David Scott

Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 232 pp. (Paper US\$23.95)

Omens of Adversity will be of interest to students and scholars of Caribbean and postcolonial studies, political theory, Marxism and Revolution, Trauma and Memory Studies. It extends David Scott's exploration of the relationship between tragedy and politics in *Conscripts of Modernity*¹ by focusing on the rupture in time caused by the 1983 collapse of the Grenada Revolution as a result of internal party conflict and external invasion by the United States. Addressing the killing of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop and several comrades and the largely show trial of the Grenada 17 (the name by which those convicted of the killings were collectively known), Scott argues that our time is marked by the aftermath and impossibility of revolution. "Tragedy is the ineradicable risk to which we expose ourselves in the act of using our capacity for freedom" (p. 64), Scott movingly contends. Drawing on Hegel and Arendt, he reads the collapse of the Grenada Revolution as the tragic collision of two valid positions within the revolutionary leadership, each partially justified, each blind to the validity of the other. He thus repositions the Grenada 17 as tragic figures that exemplify how outcomes are "not always calculable or intentional" (p. 64, see also pp. 22, 39). He reads the trial of the Grenada 17 as a U.S.-orchestrated project to criminalize socialism and deliver Grenada to a neoliberal present.

Among the many strengths of the book are its contribution to critiques of linear historiography; its study of ethical memory and agency; its critique of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the prescribed terms of forgiveness and reconciliation; its reading of the investigative study by a group of Grenadian high school students whose efforts to locate the remains of the killed leaders achieve a "reparative mourning and remembrance" (p. 116) that the revolutionary generation could not; and its reading of nonrealist, allegorical, repetitive time in Merle Collins's novel *The Color of Forgetting*. Scott's arguments about tragedy powerfully intervene in "the popular and scholarly imagination of what took place on 19 October 1983" (p. 143), the day Bishop and several comrades were killed. His commitment to tragic contingency is integral to his re-evaluation of the Grenada 17. Scott rightly problematizes the scapegoating and revenge that have characterized many accounts of them. But the theoret-

1 David Scott, 2004, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham NC: Duke University Press).

ical insight he draws from tragedy—that the risks of a political course are not always knowable, and that exceptional human beings in exceptional times may err tragically—could usefully be balanced against the historical observation that in several actual instances the risks *were* knowable. History offers many examples of ruined revolutions, of comrades killed by comrades. Contemporary revolutionaries from the region (such as Walter Rodney, Tim Hector, and David Abdulah), too, warned the leaders of the Grenada Revolution of the risks of the authoritarian path they were taking.

Although Scott asserts that he is not arguing the innocence of the Grenada 17, his theoretical examples and his choice and interpretation of particular historical details serve that argument. Rethinking the terms of discussion around the Grenada 17 is a valuable and overdue project. But Scott sometimes makes his point by overstating the ambiguities surrounding particular events. For example, he asserts that Bishop and his associates “were *allegedly* lined up and shot” (p. 117, emphasis added; see also p. 20) “under circumstances that have not yet been incontrovertibly established” (p. 17; see also pp. 142–43). Undoubtedly, the motivations, fears, and considerations of all parties involved will never be known. Undoubtedly, the partisan trial of the Grenada 17 obscured as much as it revealed, and convicted some who had scarcely any role in the killings. Yet the Grenada 17 themselves give greater weight than Scott to the *unambiguous* fact that Bishop and his comrades were shot dead, while unarmed, by some members of the Grenada 17, and they accept moral responsibility for those actions. Moreover, in contrast to his treatment of the Grenada 17, Scott perhaps understates the ambiguities surrounding Bishop’s actions. He asserts unequivocally that Bishop “released a wholly false rumor” that the Coards planned to assassinate him; that Bishop “irrevocably ... opened the door to violence”; and that “the Central Committee conceded everything to Bishop” (pp. 59–60; see also pp. 142, 169). Scott’s language in these instances squarely assigns responsibility to Bishop, undercutting his acknowledgment elsewhere of two valid logics.

Omens of Adversity is a provocative and learned book that, like tragedy, absolutizes its logic. The insistence on being stranded in a disenchanted present characterized by the “collapse of emancipatory futures” (p. 28) makes Scott unable to allow for the possibility that people might be able to *both* reject a progressivist understanding of history *and* engage in collective political action or mass social movements in the present.² In Scott’s work the innumerable, diverse, and unruly mass movements of the present either remain invisible or

2 See, for example, his rebuttal of critics of Left melancholia (pp. 124–26).

become visible as examples of a failure to comprehend tragic time. Nonetheless, his book productively rethinks the terms of analysis of the Grenada Revolution.

Shalini Puri

English Department, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh PA 15260, U.S.A.

spuri@pitt.edu