

Review - The Grenada Revolution: Reflections and Lessons

Written by John Walton Cotman

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The Grenada Revolution: Reflections and Lessons

Edited by Wendy C. Grenade

Jackson: University Press of Mississippi

Grenadian political scientist Wendy C. Grenade's book *The Grenada Revolution: Reflections and Lessons* will draw significant attention at the March 2016 Grenada Country Conference "Perspectives on the Grenada Revolution 1979–1983." In the words of Grenadian poet and novelist Merle Collins, this important interdisciplinary scholarly volume "challenges critics of Caribbean political processes to be informed in their praxis by the lessons drawn from the errors and triumphs of the Grenada Revolution" (p. viii).

Featuring the work of ten Anglo-Caribbean scholars, the book comprises four parts: "Historicizing Grenada," "Insiders' Perspectives on the Grenada Revolution," "Theoretical Critiques of the Grenada Revolution and Lessons for the Future," and "The Caribbean Left, Party Politics, and Political Transitions in Grenada." Dr. Grenade seeks to bring to light "the lessons from the Grenada experience for democratic transformation in the twenty-first century" (p. 3).

Curtis Jacobs' solid chapter "Grenada, 1949–1979: Precursor to Revolution," features the defining political events, key socioeconomic characteristics, and dramatis personae of the post-World War Two "Spice Isle." Caribbean Development Bank economist Kari H. I. Grenade presents a balanced, empirically well-documented assessment in "Grenada: Socioeconomic Overview, 1960–2012." She concludes the Maurice Bishop-led People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) "had a coherent vision for economic development; policies were well defined, but institutional and human capabilities were inadequate to effectively implement the policies" (p. 53).

Chapter four is a revealing interview conducted in October 2008 by the editor in Grenada's Richmond Hill Prison of former deputy prime minister Bernard Coard. Dr. Coard was one of fourteen convicted and sentenced to death in December 1986 for the October 1983 murders of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, Cabinet members Unison Whiteman, Norris Bain, and Jacqueline Creft, trade unionists Fitzroy Bain and Vincent Noel, businessmen Keith Hayling, Evelyn Maitland and Evelyn Bullen; and Avis Fergusson and Gemma Belmar. His sentence was commuted to life imprisonment in August 1991 and he was released from prison 5 September 2009.

One of the book's central themes is the challenge posed to knowledge by the contrast between memory and history. Both are essential for comprehending and preserving the complexities of human experience for future generations. History requires empirical verification. Memory does not. Arguably, the Grenada Revolution is the best-documented revolution to date. Scholars have yet to exhaust the rich archival materials that shed light not only on revolutions and social movements in the Americas, but theoretical and practical debates regarding the dynamics, possibilities and limitations of contentious politics as vehicles for expanding human well-being, dignity, and participatory governance.

I gauge the scholarly rigor of examinations of the Grenada Revolution by the extent to which analysts utilize five invaluable data sources: 1) Grenada Documents Microfiche Collection; 2) *Grenada Revolution Online* and archive; 3)

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The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Grenada Report *Grenada: Redeeming the Past: A Time for Healing*; 4) National Security Archives Grenada Collection; and 5) *The Grenada Newsletter*. The Coard interview illustrates one weakness of the book – most contributors do not demonstrate familiarity or mastery of the voluminous primary materials above nor of the scholarship based on them. His assessment relies heavily on self-published and unpublished materials by Joseph Ewart Layne and John Ventour – both convicted along with Coard – that scholars should review critically. Coard seems to have abandoned the theoretical and practical utility of Joseph Stalin's political ideas. They figured prominently in the PRG leader's fall 1982 "crash course in Marxism-Leninism" for the NJM Central Committee (Steve Clark, 1987, p. 41).

The limitations of memory are apparent in Coard's discussion of the Organization for Revolutionary Education and Liberation (OREL), the independent 1973–77 political current he led that fused with the New JEWEL Movement (Cotman, 1993, p. 33). Coard claims that circa 1975 "NJM did not have membership lists" (p. 63). This is contradicted by documents from Maurice Bishop's files (Grenada Documents Microfiche Collection #007213/ fiche #1/row 4).

