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Book Review: The Poor and the Powerless: Economic Policy and Change in the Caribbean, by Clive Y. Thomas

Winston Langley
University of Massachusetts Boston, winston.langley@umb.edu

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Book Review

by
Winston E. Langley

The Poor and the Powerless: Economic Policy and Change in the Caribbean, by Clive Y. Thomas, Monthly Review Press, New York. 1988. 396 pp.

With only brief interludes, the Caribbean area has for the past five centuries been a center of global power struggles and internal sociopolitical upheavals of the first order. Those struggles and upheavals show no signs of abating as we move into the twenty-first century. Indeed, there appears to be a consensus among scholars and political leaders in the region that the area now faces problems of crisis proportions.

This shared view that there exists a crisis does not, however, bespeak any agreement on the cause and character of that crisis or the nature of its solution. One who studies the Caribbean will quickly discover that the claimed causes and proffered solutions for the problems of the region are many and varied. *The Poor and the Powerless*, by Professor Clive Y. Thomas, author of several studies on the Caribbean and Director of the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Guyana, seeks to examine the present crisis from the standpoint of the powerless, “those who, under prevailing social and institutional arrangements, are or have been unable to exercise any control over the workings of the state, the machinery of production and all other established institutions of social authority.”

Professor Thomas’s conclusion is that for the powerless this is not so much a current crisis as it is the continuation of a crisis that has been going on for 500 years. Having advanced the notion of permanent crisis, the author does not deny other forms—those he calls periodic crises. These periodic crises, he contends, arise at certain historical junctures as dramatic accentuations of enduring socioeconomic structures: e.g., the maldistribution of income, wealth, and access to productive resources; the “scissors squeeze” on land brought about by the “disintegration of domestic food systems and difficulties with traditional export crops...and the rapid rise of TNC agro-processing industries based on imported inputs;” the enormous, persistent, and increasing unemployment; the high rates of emigration among skilled workers; the massive flight of capital—to mention a few.

To prove his claim, Thomas undertakes a history of economic development in the Caribbean (using Jamaica, Grenada, Guyana, Barbados, and Trinidad as case studies), although his primary interest is to analyze and interpret the economic development of

the region since World War II. In doing so, he not only details the evolution of the ongoing crisis and the expression of the periodic ones, but he invites the reader to grapple with the policy choices which, historically, have been made. Further, the reader gains an appreciation of the fact that alternative policies could have been pursued in the “development programs” of the region.

Thomas, in his analysis, appraises and disposes of many of the claimed causes of the Caribbean’s problems—larger global struggle, state intervention with freedom of the marketplace, weakness in ideology, defects in old paradigms, too little technology. He does the same with the solutions offered—from structural adjustment, aid, and privatization to militarization and the search for new sources of external trade. In all of these he demonstrates the region’s continued dependency on and subjugation to external control, the oppression and impoverishment of a large majority of the people who live there. So what alternatives do the poor and the powerless have? To lend support to, to agitate for, an alternative path to development.

This alternative path, according to Thomas, must be grounded on a *popular conception*, not on the conception (and the economic configurations this conception has produced) of the political and technological leadership. It is not in the interest of this leadership to satisfy the needs of a largely peasant and working class population, but rather to reinforce the existing unequal distribution of wealth and income. It is not in the interest of this leadership to effect a proper reconciliation between resource endowments and resource use but rather to produce resources according to the demand of the international capitalist system. These interests support a pattern of property ownership that has produced progressively worsening inequalities.

The alternative path would direct agricultural production towards supplying the needs of the local population and, as an extension, facilitating export specialization. This, of course, will entail radical land reform. Industrialization programs would be designed to produce basic materials; and academic emphasis would be geared toward raising the level of general and technical literacy. Thomas feels that this alternative path has already been opened up by, and is “indissolubly linked” to, the on-going social experiments in Cuba and Nicaragua.

The book is well-researched, accessible to the political economist and to the general reader with a multidisciplinary approach that allows the reader to gain several analytical perspectives. I recommend it to all who are interested in the problems of the Caribbean.

William E. Langley, Ph.D., is professor of Political Science and member of the Program of International Relations at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.