Linden Lewis (ed.)

*Caribbean Sovereignty, Development, and Democracy in an Age of Globalization.*
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The Caribbean is facing a range of serious political, economic, and social challenges that are testing the capacities and threatening the viabilities of the countries in the region. Linden Lewis, in the introduction to his edited volume, paints a downbeat picture, arguing that “the Caribbean finds itself at a political, economic, and social conjuncture in which the crises are so deep, the challenges so foreboding, that there is little to hold on to except an elusive sense of independence of thought, of national integrity, and of control over its own destiny” (p. 1). Although I believe that in some cases Caribbean states are using their limited sovereignty to good effect, the hypothesis is worthy of consideration. One important aspect of the sovereignty debate relates to regional integration (or the lack of it) in the Caribbean. Lewis’s book considers the issue, but concentrates mainly on the impact of globalization in the domestic space, so the book by Terri-Ann Gilbert-Roberts provides a welcome complementary analysis to the discussions over the role and extent of Caribbean sovereignty, particularly in regard to regional integration.

Much of the so-called “political anxiety” in the Caribbean (Lewis, p. 1) relates to the small size of the countries, their economic dependency, and more general vulnerability. The Caribbean consists largely of open but fragile economies based on a limited number of commodities and services. Although the region as a whole has significant levels of human development and an average GDP per capita of approximately US$9000, placing the region at middle-income level, economic growth has stagnated in the last two decades. The slowdown that began in the 1990s has been caused by the loss of trade preferences to European markets as well as deterioration of the terms of trade, reduced fiscal space, and demographic trends, including large-scale emigration of skilled labor. Another economic concern is the dramatic increase in the level of public debt, which has meant that many Caribbean countries are now the most indebted in the world. In 2012, overall public sector debt was just under 80 percent of regional GDP.

The region is also faced with a number of environmental challenges, such as climate change and vulnerable coastal, marine, biodiversity, land and freshwater resources. Further, the Caribbean is prone to hurricanes, earthquakes, and
volcanic activity. Indeed the region is twelve times as exposed to disasters as the world average, and the countries of the Eastern Caribbean are among the ten most disaster-prone countries in the world. The resulting economic and social costs can be very high indeed. Further, the region is impacted by high levels of crime, with murder rates among the highest in the world, and this undermines economic performance. The World Bank suggests that if the Caribbean murder rate was reduced by one third, the region’s rate of per capita economic growth could more than double. Under these conditions the pressure on the political class to govern effectively and find solutions to these problems is significant. However, decision-making capacity is being hindered by concerns over issues such as corruption, as well as declining public engagement and confidence in the political process.

Within the context of these myriad problems for the Caribbean, Lewis’s volume is underpinned by the argument that sovereignty is largely an “empty” concept, despite politicians and others setting great store by it. In essence the idea of sovereignty has always been compromised in the region, both in terms of pressures from external forces and the system of hierarchy and domination embedded within postcolonial systems of governance. As Lewis argues, local Caribbean leaders “did not seek to break fundamentally with the colonial philosophy of politics ... What emerged was a continuation of colonial policy, or more specifically, the development of a neo-colonial regime, wrapped in nationalist costume” (p. 9). As a consequence, the region’s development and democracy has been inhibited. Lewis and other contributors identify several attempts that have been made to assert Caribbean autonomy, including the revolutions in Cuba and Grenada, and Jamaica under Michael Manley. However, none of these examples—not even Cuba—have stood the test of time.

After Lewis’s introductory essay, the book is divided into three sections. Part I, “Neoliberalism and the Paradox of Sovereignty in the Caribbean,” begins with an essay by Alex Dupuy which is highly critical of the experience of sovereignty and democracy in Haiti; he argues that capitalism has “hijacked” (p. 30) both concepts and that power rests with a small Haitian upper class which itself is reliant largely on foreign commercial interests. Next, Hilbourne Watson addresses several issues concerning transnational capitalist globalization and state sovereignty, including state and nonstate violence in Trinidad and Tobago, and the labor and sexual exploitation of women and children. Linden Lewis then focuses on the need to abolish the concept of sovereignty altogether and instead allow the power of the working class to take hold, which would promote “freedom, equality, and social justice for all” (p. 85).

