disconnected from middle-class morals and civility that they would not be able to function in a system of deliberative democracy as advocated in the book.

Little reference is made to any of the social categories mentioned in my above quote, with the inevitable implication that they have largely migrated to various points in the diaspora, leaving behind two irreconcilable social forces. This is, I think, clearly not the case. It is the existence of a stable if historically shrunken class of employed workers deeply affected by and hostile to the violence and extortion emanating from garrison communities that was a decisive feature of the coalition against the Tivoli Gardens gangster Christopher “Dudus” Coke in May 2010.1 It was this strata’s alliance with lower-middle-class nurses, civil servants, and teachers and upper-middle-class professionals, together with reformist elements in the Chamber of Commerce and Manufacturer’s Association that tipped the balance and demanded that the JLP government sever its support for Coke and allow extradition requests from the United States to follow their course.

The coalition proved to be temporary and, despite promising initiatives, has not yet coalesced into a new, vibrant political movement. It does however suggest that the ground is not as infertile as Mandle proposes. Real possibilities exist to form a coalition of the stable that would include these elements, draw on the less compromised and “tribalistic” cadres within both political parties and reach into the garrison communities to win over those inhabitants

who fear the untramelled power of the local dons. Such a coalition, if operating in the context of a program of social (including land) reform and deeper democracy, might in the right circumstances, outflank both the dons and those among the recalcitrant wealthy who guard the status quo jealously.

In such a framework, Jamaican Argonauts arriving on the beaches of their long lost homeland might actually encounter welcoming embraces rather than the echo of gunfire and the smell of burning tyres.

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Brian Meeks’s *Envisioning Caribbean Futures* is an urgently necessary attempt to reclaim the connection between social theory and real-world social change, following the decline of the Caribbean Left and the displacement of Marxian prescriptions. Meeks balances utopianism and pragmatism in his take on Jamaica’s futures, drawing on a broad range of recent critical work to posit what could be termed a post-structuralist political economy for the Caribbean. He uses this theoretical framework to put forth an incisive analysis of Jamaica’s “state of chronic” (as entrepreneur Ezroy Millwood has called it), and to make a number of concrete policy recommendations in search of a way out of this state. In his essay, Jay Mandle reviews *Envisioning Caribbean Futures* and critically assesses the three main initiatives Meeks proposes, concentrating most closely on the possible role of the Jamaican diaspora in fomenting social and economic change.

In this brief essay, I engage with Meeks’s work and Mandle’s response. I respond to their Jamaican “futuriography,” and specifically Meeks’s analysis of Jamaica’s social divisions, focusing most closely on urban inequalities and the system of donmanship. I start by commenting briefly on the three policy initiatives set out in the book and reviewed in Mandle’s essay. This is followed by a discussion of the way Meeks, and many others, have approached the fragmentation of urban and larger society, the “two Jamaicas” that have been the topic of debate for so long. Reflecting on the role of dons in the wake of the “Dudus crisis” of 2010 can shed new light on this fragmentation. Reading Meeks’s emphasis on national consensus in relation to the political order of donmanship, I suggest other possibilities for thinking through social difference and the political. I support his well-informed aspirations for Jamaica’s future, and hope to contribute a number of critical observations to this goal.
Mandle recaps Meeks’s main recommendations concisely and assesses their feasibility. I want to add a number of reflections to this. The first regards the process of national reconciliation Meeks proposes but does not elaborate on extensively. Under the guidance of a national reconciliation commission, such a process would address the violence of the 1970s and the associated partisan rifts that have caused and continue to cause so much damage to Jamaican “social living.” While a number of Jamaica’s current problems can indeed be traced back to that period, and its memory is still traumatic to those who suffered through it, its salience for many Jamaicans today might be less than Meeks anticipates. In 2009, 61 percent of Jamaicans were under 35, meaning that the majority of the population does not have any conscious memory of the period (although its traumatic memory may be passed on across generations).

