Colin Clarke

Race, Class, and the Politics of Decolonization: Jamaica Journals, 1961 and 1968.

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In the annals of twentieth-century revolutionary and insurrectionist politics in the nonwestern world there's little evidence of any social movement of urban slum dwellers leading the armed overthrow of a state while exercising ideological hegemony over opposition forces. It is well known that anticolonial nationalist movements throughout the nonwestern world at this time were typically organized and given ideological direction by a radicalized native middle class. At mid-twentieth century it was hard to locate a rebellious vanguard from the slums that could dictate the temper and direction of change, challenge imperial strategies of decolonization, and disrupt the consolidation of political power by a native, but still culturally-colonized, political elite.

The emergence of a social force from the Kingston slums in a failed bid for power in Jamaica in 1960–61 was more than a notable local event; it was world-historical for its potential effects on regional and global politics. A politics of insubordination spearheaded by the Rastafarian movement implied the subversion of Jamaica's membership in the international system and rejection of its moral-ideological claims. But insurrectionist violence was only one expression of the complex synthesis that was Rastafarian politics. Its protean radicalism, and the Rastafarians' unrelenting opposition to the demeaning of blackness wrought by colonialism, drew Marxists, secular black nationalists, labor activists, intellectuals, and a host of others to the rebels' side.

That rebel leaders imagined their own political rule and reached for power by violent means on behalf of the black majority was a stunning move, and the forces they threatened viewed the rebels as worse than seditious. In the eyes of their detractors, this quest for sovereign black political power was not just unthinkable—it was infamy. For dominant classes, the prospect of anti-western and possibly anticapitalist black political rule on the island provoked panic and fueled the worst fears previously associated with black political power in Haiti after 1791. Moreover, this recoil from the specter of revolutionary black power became entangled with the politics of the Cold War and the politics of decolonization. Their overlap had fateful consequences, including the unleashing of a counterinsurgency program targeting black rebellion; disorganization of dissident politics; consolidation of authoritarian state power under brown middle-class leadership; and politicization of the social science faculty at UWI-Mona, as political intellectuals there were swept into the maelstrom.

Two journals kept by the social geographer Colin Clarke—one in 1961 when he was a graduate student at Oxford and another during a 1968 visit—offer

readers a gripping and controversial eyewitness account of these momentous developments. The 1961 journal is particularly compelling, presenting a convincing account of a country deep in crisis and rife with social tensions. It captures polarized sentiments, describes the myriad forms of victimization under which black Jamaicans lived, documents the squalor and stink of living conditions in the slums, and offers insightful comments on the antiblack racism of a largely brown and white middle class, impatient with black consciousness and panicked about its political import. Both journals offer affecting, if distrustful portraits of leading personalities, ideologies, and organizations representing the upsurge in black dissidence. And both highlight tensions, policy differences, and ideological disagreements within the movement. As the journals and events confirm, this black-led movement ultimately fizzled, and fears of a black-led revolution subsided. However, the journals also show that powerful institutions at home and abroad were arrayed against the rebels. Not the least was a counterinsurgency program marked by state violence, spying, mail intercepts, and top-secret reports to the Colonial Office, some of which were undoubtedly shared with then-Prime Minister Norman Manley. By contextualizing and updating his snapshot observations with information from newly released files from British counterintelligence on the island, Clarke strengthens the journals' reliability and buttresses the authority of his claims.

Two issues, however, will make these journals controversial. First, while Clarke is entitled to his political opinions, the convergence of his views—held to this day—with those expressed in reports sent to the Colonial Office on the movement's presumed antiwhite and "racist" character and dire political threat may undermine many readers' confidence in his understanding of the complex phenomenon that was the 1960s black revolt. Secondly, after scholarly exchanges with Jamaican historian Robert Hill, Clarke's independent research confirmed some aspects of the latter's bombshell claim that eminent Jamaican anthropologist Michael G. Smith was the mastermind behind the 1960 university report on the Rastafarian movement. It also confirmed that the now-canonical report was not a scholarly account after all, but instead a security document abetting counterinsurgency. These are stunning allegations with profound implications. Readers will be well advised to retain their skepticism until further evidence confirms Smith's role as a Machiavellian state political intellectual.

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