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Demeaned but Empowered: The Social Power of the Urban Poor in Jamaica

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SUBALTERN POLITICS IN JAMAICA:
A REVIEW ESSAY


In a way, questions about the nature of the state are always also questions about the nature of society, and these questions tend to arise during moments that are seen to represent a period of crisis or transition. M.G. Smith’s plural society theory, for instance, arose during a time when analysts were attempting to understand the potential basis for national unity within the context of impending independence, and as Don Robotham (1980) has cogently argued, reflects Smith’s disillusionment with a particular version of the Jamaican nationalist project. During the second half of the 1990s to the present, the context is one in which the murder rate has skyrocketed and Jamaica has become increasingly integrated — though on disadvantageous terms — within a globalized political economy, prompting more and more citizens to rethink the cultural and political dynamics of what it means to be Jamaican. These new conditions impel Obika Gray’s attention to the origins and development of the Jamaican state, and its relationship to partisan violence.

In his new book, Demeaned but Empowered: The Social Power of the Urban Poor in Jamaica, Gray extends his earlier work on subaltern subjectivities and social movements in Jamaica (1991). By way of a historical exegesis of politically affiliated (and later, drug- and gun-trade inspired) gang violence in Kingston, he seeks to clarify the contours of the Jamaican state during the period leading up to independence and throughout the post-colonial era. Gray is particularly interested in how the state has negotiated, drawn legitimacy from, co-opted, and capitulated to “power from below,” arguing that “the urban poor have a political life and a moral economy whose contours require closer examination than they have received thus far” (3). Since political science as a discipline has generally been concerned with the ways people maneuver within and through formal channels of power, Gray’s perspective here follows James Scott’s emphasis on infrapolitics and hidden
transcripts (1990) — the various informal arenas in which poor and marginalized groups mobilize their own senses of political defiance and creativity. Thus, throughout the book Gray draws from both Gramscian analyses of hegemony and Foucauldian notions of power in order to make an important case for centering the cultural dynamics of politics. That is, he foregrounds the ways cultural practices and sensibilities — in this case, those of the urban lumpenproletariat — have had a critical hand in forging the taken-for-granted shape of politics in Jamaica.

In the first instance, Gray’s book is geared toward reformulating previously held conceptualizations of the Jamaican state as paternalistic, clientelistic, and authoritarian, but primarily democratic in its orientation. Here, Gray takes on Carl Stone in particular, not so much to argue against Stone’s seminal work on class inequality, violence, and state power, but to update it for the post-1989 moment and to give greater prominence to the impact of the political practices of the urban poor. For Gray, as for Stone, the Jamaican state is both monopolistic and flexible, authoritarian and adaptive — in a word, contradictory. Yet Gray does not see the state as primarily clientelistic. Instead, he argues, the Jamaican state is parasitic, a term he uses to describe a process of rule whereby the state maintains its dominance by “appropriating aspects of popular culture and blurring, even collapsing, the boundaries between antagonistic cultural forms of the poor and that [sic] of their nemesis in the class system” (5). Parasitic rule, he states, is opportunistic; it incorporates norms and practices hostile to those that are publicly proclaimed as valuable, and it undermines democracy by making predation and state violence tacitly acceptable (6). Gray’s clearest definition of parasitism appears as follows:

Parasitic rule in Jamaica is the form that state power takes as dominant classes attempt to extend their political power, control a fragmented society, manage dependence in the world system, and expunge rebellious challenges from below. Yet the exercise of parasitic rule is neither essentially for the benefit of the rich, nor unalterably against the poor. Parasitic rule is not based on an alien model of power and it is not so slavish to foreign interests that it ignores local political interests. Indeed, because parasitic rule explicitly draws on indigenous socio-political tendencies, those over whom it rules typically
experience it as culturally familiar, and even as representative of national-popular traditions. Similarly, parasitic rule does not employ state power in favour of ‘order’ against ‘disorder’; it does not valorize legal-democratic measures over illegal-mercenary tactics in political contestations, nor is it reluctant to embrace both the rule of law and the subversion of that law in making public policy. Rather than making such distinctions as a method of establishing itself as a lawful and legitimate power, parasitic rule blurs the political boundaries between the formal-constitutional and the covert-illegal (8).