Written in 2007, Meeks’s book could not engage with more recent instances of political and state violence, but to many of Jamaica’s younger inner-city residents this bloodshed may be more relevant. During the “Tivoli massacre” of May 2010 (known in polite circles as the “Tivoli incursion”) that took place as state security forces sought to arrest Christopher “Dudus” Coke, at least 73 civilians were killed, although there are persistent rumors that the body count was much higher. During the state of emergency that lasted from May to July 2010, “curfews” were held in dozens of inner-city communities, in which hundreds of young men were detained, questioned, and fingerprinted without any formal grounds other than their area of residence. In addition, in 2010, the number of police killings (309 deaths, excluding the Tivoli killings) was the highest recorded in any year. What state actors call a war on organized crime is interpreted by many of those who reside in these areas as a war on the poor. Of course, the political violence of the 1970s set the stage for these events in various complex ways. To my mind, the more recent acts of officially sanctioned violence and disrespect and the rifts they cause are equally in need of reconciliation, perhaps in conjunction with the acts of the 1970s. At the time of writing, an official Commission of Enquiry is looking into the “Manatt Phelps Philips” affair in which the U.S. law firm was hired in an attempt to block Dudus’s extradition. While formal and informal commentators agree that the enquiry makes great daytime television, it is a “poppy-show,” an entertaining farce that is not likely to bring about any change in politicians’ integrity or accountability.

The second of Meeks’s recommendations that Mandle addresses is that of land reform. These suggestions are valuable and might well be implemented, at least in part. While Mandle expects “formidable opposition by the country’s
still powerful land-owning class,” Meeks’s proposal is to redistribute government land rather than resort to expropriation of privately owned land. This moderate version of land reform suggests that elite opposition might be much less fierce than the hostility Michael Manley’s attempts at nationalization provoked in the 1970s. The impact of a redistribution of land, however, is likely to be limited. As Mandle points out, a minority of the labor force is involved in agricultural production. More importantly, the hegemonic dissolution that Meeks describes, and the “Caribbean subaltern” with which he concerns himself, are rooted largely in Jamaica’s urban areas. I see no reason for major political opposition to land reform from the urban poor, many of whom have family “in country.” However, there is no indication that a “back-to-the-land” movement would find many adherents amongst inner-city residents, nor is it certain that lack of land is the principal driver for urban drift. While land reform may slow down rural-to-urban migration, it will not solve the pressing issues of urban poverty or social exclusion. Meeks’s (2007:172-73) statement that “all city dwellers would gain from a prosperous countryside, as urban drift would be radically reduced” might risk overestimating the contemporary significance of rural migrants to urban crises, as well as the appeal of rural alternatives to those considering a move to the city.

The final proposal with which Mandle engages is Meeks’s idea of a National Constituent Assembly of Jamaicans at Home and Abroad. This idea and the various associated suggestions for democratic and economic reform are sensible plans to effect a shift of power from politicians to the people (if not all of them are immediately feasible, the processes of constitutional reform in divided countries such as Brazil and Colombia are cause for some optimism). Here, I want to comment briefly on the role Meeks and Mandle ascribe to the Jamaican diaspora. I wonder to what extent Jamaicans “at home” are willing to accept political and economic involvement – or interference – of those who left. The recent debates over the dual citizenship of MPs – and the frustrations many return migrants face – demonstrate an unwillingness to let Jamaican-Americans (or Jamaican-Canadians, Jamaican Brits, etc.) have their cake and eat it. Are Jamaicans in Jamaica interested in being saved by the “transformative agents of change” from the diaspora, who Mandle believes must “thrust Jamaica into economic modernity”? Or would they consider this unwelcome interference from those who turned their backs on their country when the going got tough? The fact that Jamaicans Abroad have something to offer does not necessarily mean Jamaicans at Home are interested in accepting it. Nevertheless, there are various examples of attempts to develop mutually beneficial relations with diaspora communities – such as the Person of Indian Origin (PIO) status developed by India, or Ghana’s Joseph project – and it is certainly worthwhile to explore which

2. See, for example, Potter et al. (2005).
economic and political possibilities are acceptable to Jamaicans both in and outside Jamaica.

**JAMAICAN DISSENSUS**

Meeks, in his response to Mandle, is correct to point out that Mandle’s focus on economic strategy disregards the necessity of “a prior action that seems to be required to build trust and lay some foundation of greater social peace.” He suggests that Mandle oversimplifies Jamaica’s social categories, representing them as limited to “two irreconcilable social forces.” While there is certainly substance for this charge, I suggest that Meeks’s analysis is open to the same critique. In the conclusion to *Envisioning* he points to the possibility of a progressive coalition based on solidarity between the working poor, segments of the middle classes, and fed-up members of (presumably innercity) communities. Yet in his elaboration of hegemonic dissolution, his take on Jamaica’s social fracture seems to follow the “two Jamaicas” narrative, a bipolar split between the wealthy and middle classes on the one hand, and the disenfranchised, socially alienated (urban) poor on the other.

