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NOTES ON THE STATE OF CHRONIC:
DEMOCRACY AND DIFFERENCE AFTER DUDUS

Brian Meeks's *Envisioning Caribbean Futures* is an urgently necessary attempt to reclaim the connection between social theory and real-world social change, following the decline of the Caribbean Left and the displacement of Marxian prescriptions. Meeks balances utopianism and pragmatism in his take on Jamaica's futures, drawing on a broad range of recent critical work to posit what could be termed a post-structuralist political economy for the Caribbean. He uses this theoretical framework to put forth an incisive analysis of Jamaica's "state of chronic" (as entrepreneur Ezroy Millwood has called it), and to make a number of concrete policy recommendations in search of a way out of this state. In his essay, Jay Mandle reviews *Envisioning Caribbean Futures* and critically assesses the three main initiatives Meeks proposes, concentrating most closely on the possible role of the Jamaican diaspora in fomenting social and economic change.

In this brief essay, I engage with Meeks's work and Mandle's response. I respond to their Jamaican "futuriography," and specifically Meeks's analysis of Jamaica's social divisions, focusing most closely on urban inequalities and the system of donmanship. I start by commenting briefly on the three policy initiatives set out in the book and reviewed in Mandle's essay. This is followed by a discussion of the way Meeks, and many others, have approached the fragmentation of urban and larger society, the "two Jamaicas" that have been the topic of debate for so long. Reflecting on the role of dons in the wake of the "Dudus crisis" of 2010 can shed new light on this fragmentation. Reading Meeks's emphasis on national consensus in relation to the political order of donmanship, I suggest other possibilities for thinking through social difference and the political. I support his well-informed aspirations for Jamaica's future, and hope to contribute a number of critical observations to this goal.

RECIPES FOR SOCIAL LIVING

Mandle recaps Meeks's main recommendations concisely and assesses their feasibility. I want to add a number of reflections to this. The first regards the process of national reconciliation Meeks proposes but does not elaborate on extensively. Under the guidance of a national reconciliation commission, such a process would address the violence of the 1970s and the associated partisan rifts that have caused and continue to cause so much damage to Jamaican "social living." While a number of Jamaica's current problems can indeed be traced back to that period, and its memory is still traumatic to those who suffered through it, its salience for many Jamaicans today might be less than Meeks anticipates. In 2009, 61 percent of Jamaicans were under 35,¹ meaning that the majority of the population does not have any conscious memory of the period (although its traumatic memory may be passed on across generations).

Written in 2007, Meeks's book could not engage with more recent instances of political and state violence, but to many of Jamaica's younger inner-city residents this bloodshed may be more relevant. During the "Tivoli massacre" of May 2010 (known in polite circles as the "Tivoli incursion") that took place as state security forces sought to arrest Christopher "Dudus" Coke, at least 73 civilians were killed, although there are persistent rumors that the body count was much higher. During the state of emergency that lasted from May to July 2010, "curfews" were held in dozens of inner-city communities, in which hundreds of young men were detained, questioned, and fingerprinted without any formal grounds other than their area of residence. In addition, in 2010, the number of police killings (309 deaths, excluding the Tivoli killings) was the highest recorded in any year. What state actors call a war on organized crime is interpreted by many of those who reside in these areas as a war on the poor. Of course, the political violence of the 1970s set the stage for these events in various complex ways. To my mind, the more recent acts of officially sanctioned violence and disrespect and the rifts they cause are equally in need of reconciliation, perhaps in conjunction with the acts of the 1970s. At the time of writing, an official Commission of Enquiry is looking into the "Manatt Phelps Philips" affair in which the U.S. law firm was hired in an attempt to block Dudus's extradition. While formal and informal commentators agree that the enquiry makes great daytime television, it is a "poppy-show," an entertaining farce that is not likely to bring about any change in politicians' integrity or accountability.