In Part II, “Arrested Development and the Cultural Turn,” Anton Allahar argues that the class structure of the dependent capitalist states of the
Caribbean undercuts the notion of sovereignty and asserts somewhat unconvincingly “that Cuba is the only genuinely sovereign state in the region” (p. 89). Dave Ramsaran then looks at the interplay between class and race and their harmful influences on the process of development and globalization in Trinidad and Tobago. Silvio Torres-Saillant focuses on the Dutch and Spanish-speaking Caribbean and the tensions that exist between aspirations for autonomy, progressive and indigenous leadership, and popular democracy on the one hand and the reality of restrictive sovereignty and democracy on the other. Deborah Thomas focuses on Jamaica and asks whether recent experiences (for example, the arrest and conviction of drug “don” Dudus Coke) have undermined the traditional political system of “patronage and spoils” (p. 180), and opened up new opportunities for political engagement.

The final part, “Caribbean Futures: Democracy Imperiled,” starts with Franck Guadeloupe’s evaluation of the often difficult relationship between Curaçao and the Netherlands, and more particularly the autochthon and nonautochthon conceptions of home. Yarimar Bonilla then considers the labor unrest in Guadeloupe in 2009 and the new political projects that are perhaps emerging in its wake. Finally, Brian Meeks takes another look at Jamaica and analyzes the serious problems facing the country.

Overall, the volume provides an interesting set of perspectives from a number of highly regarded thinkers writing on the contemporary Caribbean. However, I was slightly disappointed by an imbalance in emphasis. Much (perhaps too much) is made of the structural (often class-based) problems undermining Caribbean sovereignty, development, and democracy, but there is little on what could be done to improve matters—only Meeks and to a lesser extent Thomas attempt to provide a positive agenda for change. Reading Meeks’s eight-point plan (pp. 237–238) on how to improve Jamaican politics and society was a breath of fresh air after the at times one-note critical analysis contained in some of the earlier chapters. Because of this analytical imbalance the volume is not quite as ground-breaking or insightful as the editor suggests.

As with the Lewis volume, the book by Terri-Ann Gilbert-Roberts critiques the concept of sovereignty and argues that the illusion of a “vaunted and pristine sovereignty” is present. Despite this observation she is not unsympathetic to the underlying significance of the concept. She notes that the youthfulness of sovereignty in the Caribbean has been a powerful force, acting to undermine moves toward greater regional integration. But Gilbert-Roberts also supports the idea that “the erosion of recently-attained sovereignty through the delegation of authority to regional institutions is, paradoxically, essential for the reinforcement of the sovereign capacity of the state” (p. xiii). In short, she still believes that sovereignty has an important role to play in improving gover-
nance and furthering development. However, as Gilbert-Roberts makes clear, the “paradox of sovereignty” in the Caribbean has not been easy to overcome. She suggests that the reasons for this are twofold. First, there has been a failure by political leaders to abandon their own elite conceptions of a personal sovereignty. And secondly, the absence of a truly regional ideology has limited substantive collective action. As a consequence, a vacuum has grown between the theoretical promise of regionalism and CARICOM’s disappointing record. Indeed, the very future of the organization is in doubt—in 2011 CARICOM heads of government decided to “pause” integration, in essence kicking the process into the long grass. So what suggestions does Gilbert-Roberts propose to revive the integration process? Well, she suggests the reconfiguration of Caribbean political culture, making the application of state sovereignty less hierarchical and so allowing the public to be more actively involved in the regional process. She also suggests that new inspirational leaders are required, a stronger rationale for integration must be presented, and important institutional reforms should be enacted. These are all valuable suggestions, but similar ideas have been talked about for many years.

Both books pose important questions about the understanding and application of sovereignty, and the relationship between the state, the region, and the world, but more original thinking is needed for the Caribbean to have any chance of throwing off the negativity and in some quarters despair currently affecting the region.

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