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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.

This issue of Small Axe is dedicated to the memory of Jim Murray (10 April 1949 to 21 July 2003), late founder and director of the C.L.R. James Institute, New York.
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Editorial Comment: Our Times

We live today not merely in morally and politically uncomfortable times. We live today, wherever we live, in a fundamental “state of emergency.” Ours is a time in which a new and ominous global project appears to be taking shape with ferocious speed and cynical justification: a new imperial project.

Since the Persian Gulf War of 1991, and with gathering momentum since the awful events of 11 September 2001, the post–Cold War world has seen this project emerge with ever increasing definition and bold and self-serving affirmation. The unveiling in September 2002 of the new “National Security Strategy of the United States of America” makes explicit as policy what think-tank talking heads (such as William Kristol and others of the Project for the New American Century) have been fantasizing about for more than a decade. In extraordinarily unilateralist and militarist language expressing its will to absolute global rule, the US state now lays claim to a variety of unprecedented rights and privileges of international conduct, among them the right to act preemptively “against . . . emerging threats before they are fully formed.” Asserting that there is “a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy and free enterprise,” the United States arrogates to itself the privilege of being the only superpower on earth. Against this unfolding background, the US war against Iraq looks less like a war against terrorism and more like the execution of this strategic imperial agenda. We deplore and condemn the war, the ensuing occupation, and the larger project of which these are clearly but moments. Small Axe stands with all those around the world who demand an immediate end to this belligerence and expansionism.
The Caribbean, of course, is not exempt from the new governing-effects of empire. On the contrary, it is our particular fate to have been brought into being historically as a subordinate part of an older (and now largely derelict if not completely defunct) imperium: the modern European empires. (See the Book Discussion section in this issue for an engagement with one account of that story.) And the individual nation-states that constitute our island-archipelago have, since that inauspicious beginning, remained vulnerable to the transformations of global capital (as the recent World Trade Organization rulings on bananas demonstrated, to the detriment of many of the smaller island-economies) and to the imperatives of US global hegemony (as the Shiprider Agreement dispute vividly illustrated). In the contemporary international organization of command and obedience, what is the sense in which these states constitute autonomous political units and exert indivisible sovereign power over the territories that demarcate them? Our Caribbean is undoubtedly faced with new and difficult challenges. The provocative image that frames the cover of this issue, Tirzo Martha’s *Silent Witness*—a chamber pot of spent bullet casings in a seemingly untroubled sea of turquoise—alerts us to the desperate fragility (the incontinent anxiety) of our dependence and insecurity.

These are our times. As we seek to confront them critically, it will not be enough to resurrect the old languages of national sovereignty and the old political doctrine of the right to self-determination. These great modernist discourses may yet retain rhetorical energy and the capacity to inspire moral outrage, but it is no longer clear that they have any critical leverage either in theoretically grasping the present as a new structure of power or in providing the conceptual tools for actively opposing it. We shall have to feel our way, but *Small Axe* is committed to this exploratory exercise and to being a vocal participant in an informed and critical public discussion about the state of our times and the possible ways beyond it.

David Scott
New York/Kingston
May 2003