Grenade asked if "the revolution chose to defend itself at the expense of civil liberties." Coard replied, "That is a correct characterization of the situation. I think it was misguided in retrospect and ultimately unnecessary – a strategic error. [...] The vast majority of the detentions were unjustified" (p. 72, 73).

Coard (and John Ventour) argue there is "considerable concrete evidence of Cuban interference, even imposition of decisions on the party and the PRG, playing on our growing economic and military dependence on them; and of the fatal consequences of these actions for the revolution" (p. 78–79). The extensive documentary record – numerous eyewitness accounts; internal New JEWEL Movement and Revolutionary Military Council documents; Cuban internal documents captured by U.S. forces on the isle, plus official statements from Havana – provides no empirical support for this thesis (Cotman, 1993; and Williams, 2007).

Dr. Coard asserts – despite strong evidence to the contrary (Cotman, 1993; Williams, 2007; and David Hinds in chapter 10 of the Grenada book) – that profound political and ideological differences did not exist within the New JEWEL Movement, thus they played no role in the implosion of the Grenada Revolution.

Brian Meeks' contribution is titled "Grenada Once Again: Revisiting the 1983 Crisis and Collapse of the Grenada Revolution." He was one of nine members of an organized cell of the Workers Party of Jamaica on the Spice Isle during the Grenada Revolution that worked for the People's Revolutionary Government. Meeks concurs with the main conclusions of Bernard Coard and John Ventour: 1) leading members of the Organization for Revolutionary Education and Liberation were not a distinct political and ideological current within the NJM, nor did they organize against a current led by Maurice Bishop; and 2) Fidel Castro and the Cuban leadership on Grenada intervened on the side of Bishop in violation of Grenadian sovereignty, and were partially responsible for the bloody collapse of revolution. According to Professor Meeks "much work, however, still needs to be done on the WPJ's involvement in the Grenada events" (p. 94). He concludes: "At its fundamental level, the crisis of 1983 was rooted in traditions of authoritarianism and arbitrary rule that the Grenadian revolutionaries inherited from Eric Gairy and the colonial regime that preceded independence" (p. 97).

Chapter 6 features the Patsy Lewis interview conducted a year after October 1983 with an unnamed NJM member who was eyewitness to the execution of Maurice Bishop and his allies. This chilling account captures the mindset of the New JEWEL Movement majority and the Revolutionary Military Council.

Political scientist Hilbourne A. Watson authored "Grenada: Noncapitalist Path and the Derailment of a Social Democratic Revolution." He opines that at the heart of European classical liberalism were deep structures of authoritarianism that "took firm root in the political institutions and cultural life in Caribbean colonial and postcolonial societies" (p. 122). In his view "Marxism-Leninism was not the cause of the authoritarianism that featured in the mode of governing that the NJM and PRG instituted" (p. 122). As a petite bourgeois party the New JEWEL Movement employed populism "to dampen class consciousness and class struggle to broaden and strengthen its popular base" (p. 131). Watson notes the populist Bishop "had failed to carry out his responsibilities" (p. 135), nor

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could he “repress the syndrome of the charismatic authoritarian personality of the hero” (p. 137). Both Bishop’s party allies and the NJM majority around Coard “shared authoritarian values and responsibility for the derailment of the social democratic experiment” (p. 140). Dr. Watson is especially critical of the actions of historic leaders of the Grenada Revolution who in October 1983 broke the silence surrounding the turmoil inside the NJM and PRG and took the dispute to the Grenadian people, thereby precipitating the mass mobilization of at least 15,000 who freed Bishop from detention and joined him in St. George’s (Cotman, 1993, p. 207–209; and Williams, 2007, p. 82–99).