The second of Meeks's recommendations that Mandle addresses is that of land reform. These suggestions are valuable and might well be implemented, at least in part. While Mandle expects "formidable opposition by the country's

1. See <<http://statinja.gov.jm/EndofYearPopulationbyAgeandSex2008.aspx>>.

still powerful land-owning class,” Meeks’s proposal is to redistribute government land rather than resort to expropriation of privately owned land. This moderate version of land reform suggests that elite opposition might be much less fierce than the hostility Michael Manley’s attempts at nationalization provoked in the 1970s. The impact of a redistribution of land, however, is likely to be limited. As Mandle points out, a minority of the labor force is involved in agricultural production. More importantly, the hegemonic dissolution that Meeks describes, and the “Caribbean subaltern” with which he concerns himself, are rooted largely in Jamaica’s urban areas. I see no reason for major political opposition to land reform from the urban poor, many of whom have family “in country.” However, there is no indication that a “back-to-the-land” movement would find many adherents amongst inner-city residents, nor is it certain that lack of land is the principal driver for urban drift. While land reform may slow down rural-to-urban migration, it will not solve the pressing issues of urban poverty or social exclusion. Meeks’s (2007:172-73) statement that “all city dwellers would gain from a prosperous countryside, as urban drift would be radically reduced” might risk overestimating the contemporary significance of rural migrants to urban crises, as well as the appeal of rural alternatives to those considering a move to the city.

The final proposal with which Mandle engages is Meeks’s idea of a National Constituent Assembly of Jamaicans at Home and Abroad. This idea and the various associated suggestions for democratic and economic reform are sensible plans to effect a shift of power from politicians to the people (if not all of them are immediately feasible, the processes of constitutional reform in divided countries such as Brazil and Colombia are cause for some optimism). Here, I want to comment briefly on the role Meeks and Mandle ascribe to the Jamaican diaspora. I wonder to what extent Jamaicans “at home” are willing to accept political and economic involvement – or interference – of those who left. The recent debates over the dual citizenship of MPs – and the frustrations many return migrants face² – demonstrate an unwillingness to let Jamaican-Americans (or Jamaican-Canadians, Jamaican Brits, etc.) have their cake and eat it. Are Jamaicans in Jamaica interested in being saved by the “transformative agents of change” from the diaspora, who Mandle believes must “thrust Jamaica into economic modernity”? Or would they consider this unwelcome interference from those who turned their backs on their country when the going got tough? The fact that Jamaicans Abroad have something to offer does not necessarily mean Jamaicans at Home are interested in accepting it. Nevertheless, there are various examples of attempts to develop mutually beneficial relations with diaspora communities – such as the Person of Indian Origin (PIO) status developed by India, or Ghana’s Joseph project – and it is certainly worthwhile to explore which

2. See, for example, Potter *et al.* (2005).

economic and political possibilities are acceptable to Jamaicans both in and outside Jamaica.

JAMAICAN DISSENSUS

Meeks, in his response to Mandle, is correct to point out that Mandle's focus on economic strategy disregards the necessity of "a prior action that seems to be required to build trust and lay some foundation of greater social peace." He suggests that Mandle oversimplifies Jamaica's social categories, representing them as limited to "two irreconcilable social forces." While there is certainly substance for this charge, I suggest that Meeks's analysis is open to the same critique. In the conclusion to *Envisioning* he points to the possibility of a progressive coalition based on solidarity between the working poor, segments of the middle classes, and fed-up members of (presumably inner-city) communities. Yet in his elaboration of hegemonic dissolution, his take on Jamaica's social fracture seems to follow the "two Jamaicas" narrative, a bipolar split between the wealthy and middle classes on the one hand, and the disenfranchised, socially alienated (urban) poor on the other.