 Obviously social realities are much more complex, but it is this classed and raced dichotomy – expressed most clearly, perhaps, in the social distance between “uptown” and “downtown” Kingston – that is dominant in both academic and popular narratives. Meeks (2007:62) adopts it when he speaks of inequality “sharply demarcating the upper middle and upper classes from the rest of the society.” He alludes to it when he quotes Bob Marley’s lyrics from the 1970s: “we nuh know how we and dem a go work this out” (Meeks 2000:52). More recently, dancehall artist Vybz Kartel captured the acrimonious class divide in the track *Dem Nuh Like We* (“they don’t like us”): “Poor people / dem nuh like we … me granny follow the system / dem treat her like garbage … ghetto yute life don’t mean nutten to dem / five [murders] a day ah the average.” Such narratives draw on what I call “bipolar antagonism,” a specific dualist rhetoric in which social categories are constructed as discrete and antagonistically either/or, rather than both/and. Notwithstanding the reality of multiple gradations, this bipolar rhetoric may complicate the formation of coalitions.

 It seems to me that it is this rift between a largely dual, almost irreconcilable “we and them” that Meeks refers to in his book. His emphases on the “Caribbean subaltern” and the declining power of the dominant social bloc imply a contrast between two broad, culturally distinct classes, of oppressors and oppressed. Similarly, his elaboration of hegemonic dissolution evokes this split, as it is characterized by a “popular, subaltern insurgency” and “a widening fissure, from below, from the ways and means of official Jamaican society” (Meeks 2007:77). In seeking to bridge this fissure in his search for national
notes on the state of Chronic consensus, Meeks cannot escape becoming entangled in the long tradition of “plural society” theories that have been debated in relation to the Caribbean. The underlying question in such debates is always: how can social difference be reconciled with national unity? Meeks’s emphasis on national consensus is reminiscent of what David Scott (2000:287) calls “the Bandung project of the national-modern” in which “difference (religious, ethnic, cultural) is at best a distraction, and at worst a hindrance to the progressive, improving objectives of nation-state building. Difference, on this view, is essentially to be overcome (assimilated, regulated, marginalized, eradicated).”

While the national consensus Meeks seeks to envision does not appear to entail a new hegemony, his proposals can be seen as an attempt to “imagine a progressive convergence on a consensualist ideal” (Scott 2000:296). Envisioning can be understood as an effort to revive “the nationalist modernization project” that Scott (2000:294), using a discussion of the prominent don Zeeks, argues has been subject to dissolution.

In a way, both Meeks’s and Scott’s approaches to Jamaica’s “crisis” echo older discussions on ideology and culture (see Austin 1983). Meeks, as he tries to imagine a replacement for a middle-class Creole hegemony, suggests that a new consensus might be reached through state-sanctioned committees and other reformist measures. While I support these proposals to achieve a more equitable Jamaica, the form of these measures does not necessarily depart from traditional middle-class norms or procedures. Resolving conflict and negotiating (bipolar) antagonism along these lines might risk enforcing a new type of ideological domination. Scott, on the other hand, argues for an understanding of cultural difference and opposition that disregards the integration of different social groups, even if the integrative system is one of inequality and exclusion.

Is there a way of conceptualizing (Caribbean) social difference that finds a middle ground between, on the one hand, the unassimilable, antagonistic divisions posited in Scott’s “permanence of pluralism,” and, on the other, Meeks’s Creolesque insistence on national unity, which has historically proved problematic in its emphasis on acculturation and assimilation? Is it possible to conceive of a situation in which the absence of consensus between different social segments does not necessarily indicate crisis or insurgency, nor does it imply permanent, unbridgeable divides? Without offering any immediate resolutions to these enduring dilemmas, I suggest that the case of Jamaica’s dons presents a compelling metaphor for thinking through difference.

