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