THE SMALL AXE PROJECT

The Small Axe Project consists of this: to participate both in the renewal of practices of intellectual criticism in the Caribbean and in the expansion/revision of the horizons of such criticism. We acknowledge of course a tradition of social, political, and cultural criticism in and about the regional/diasporic Caribbean. We want to honor that tradition but also to argue with it, because in our view it is in and through such argument that a tradition renews itself, that it carries on its quarrel with the generations of itself: retaining/revising the boundaries of its identity, sustaining/altering the shape of its self-image, defending/resisting its conceptions of history and community. It seems to us that many of the conceptions that guided the formation of our Caribbean modernities—conceptions of class, gender, nation, culture, race, for example, as well as conceptions of sovereignty, development, democracy, and so on—are in need of substantial rethinking. What we aim to do in our journal is to provide a forum for such rethinking. We aim to enable an informed and sustained debate about the present we inhabit, its political and cultural contours, its historical conditions and global context, and the critical languages in which change can be thought and alternatives reimagined. Such a debate we would insist is not the prerogative of any single genre, and therefore we invite fiction as well as nonfiction, poetry, interviews, visual art, and reviews.
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The Frame of the Nation

Anthony Bogues

In the age of transnational capitalism, regional blocs, diasporic connections, postcolonial projects gone awry, and in the age of nationalism as the dark stepchild of dangerous fundamentalism, why would anyone want to think critically about the frame of the nation? The nation-state is a relic of early political modernity. What can one find in an inquiry into the frames of the nation other than premodern throwbacks, traditional cultures, and irrationalities? To be modern, these arguments run, is to fix our gaze on political futures that look forward, not backward. However, there is a problem with these arguments. At the base of such positions is an understanding of modernity as a singular universal process that determines all political and social meanings. Modernity drags both the colony and postcolony kicking and screaming into the present age and into a singular uniform process. Consequently, all other histories are merely secondary or derivative, as modernity reorganizes geography, history, and reason into this central singularity. Thus, the present crisis in the different Caribbean nation-states is significantly about a failure to modernize on two fronts. The first is the supposed incapacity of the region to opportunistically insert itself economically into transnational capitalism; and second is the lack of traditional liberal norms and practices in the region’s political order.

What is missing from this perspective is a critical examination of how the stubborn legacies of colonial modernity operate, how empire continues to rule the world. What is missing also is another history of modernity, not just a history of its “underside,” which has been richly documented by many of the region’s twentieth-century intellectuals.
(from C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins* to the New World Group's intellectual labor on plantation political economy to the writings of many novelists and poets). What is missing is a historical view of how human populations in the Caribbean colonies grappled with the *consequences* of modernity.

The story is a complex one. It obviously involves genocide, racial slavery, forms of indentured servitude and forms of capital accumulation. But human beings are not just victims; they wrestle with their conditions and seek meanings in their lives. Given that the colonial project's overlapping episteme can still be discerned in the hegemonic practices of the Caribbean postcolony, a real difficulty in Caribbean life is *decolonizing the mind*. This is not to say that the original work done on the economy, history, politics, and social structures of the Caribbean, work generated by the Caribbean intellectual tradition to critique and root out the colonial, has been useless. No. It is instead to indicate that there is a politics of knowledge, a politics of *naming*, which in the stark and oftentimes horrendous social conditions of our postcolony has been elided. And so, now, when we face the challenges of rethinking and grappling with the nature of collapsed political projects, the work of creating an inventory still remains.

We should by now be aware that we can no longer define politics narrowly. Thus perhaps a considerable part of the region's crisis is rooted in a politics of knowledge: the categories through which we think about politics, about social change, about race, about ethnicity and gender. Categories do not make revolution, but flawed categories can have grave political and social consequences. To discuss the frames of the nation is to critically engage the ways we think about the nation, about the discursive practices of nation-builders, poets, intellectuals and political figures, to see if we can bring to the fore another history. This is not the history of glorious mythic achievements or of rebellion in every action but an alternative history to be found in the ways that ordinary people have shaped their environment.

This issue of *Small Axe* is organized around aspects of this alternative history. We begin with an investigation of forms of nationalism in the Jamaican colonial state other than the standard narratives of Creole nationalism. From there we move on to discuss the ways in which the meanings of the different coats-of-arms became a site of contestation about the nation. We then segue into an exploration of how language is central to both the colonial and decolonization projects through an examination of the writings of George Lamming. Our next offering is a poignant short story written in Trinidadian cadences, a story that dramatizes on one level the complicated social structures of English-speaking Caribbean nation-states and on another level the rich religious experiences of the ordinary Caribbean person. From there we move to dub music. Here, dub is
examined as an aural representation of the ways in which the Jamaican subaltern male negotiates identity and belonging. Following this we have an exegesis of a Derek Walcott poem that takes the nation as one of its themes. We end this section with an essay that discusses the nature of community and belonging among black Caribbean women in London. In our book review section we offer an extensive discussion of a text that raises profound questions about the intellectual tradition of the region: Paget Henry’s *Caliban’s Reason*.

Combined, all the offerings in this issue conduct an interrogation into the frames of the nation. It is a modest start, and we can only hope that the discussions about political futures in the region will draw some attention to the discursive formations that shaped our nations. Our present crisis demands this. For if one stream of radical nineteenth-century thought demonstrated the central importance of the material and economic realms to human society, the end of the twentieth century shows us how incomplete our understandings of human social formations still are. We consistently grapple with interpretive and emancipatory endeavors, creating new knowledges and human practices as we go along, taking seriously the question “What shall we do and how shall we live?” For those of us whose nations were founded on a “modular nationalism,” the time has come for full decolonization. Such an enterprise demands that we make explicit the contours of the intellectual traditions of the region. This is the spirit in which this issue of *Small Axe* has been put together.