DONS AND DIFFERENCE

The tendency has been to conceive of donmanship as incompatible and competitive with the formal system of democratic statehood. The garrisons over which dons rule have been characterized as “states within a state.” Dudus’s
“Republic of Tivoli” was generally seen as the most developed example of such a parallel or shadow state. The most established dons preside over governance structures that offer alternative, competing forms of justice, security, and welfare, an alternative system of “taxation,” and alternative political rituals such as those evidenced in street dances commemorating or celebrating dons. These state-like entities – often violent, always undemocratic – encroach on the terrain of the formal Jamaican state. They compete with it in terms of service provision, taxation, conscription, and, importantly, a monopoly of the means of coercion. They adopt state-like discourses, for instance when extortion fees are referred to as “taxes.” Dudus was popularly known as “The President” or “Presi,” and his common-law wife went by the moniker of “First Lady.” Ricardo Wynter, the reputed leader of the Stinger Gang in Kingston’s Maxfield Avenue community, went by the nickname of “Government.”

However, the entanglement of the dons’ power structures with the formal political system and state bureaucracy suggests that we should think beyond “parallel states” that engage in competition. Rather, the two systems exist in collaboration. Dons continue to function as important inner-city gatekeepers, not only for politicians, but for government agencies and bureaucrats as well. Various MPs and government officials (as well as businesspeople and NGO workers) spoke to me of the pragmatic necessity and even efficiency of working with dons. Conversely, dons rely on politicians and state bureaucrats for the government contracts that provide a significant portion of their income. In these aspects, the system of donmanship does not engage in competition with the formal state.

It has become increasingly difficult to understand Jamaica’s formal and informal systems of rule and belonging as distinct. Urban governance is achieved through a hybrid, composite system of actors and mechanisms of maintaining order, with various shifting yet enduring coalitions between state actors and criminal organizations. Politicians and state actors use dons to pursue public goods as well as private interests, while dons use them in return with the same objectives. Inner-city residents may access certain public goods through this system of order, but ultimately they suffer. Meanwhile, the formal state and the dons’ informal state have come to form a mutually expedient symbiosis in which sovereignty is shared and capital accumulated. I suggest that we can understand these compound governance structures as “hybrid states,” in which criminal organizations and the formal state are entangled in a relationship of collusion and divestment, sharing control over urban spaces and populations.

Might we take this phenomenon of symbiotic entanglement at the level of governance as a metaphor for the way Jamaica’s different classed and cultural segments are organized? I would never endorse this hybrid state as a positive model of governance and, as outlined above, its benefits to inner-city residents are few. Rather than positing this hybrid form of governance as
a suggestion for reform, I suggest it might be useful as a metaphor for how diversity is organized, offering a slightly different way of conceptualizing the articulation of multiple cultural-political orders within one nation-state. Like these different forms of governance, Jamaica’s various social categories (uptown, downtown, and their gradations and variations) are distinct yet entangled, separate yet mutually constitutive, competitive yet interdependent. These different class/cultural/ethnic/geographical categories can shape-shift rhetorically, expanding, contracting, and splintering over time, with actors within one category aligning with actors from another at one moment, only to oppose them in the next instance. The antagonisms need not be permanent, nor the fractures insuperable. Yet the coalitions will most likely not be stable either, and strategic temporary unity will not result in cultural assimilation.

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

Perhaps the social glue that Meeks seeks is to be found not so much in the consensus itself, but in the existing interlinkages and ongoing dialogue between Jamaica’s different social categories, those links and encounters that a rhetoric of bipolar antagonism studiously disregards. Dissensus within a nation-state need not be the main cause of crisis – indeed, it is inevitable. Rather than focusing on which specific consensual coalition is capable of emerging, it might be more important to emphasize and cultivate the fora for working through different opinions, values, and (economic) interests. Such possibilities – agonistic rather than antagonistic – are in fact most evident in Meeks’s proposal of a constituent assembly. For Jamaica, such an assembly would be a new forum for such meetings and debates, a new mode of working through difference without denying it.

