
Reviewed by Michael Franczak (Boston College)
Published on H-Decol (June, 2015)
Commissioned by Christopher R. Dietrich

Today, many Caribbean economies suffer from an economic crisis related to declining tourism, lower commodity prices, and inflated government debts. The solution for the region’s problems, according to some economists and politicians, is a larger common market for goods, capital, and labor. Supporters envision this as a significant expansion of the weak Caribbean Community, or Caricom, formed in 1973 by Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana. But many are not convinced. Larger and richer Anglophone Caribbean countries—namely, the above founders—fear that the amounts they would be asked to spend would not be proportionate to their voting powers. Smaller countries worry about their own political representation and competition in goods and labor. “This is going to be the dominant conversation that the international community is going to place on the region in the next five to ten years,” Mia Mottley, opposition leader of the center-left Barbados Labour Party, said in 2014. [1]

The history of the Caribbean federation, and the tensions that mark it, began much earlier than 2014 or 1973, as Spencer Mawby writes in *Ordering Independence*. In 1947 at Montego Bay, Jamaica, Britain and its West Indian colonies began plans for a political federation that would unite the territories in a new constitutional structure, leading first to dominion status and then to independence. Eleven turbulent years later, the West Indies Federation was formed by Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados, the three largest countries of Caricom. Its capital was in Port of Spain, Trinidad, which irked the larger Jamaica, and its first prime minister was Barbados’s Grantley Adams, the founder of Mottley’s party. The federation dissolved in 1962, shortly after Jamaica, the largest island, withdrew its membership and declared independence. Jamaica cited its larger expected financial burden and under-proportionate voting power in that decision, as did Trinidad, which was expected to fill Jamaica’s role. Both compared the protracted process unfavorably with decolonization elsewhere in the empire.

Observers and historians of the Caribbean should welcome Mawby’s book, which emphasizes the consequences of British Foreign and Colonial Office decisions during the years leading to independence on the post-colonial trajectories of Anglo-Caribbean nations and the region as a whole. Within the growing historiography, he argues, “critical narratives which focus explicitly on the inadequacies of British policymaking … [have] proved the least robust,” and “British policymakers have escaped relatively unscathed” (p. 139). Mawby uses this focus to place much of the blame for the region’s problems during and shortly after decolonization on British parsimony when generosity was needed most, namely, when the federation began and just after its failure.

In other words, Britain wanted to decolonize in the Caribbean cheaply, and during the negotiations for the federation attempted to capitalize on disputes between nationalist leaders over constitutional issues to do so. The British “liked to adopt the role of frustrated arbiter” on sensitive nationalist issues, such as the site of the federal capital and freedom of movement, Mawby writes. But “on the matter of their own powers and perquisites they adopted a latitudinarian approach which was designed to entrench their continuing influence.” For instance, one of the most controversial issues at Montego Bay was how to fund the federation. The British knew...
that Caribbean nationalists would lose domestic support if the main source was higher income taxes, and so all agreed to raise the money through customs duties. "The idea of making the cost of federation as inconspicuous as possible had political advantages," Mawby notes, "but it inevitably limited the possibilities of what the federation would be able to achieve" (p. 110).

Ordering Independence also connects the economics and control of decolonization to British racial stereotypes of the various ethnic groups of Anglo-Caribbean colonies. Tropes abounded about the necessity of a strong ruler, who would also preferably have an Oxbridge education or at least a strong affinity with British culture. They also added new significance to seemingly perfunctory matters. For instance, in constitutional discussions in 1952-53, Conservative secretary of state for Colonial Affairs Oliver Lyttleton refused to allow the pro-monarchy, Oxford-educated Adams to claim the title of prime minister (p. 99). The Colonial Office instead unhelpfully suggested "Chief Minister." The interim governor informed Lyttleton that Adams’s subsequent refusal was "understandable in a society where the word 'chief' had connotations of primitive African conditions." The governor suggested premier or principal minister as alternatives, but the Colonial Office deemed even "Premier" to be "too dignified" for Adams, despite the fact that only in 1953 did Lyttleton concede that Adams could be called the premier of Barbados, "but not, of course, Prime Minister," even though Kwame Nkrumah had by then been appointed prime minister of the Gold Coast. Adams recalled this part of the negotiations as "amusing." To British officials’ relief, as premier he "tolerated the continuation of racial discrimination on the island and the white Barbadians were compensated for their loss of political power by the retention of their social privileges" (p. 100).