Obviously social realities are much more complex, but it is this classed and raced dichotomy – expressed most clearly, perhaps, in the social distance between "uptown" and "downtown" Kingston – that is dominant in both academic and popular narratives. Meeks (2007:62) adopts it when he speaks of inequality "sharply demarcating the upper middle and upper classes from the rest of the society." He alludes to it when he quotes Bob Marley's lyrics from the 1970s: "we nuh know how we and dem a go work this out" (Meeks 2000:52). More recently, dancehall artist Vybz Kartel captured the acrimonious class divide in the track *Dem Nuh Like We* ("they don't like us"): "Poor people / dem nuh like we ... me granny follow the system / dem treat her like garbage ... ghetto yute life don't mean nutten to dem / five [murders] a day ah the average." Such narratives draw on what I call "bipolar antagonism," a specific dualist rhetoric in which social categories are constructed as discrete and antagonistically either/or, rather than both/and. Notwithstanding the reality of multiple gradations, this bipolar rhetoric may complicate the formation of coalitions.

It seems to me that it is this rift between a largely dual, almost irreconcilable "we and them" that Meeks refers to in his book. His emphases on the "Caribbean subaltern" and the declining power of the dominant social bloc imply a contrast between two broad, culturally distinct classes, of oppressors and oppressed. Similarly, his elaboration of hegemonic dissolution evokes this split, as it is characterized by a "popular, subaltern insurgency" and "a widening fissure, from below, from the ways and means of official Jamaican society" (Meeks 2007:77). In seeking to bridge this fissure in his search for national

consensus, Meeks cannot escape becoming entangled in the long tradition of “plural society” theories that have been debated in relation to the Caribbean. The underlying question in such debates is always: how can social difference be reconciled with national unity? Meeks’s emphasis on national consensus is reminiscent of what David Scott (2000:287) calls “the Bandung project of the national-modern” in which “*difference* (religious, ethnic, cultural) is at best a distraction, and at worst a hindrance to the progressive, improving objectives of nation-state building. Difference, on this view, is essentially to be overcome (assimilated, regulated, marginalized, eradicated).”

While the national consensus Meeks seeks to envision does not appear to entail a new hegemony, his proposals can be seen as an attempt to “imagine a progressive convergence on a consensualist ideal” (Scott 2000:296). *Envisioning* can be understood as an effort to revive “the nationalist modernization project” that Scott (2000:294), using a discussion of the prominent don Zeeks, argues has been subject to dissolution.

In a way, both Meeks’s and Scott’s approaches to Jamaica’s “crisis” echo older discussions on ideology and culture (see Austin 1983). Meeks, as he tries to imagine a replacement for a middle-class Creole hegemony, suggests that a new consensus might be reached through state-sanctioned committees and other reformist measures. While I support these proposals to achieve a more equitable Jamaica, the form of these measures does not necessarily depart from traditional middle-class norms or procedures. Resolving conflict and negotiating (bipolar) antagonism along these lines might risk enforcing a new type of ideological domination. Scott, on the other hand, argues for an understanding of cultural difference and opposition that disregards the integration of different social groups, even if the integrative system is one of inequality and exclusion.

Is there a way of conceptualizing (Caribbean) social difference that finds a middle ground between, on the one hand, the unassimilable, antagonistic divisions posited in Scott’s “permanence of pluralism,” and, on the other, Meeks’s Creolesque insistence on national unity, which has historically proved problematic in its emphasis on acculturation and assimilation? Is it possible to conceive of a situation in which the absence of consensus between different social segments does not necessarily indicate crisis or insurgency, nor does it imply permanent, unbridgeable divides? Without offering any immediate resolutions to these enduring dilemmas, I suggest that the case of Jamaica’s dons presents a compelling metaphor for thinking through difference.

DONS AND DIFFERENCE

The tendency has been to conceive of donmanship as incompatible and competitive with the formal system of democratic statehood. The garrisons over which dons rule have been characterized as “states within a state.” Dudus’s

“Republic of Tivoli” was generally seen as the most developed example of such a parallel or shadow state. The most established dons preside over governance structures that offer alternative, competing forms of justice, security, and welfare, an alternative system of “taxation,” and alternative political rituals such as those evidenced in street dances commemorating or celebrating dons. These state-like entities – often violent, always undemocratic – encroach on the terrain of the formal Jamaican state. They compete with it in terms of service provision, taxation, conscription, and, importantly, a monopoly of the means of coercion. They adopt state-like discourses, for instance when extortion fees are referred to as “taxes.” Dudus was popularly known as “The President” or “Presi,” and his common-law wife went by the moniker of “First Lady.” Ricardo Wynter, the reputed leader of the Stinger Gang in Kingston’s Maxfield Avenue community, went by the nickname of “Government.”