As Maecckelbergh (2009) shows for the alterglobalization movement, attention to the process of organization and decision-making itself – rather than to specific goals or ideas – can entail a productive democratic shift. Moving from the question *who rules?* to the question *how do we rule?* means that common processes and practices (of practical decision-making) rather than common values can create a basis for collective action in contexts of diversity. Is it possible to focus on (or at least start out by) limiting consensus to specific, practical situations (as in effect Meeks advocates when he proposes that the constituent assembly start with adjudicating land reform), rather than demanding consensus for larger abstractions such as “a vision for the future of Jamaica”? Grounding Caribbean futures in very concrete and pragmatic forms of productive conflict – starting small, but dreaming big – as Meeks has begun to do in *Envisioning Caribbean Futures*, is perhaps the best hope we have for dismantling the state of chronic.
REFERENCES


JAY R. MANDLE

RESPONSE TO BRIAN MEEKS AND RIVKE JAFFE

Rivke Jaffe believes discussion of what to do in Jamaica should move from the question of who rules (the analytic foundation of Meeks’s essay) to that of “how do we rule.” Doing so, she writes, would make it “possible to focus on (or at least start out by) limiting consensus to specific practical situations … rather than demanding consensus for large abstractions such as ‘a vision for the future of Jamaica.’” Citing Maeckelbergh, Jaffe believes that “attention to the process of organization and decision-making itself – rather than to specific goals or ideas – can entail a productive democratic shift” (emphasis in original). In this she seeks a middle ground between the view traceable back to M.G. Smith’s conception of a plural society that posits an unbridgeable gap between classes and groups and “Meeks’s Creolesque insistence on national unity.”

The disagreement between Meeks and Jaffe is crystallized in their attitudes towards urban dons. Meeks finds hope and the basis for Jamaican renewal in the alliance of the country’s employed workers, “deeply affected by and hostile to the violence and extortion emanating from garrison communities” and “lower-middle-class nurses, civil servants, and teachers and upper-middle-class professionals together with reformist elements in the Chamber of Commerce and Manufacturer’s Association.” That coalition, he writes, “tipped the balance and demanded that the JLP government sever its support of [Christopher “Dudus”] Coke.” Jaffe in contrast argues that “criminal organizations and the formal state are entangled in a relationship of collusion and divestment, sharing control over urban spaces and populations.” While making clear that she “would never endorse this hybrid state as a positive model of governance,” Jaffe nevertheless argues that “the social glue that Meeks seeks” is not to be found in a new consensus formed by a reforming coalition, a project that risks “enforcing a new type of ideological domination.” Instead Jaffe believes “that emphasis should be placed on cultivating the fora “for working through different opinions, values, and (economic) interests” that result from the hybrid governing structure.

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Only experience will allow a judgment to be made between these contrasting views. Both possess deep vulnerabilities. Jaffe’s position depends on the good will of urban bosses who have not revealed any particular interest in dialogue and discussion. But at the same time, the reforming coalition that Meeks pins his hopes upon is at best fragile, not having as he puts it, “yet coalesced into a new vibrant political movement.” Meeks takes the coalition’s presence in the Coke conflict as indicating that the political ground is not as “infertile” as I suggest, but at this moment in time his optimism is more hope than reality.

The fact remains that if Jamaica is to become anything other than an insular backwater in the globalizing world order, it is Meeks’s hypothesis that should command the efforts of political organizers. It might be true that the hybrid politics described by Jaffe could sustain itself in a long-term equilibrium. But it is very unlikely that the tradeoffs between the official and unofficial world of politics required by that model will serve the country well. Contrary to Jaffe’s view, a vision of the future is essential for Jamaica to develop the productive dexterity that will determine its degree of success in a world no longer dominated by a single superpower and in which previously poor countries become masters of modern technology.

It is in this regard that the human capital and entrepreneurial capacities present in the Jamaican diaspora have an important, perhaps even central, role to play. Meeks of course is right that my paper does not elaborate the steps needed for the implementation of the “Argonauts Strategy.” And certainly Jaffe makes a valid point in questioning whether Jamaican’s “At Home” will have much interest in initiatives undertaken by Jamaicans “Abroad.” But neither of these reservations should be thought of as determinant. In 1977 no one believed that China would reach out successfully to Overseas Chinese for assistance in the country’s economic development. Yet a few short years after the ending of the Cultural Revolution that is precisely what occurred. The same can happen in Jamaica.

Much has changed in the Caribbean since M.G. Smith and R.T. Smith waged their epic struggles over the nature of Caribbean societies. Growth has been slow, but it has occurred. There are many more well-educated individuals constituting a middle stratum of society than in the 1960s. As a result there is more coherence to these societies than M.G. envisioned, though regretfully, not as much as R.T. thought he observed. Part of this grouping found opportunities abroad but would, under the right circumstances, return home. The task for domestic activists is to work to create the conditions that would encourage such a return. In this, Meeks’s approach to reform has much more to commend it than does Jaffe’s.

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