Trinidad’s independence leader, the celebrated historian Eric Williams, was more outspoken in his criticisms of British policy than was Adams. But he was also a leading partner in the federation project. In making this point, Mawby captures something of the big-tent venture that federation was. Williams never forgot the racism he experienced at Oxford. He and others also closely followed the racial violence occurring in England during negotiations, as Britain’s liberal immigration bill in 1948 produced a backlash that led to the Conservatives’ restrictive 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act, the year of the federation’s demise.

As Mawby notes, the racial views of white colonial administrators also crossed party lines. Jamaica’s Norman Manley, who earned degrees at Jesus College in Oxford in 1919 and 1921, expressed this frustration in 1952 after the failure of constitutional negotiations with the new governor, Hugh Foot. Foot, who was later the minister of state for Foreign Affairs and the British ambassador to the United Nations in the Labour government of Harold Wilson, offered the new constitution of Nigeria as a model for Jamaica. Manley, on the other hand, wanted to turn to the constitution of Ceylon, which unlike Nigeria was already formally independent. Although Foot recorded that the talks “represented a big step forward,” Manley, speaking to the Jamaican House of Representatives, declared damningly that "even the most liberal-minded members of a world-governing country do not believe in the effectiveness of a colonial people to govern themselves, except peradventure where they are people of their own race" (p. 52).

The tension between the diversity of nationalist personalities and the standard racial-economic line of British colonial policy informs Ordering Independence throughout. In his conclusion, Mawby returns to his broad analysis of Anglo-Caribbean nationalists’ responses to colonialism, decolonization, and racial inequality. The American Revolution, which gets less attention elsewhere, decolonization in South Asia, Ghana’s 1957 independence, racial violence in Britain and the United States—all of these and more provided for nationalist negotiators a historical context and a sense of moral rectitude for the negotiations. At the end, Mawby stresses that the attention paid by Anglo-Caribbean politicians to "the wider project of black nationalism," especially that which emanated from the United States, "fueled a further re-examination of the relationship between political and economic independence" (p. 234).

Ordering Independence is a strong indictment of "the notion that the nationalist leaders of the Anglo-Caribbean were ineffectual in promoting the decolonization of the region," shared by what Mawby calls Colonial Office "vindicators" and today’s critics of the "inculpatory school of historiography" (p. 244). By the 1950s, the Colonial Office recognized Anglo-Caribbean states’ independence as inevitable, but the nationalists "pressed for the transfer of power as rapidly as possible, while the Colonial Office attempted to retain as much of their residual constitutional authority as seemed practicable in an atmosphere of mounting hostility to colonialism" (p. 245). This is consistent with Britain’s priorities in some other parts of the empire—most obviously, West Africa into the 1950s, when Britain finally resigned itself to re-
leasing its holdings.

Mawby also deserves credit because, even though his thesis is about the power of British colonial officials, he does not discount problems within and between nationalist political parties and personalities. The accounts of the interparty tensions between Manley and the Jamaican Labour Party leader Alexander Bustamante, and of Trinidad’s Williams with his own constituencies and opposition, are especially informative. He also pays attention to the region’s geography, social and ethnic diversity, economic inequality, and place in the Cold War. In addition, Mawby’s thorough retelling of Anglo-American machinations in British Guiana; the headache over the US military base in Chaguaramas, Trinidad; and Caribbean nationalists’ attention to postcolonial and nonaligned states and statesmen make this an appropriate addition to Palgrave’s Britain and the World series.

The region’s complexity might make this text too challenging a read for many undergraduates, but it would be appropriate and effective in specialized or advanced classes. Graduate students and historians studying decolonization, with or without a focus on the region, will gain much from reading this excellently researched and well-written study.

Note


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