However, the entanglement of the dons’ power structures with the formal political system and state bureaucracy suggests that we should think beyond “parallel states” that engage in competition. Rather, the two systems exist in collaboration. Dons continue to function as important inner-city gatekeepers, not only for politicians, but for government agencies and bureaucrats as well. Various MPs and government officials (as well as businesspeople and NGO workers) spoke to me of the pragmatic necessity and even efficiency of working with dons. Conversely, dons rely on politicians and state bureaucracies for the government contracts that provide a significant portion of their income. In these aspects, the system of donmanship does not engage in competition with the formal state.

It has become increasingly difficult to understand Jamaica’s formal and informal systems of rule and belonging as distinct. Urban governance is achieved through a hybrid, composite system of actors and mechanisms of maintaining order, with various shifting yet enduring coalitions between state actors and criminal organizations. Politicians and state actors use dons to pursue public goods as well as private interests, while dons use them in return with the same objectives. Inner-city residents may access certain public goods through this system of order, but ultimately they suffer. Meanwhile, the formal state and the dons’ informal state have come to form a mutually expedient symbiosis in which sovereignty is shared and capital accumulated. I suggest that we can understand these compound governance structures as “hybrid states,” in which criminal organizations and the formal state are entangled in a relationship of collusion and divestment, sharing control over urban spaces and populations.

Might we take this phenomenon of symbiotic entanglement at the level of governance as a metaphor for the way Jamaica’s different classed and cultural segments are organized? I would never endorse this hybrid state as a positive model of governance and, as outlined above, its benefits to inner-city residents are few. Rather than positing this hybrid form of governance as

a suggestion for reform, I suggest it might be useful as a metaphor for how diversity is organized, offering a slightly different way of conceptualizing the articulation of multiple cultural-political orders within one nation-state. Like these different forms of governance, Jamaica's various social categories (uptown, downtown, and their gradations and variations) are distinct yet entangled, separate yet mutually constitutive, competitive yet interdependent. These different class/cultural/ethnic/geographical categories can shape-shift rhetorically, expanding, contracting, and splintering over time, with actors within one category aligning with actors from another at one moment, only to oppose them in the next instance. The antagonisms need not be permanent, nor the fractures insuperable. Yet the coalitions will most likely not be stable either, and strategic temporary unity will not result in cultural assimilation.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Perhaps the social glue that Meeks seeks is to be found not so much in the consensus itself, but in the existing interlinkages and ongoing dialogue between Jamaica's different social categories, those links and encounters that a rhetoric of bipolar antagonism studiously disregards. Dissensus within a nation-state need not be the main cause of crisis – indeed, it is inevitable. Rather than focusing on which specific consensual coalition is capable of emerging, it might be more important to emphasize and cultivate the fora for working through different opinions, values, and (economic) interests. Such possibilities – agonistic rather than antagonistic – are in fact most evident in Meeks's proposal of a constituent assembly. For Jamaica, such an assembly would be a new forum for such meetings and debates, a new mode of working through difference without denying it.

As Maeckelbergh (2009) shows for the alterglobalization movement, attention to the *process* of organization and decision-making itself – rather than to specific goals or ideas – can entail a productive democratic shift. Moving from the question *who rules?* to the question *how do we rule?* means that common processes and practices (of practical decision-making) rather than common values can create a basis for collective action in contexts of diversity. Is it possible to focus on (or at least start out by) limiting consensus to specific, practical situations (as in effect Meeks advocates when he proposes that the constituent assembly start with adjudicating land reform), rather than demanding consensus for larger abstractions such as “a vision for the future of Jamaica”? Grounding Caribbean futures in very concrete and pragmatic forms of productive conflict – starting small, but dreaming big – as Meeks has begun to do in *Envisioning Caribbean Futures*, is perhaps the best hope we have for dismantling the state of chronic.

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