Gray makes these arguments about parasitism in part to counter the crisis discourse currently circulating more generally about how current processes of globalization have eroded the power of states throughout the Global South. For Gray, as for many other contemporary commentators, the state is not collapsing. Rather, it is mutating and adapting to new contexts in ways that draw from culturally familiar forms of authority and legitimacy. Parasitism, thus, emerges as a “political strategy that state agents employ in contexts of underdevelopment where existing structures of control are no longer able to satisfy dominant group needs” (10). Gray also identifies parasitism as the defining characteristic of the contemporary Jamaican state in order to underline the now common argument that since the 1970s, and especially since 1989, there has been a transformation in the “social balance of power from the respectable middle class to the culturally defiant and irrepressible urban poor” (9). In other words, creole multi-racialism has “exhausted itself” (356), and this exhaustion has coincided with a “shifting definition of law, morality, and crime” (7). Gray suggests that these shifts do not represent a situation of “turbulence-amidst-democracy,” but instead that the democratic aspects of Jamaican statehood “have been supplanted by predatory, violent and illegal forms of rule” (6), with the state engaging in extra-judicial violence, the violation of human rights, and corruption.

Gray's book, however, is an attempt not only to characterize the Jamaican state, but also (and perhaps more importantly) to understand the social dynamics of subject formation among urban lower class Jamaicans and how these have changed since the 1940s. He argues that the social power that the lumpenproletariat has been able to accumulate and exercise since, in particular, the late 1950s has “not only entailed an alteration in the balance of power between
classes, but also produced a reshaping of the social identity of the urban lower class, stimulating in its members a lively consciousness of social inequality and a potent sense of their capacity to challenge the state” (13). In other words, Gray seeks to prove that while marginalized from processes of decision-making and policy formulation, the urban poor have indelibly stamped the practice of politics in Jamaica, imbuing it with the cultural practices and social consciousness that developed within ghetto communities but diffused to become critical components of a national socio-cultural ethos:

Contrary to the widely held view that the social actions and moral sensibility of the rebellious poor are outside the pale of Jamaican culture, these shared traditions, in which the poor participate, show that what the rebellious poor do politically ought not to be regarded as moral aberrations inflicted upon a civilized society by a criminal and barbaric class. Rather, much of what the rebellious poor do, and the moral sentiments they exhibit, should be regarded, in part, as expressions of the banal, everyday attributes of a widely shared social sensibility in late twentieth-century Jamaica (16).

The problem, for Gray, is that the lumpenproletariat's status as social outcasts constrains their ability to completely overhaul the class hierarchies that shape power relations in Jamaica.

With these as his two main points, Gray spends the bulk of the book tacking back and forth between them, simultaneously developing his arguments about the formation of political parties, how they came to rely on lumpen support, and how they sought to ensure this support through the distribution of benefits solely to party loyals, thereby giving the lumpen a power that far outstripped their numbers, and his arguments about how these very lumpen developed moral and social codes that then came to influence the country as a whole through its system of political leadership and patronage. Thus, Gray covers quite a lot of ground with this book. He moves decade by decade to amalgamate and expand upon familiar stories about how middle class politicians mobilized the black poor in their struggle for power.

