Wendy C. Grenade (ed.)


Socialism in the Caribbean was tarnished beyond repair when one group among Grenada’s revolutionary leadership placed eight other members of the same leadership in front of a firing squad and had them killed. The vicious use of violence that climaxed the revolution in Grenada, the dictatorial nature of Forbes Burnham’s “Cooperative Socialism” in Guyana, and the difficulties that Michael Manley’s “Democratic Socialism” experienced in Jamaica, mean that even today the Caribbean people are deeply skeptical of that brand of politics.

In collecting these papers, Wendy Grenade hopes to provide insight into what went wrong with the Grenada Revolution. Her objective is to draw lessons “from the Grenada experience for democratic transformation in the twenty-first century” (p. 3). What is clear is that the lessons Grenade refers to will have to be absorbed by a Left that, to be successful, will be compelled to reject much of its socialist legacy and most particularly to jettison the paternalism that constitutes much of the substance of Marxism-Leninism.

Several of the essays in this collection are invaluable in casting light on the Revolution’s demise. Of particular importance is Grenade’s long interview with Bernard Coard while the latter was still in prison, convicted of murdering his comrades. In the interview, Coard itemizes no less than ten different factors that led to the ultimate catastrophe—a list that extends from the manner in which the New Jewel Movement (NJM) took power to the fact that “the party had no internal capacity to resolve conflicts at the level of its top leadership” (p. 81). An equally compelling contribution is made by Brian Meeks, who considers, among other issues, the role played by the Cubans in the final events. He thinks that Maurice Bishop, in resisting the NJM’s demand that he lead it jointly with Coard, probably was hoping for Cuban military assistance. A different perspective is provided by Patsy Lewis’s contribution. In recounting the experiences of a young woman who was at Fort Rupert in support of the ruling party when the shooting occurred, this essay provides devastating insight into the emotions in play on the fateful day when the Revolution came to an end.

Instead of rooting itself in the region’s rich history of democratic and modernist thinking, the Grenada Revolution imported Marxism/Leninism. Most damaging was the fact that, in that tradition, a ruling party governs freed from the necessity of testing its legitimacy with elections. David Hinds’s paper demonstrates how the conflict between the NJM’s Leninism and West Indian radical democratic thinking created tensions between it and Guyana’s Working
People’s Alliance (WPA). Each in its early days rejected Marxist orthodoxy. But by the time of the Grenada Revolution, the NJM had embraced the imported ideology that the WPA continued to reject. As Hinds puts it, the WPA’s praxis was greatly influenced by the Caribbean scholar Walter Rodney who, “belonged to the tradition of C.L.R. James and Eusi Kwayana, both of whom rejected the Leninist vanguardist dogma” (p. 223). According to Hinds, the WPA was “uncomfortable with some of the human-rights violations such as the harassment of political opponents and the muzzling of nongovernment media.” He goes on, “the party also felt that the delay in holding elections was a costly mistake” (p. 229). These disagreements faithfully reflected the fact the while the NJM increasingly was influenced by the Marxism provided by the Russians and the Cubans, the WPA’s political activities were rooted in the thinking of Caribbean political activists.

For all of its revolutionary rhetoric, the Revolution betrayed a surprising degree of continuity with Grenada’s past. As Meeks argues, the revolutionaries’ authoritarianism can be understood as an inheritance “from Eric Gairy and the colonial regime that preceded independence” (p. 97). Less obviously, its economic goals also represented more continuity than change in two dimensions. First, the construction of a new airport financed almost entirely by outside sources—the centerpiece of its economic strategy—implied the persistence of dependency. Second, Grenada would have remained a technological backwater since in revolutionary Grenada tourism would continue to dominate the economy as the principal beneficiary of the new airport.

Vanguardism failed in Grenada. Too few party members were responsible for too many tasks. The physical and mental exhaustion of the cadres was an important element in the spasm of violence that put an end to the Revolution. In that climax may lie the lesson that should most inform efforts at democratizing Caribbean societies in the future. No single individual or group of individuals should be vested with power that goes unchecked by an electoral process.

Jay R. Mandle
Department of Economics, Colgate University, Hamilton NY 13346, U.S.A.
Jmandle@colgate.edu