The fascinating chapter by Tennyson S.D. Joseph “C. L. R. James and the Grenada Revolution: Lessons Learned and Future Possibilities” breaks new ground via the theoretical lens of independent Caribbean Marxist C. L. R. James (1901-1989). Joseph reveals that Bishop sought James advice regarding making a revolution oriented to building socialism in a predominantly peasant country with a tiny working class. In line with James, this chapter asserts that the New JEWEL Movement and its immediate predecessors “were consciously geared toward an enlargement of democracy in Grenada, the political education of the Grenadian masses through the medium of the mass meeting, and the involvement of the Grenadian people through mass demonstrations. [...] The proposed establishment of people’s assemblies [as] mechanisms of popular democracy [...] is perhaps the most significant political development to have occurred in Grenada, and indeed the entire Caribbean during that period” (p. 160).

In “The Challenges for Revolutionary Change in the Caribbean” Horace G. Campbell “seeks to engage in the questions of democratic participation and revolutionary change when the Caribbean peoples move again” (p. 182). He is convinced that “the implosion of the accumulation model of U.S. capitalism, along with the deepening inequalities between the superrich and the poor, means that people are actively looking for alternatives” (p. 184). To chart a course in the Caribbean “to move the region out of the grip of the economic and social retrogression that set in after the overthrow of the Grenadian experiment”(p. 197) citizens and intellectuals must study the Rastafarian cultural revolution, as well as the Haitian, Mexican, Cuban, Nicaraguan, Grenadian, and Bolivarian revolutions.

Chapter 10 “The Grenada Revolution and the Caribbean Left: The Case of the Guyana Working People’s Alliance” – the most important contribution in the book – is an eye-opening and compelling counterpoint to the analyses of Coard, Meeks and Watson. David Hinds, a political scientist and leader of the Working People’s Alliance (WPA) explains:

Because of the WPA’s ideological orientation, the developments in the early years of the revolution placed the party in a dilemma. While it viewed the revolution as a significant blow for Caribbean freedom that should be encouraged and nurtured, it was uncomfortable with some of the human-rights violations such as the harassment of political opponents and the muzzling of the nongovernment media, including closing down the *Torchlight* newspaper. The party also felt that the delay in holding elections was a costly mistake. Finally, the WPA was uneasy about the cadre party formation that had been adopted by the NJM. [...] Despite these misgivings, the WPA did not publicly criticize the revolution. [...] The problem for the WPA was that it was fighting for those very rights that the Grenada revolution was trampling on (p. 229).

In conclusion Hinds states:

Another lesson to be drawn is that closed political parties are diametrically opposed to the notion of democratic leadership. The NJM and other parties of the Left did not sufficiently distinguish between secrecy as a function of security and as a function of limiting debate and discourse on public issues. The revolution was treated as the property of the party rather than of the people who would ultimately be its defenders and nurturers. [...] Under the circumstances, one would not be out of place to label the WPA and other fraternal parties, some more direct than others, as enablers of some of the negative tendencies in the revolution (p. 238).

“Exploring Transitions in Party Politics in Grenada, 1984-2013” by Wendy C. Grenade fills a gap in the literature by analyzing the reconstitution of the isle’s party system. She concludes that a “glaring irony of the last thirty years is that the restoration of electoral democracy rolled back many of the gains of participatory democracy made during the revolutionary era” (p. 258). The book closes with the keynote address by Dr. Ralph E. Gonsalves, Prime Minister of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines delivered at the ceremony naming the Maurice Bishop International Airport at Point

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Salines on 30 May 2009. Among the invited dignitaries at this historic celebration was Cuban Vice President Esteban Lazo Hernandez (Cotman, 2013, p. 161).

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Dr. John Walton Cotman is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Howard University. His specializations are Comparative Politics and International Relations, with a regional focus on the Caribbean. His recent publications include the article Coming in from the Cold: Grenada and Cuba since 1983 and the chapter The Havana Consensus: Cuba's Ties with Five CARICOM States. Dr. Cotman is also the author of the books *The Gorrión Tree: Cuba and the Grenada Revolution* (1993, Peter Lang) and *Birmingham, JFK and the Civil Rights Act of 1963: Implications for Elite Theory* (1989, Peter Lang).