During a period when politicians are being publicly challenged for their association with known gang leaders in communities throughout Kingston and St. Catherine, and when there has been debate about the signing of yet another political code
of conduct, Gray points fingers and names names as he gives his account of the development of housing communities loyal to one party only and the violent resettlement of party hostiles; the distribution of jobs and contracts to party supporters; the employment of juvenile gangs as political enforcers with turf battles being drawn into political service; the transformation of working-class neighbourhoods into martial political enclaves; the rise to power of "top rankings" under the patronage of particular politicians; the ways the 1974-1979 period of ideological extremism became tied to the already rampant ghetto political wars; the convergence of violence from political warfare and violence associated with the drug trade in the 1970s and the subsequent rise to power of the community drug don, now able to compete successfully with politicians in their ability to provide spoils to community members; the growth and internationalization of independent criminal gangs, itself linked to the drug and gun trades; the parties' decreasing ability to provide patronage, especially after the IMF agreements signed in the late 1970s; the retreat, beginning in the late 1980s, of politicians from gunmen; and the proliferation of new tactics of popular protest such as the roadblock.

Gray begins his story with the founding of the PNP and JLP, pulling together documentation of the ways both parties used political spoils to woo supporters and ultimately victimize the opposition. For Gray, this process starts with Bustamante, but is quickly picked up in retaliation by PNP leaders. He documents the various crises, strikes, and states of emergency that accompanied the emergent political war, which involved (by 1947) the recruitment of "defenders" from its rank to do battle (28). Gray also argues that by 1947, guns had "increasingly become a weapon of choice in the ongoing war" (30), but that "the real nexus between guns and politics in Jamaica was not definitively forged until the run-up to the 1967 elections" (79). He chronicles the history of violence and counterviolence, and the struggle over the West Kingston constituency that initially rejected Bustamante, but ultimately embraced Seaga, and later outlines the career trajectories of various "top rankings" and community dons.

Gray argues that while "benefits politics'... enveloped the urban poor in a violent partisanship inimical to the cause of national unity against colonial rule" (32), thus forging a link
between political identity and cultural identity, by the late 1940s, the lumpen had other cultural and ideological models as well. For example, Rastafarianism and forms of Ethiopianism and (later) rude boys prevented complete acquiescence to the Jamaican creole nationalist project or to the state's clientelist methodology, and the urban poor maintained a degree of cultural autonomy. Though they did not define party policy or have formal power within parties, because "benefits politics" drew from more general cultural values related to individualism and authoritarian partisanship (85), it gave them some modicum of the power to define the political culture of the society "in ways which suggested that the parallel influence of the traditional middle class and their values were being eroded" (86).

For Gray, this gives the lumpen a privileged and important role in relation to national politics, but this is not the role originally envisioned by Garth White (1967). In other words, Gray insists that lumpen race and class consciousness does not necessarily make them the revolutionary vanguard. Yet at the same time, he does see them — at least those who became enforcers for parties and unions — as enacting "small acts of resistance" (64), primarily through their ability to influence dominant political culture in Jamaica while also maintaining a lifestyle alternative to that professed by the uplift-oriented advocates of creole multi-racial nationalism. This is a lifestyle that emerges out of shared cultural expressions including "a syncretic religious life in forms as various as Rastafarianism, revivalism, and pukumina; an ethno-national consciousness that affirmed non-negotiable loyalties and beliefs about the primacy of Africa and concern for the fate of Africans in Jamaica and in the wider world; a vernacular language that communicated ideas and beliefs through orality and kinetic expression; participation in forms of leisure and sport in which concern for mastery and group uplift were manifest; and mutual awareness of a self-owning freedom that resisted the moral authority of their social betters and the compulsion of governing institutions" (92). It is this shared cultural basis, Gray argues, that defines the contours of lumpen social consciousness and that, in conjunction with the experience of post-war urbanization and class discrimination, "gave the group a strategic role in the society as an aggrieved formation that could not be ignored by politicians" (84). For Gray, by the early 1970s as politicians increasingly mobilized the symbols of popular street
culture in their election campaigns as a way to demonstrate their own legitimacy and authority, it was the urban poor who dictated “the terms for evolving claims to cultural authenticity and personal respect” (128).

This is a very important point, but becomes a difficult tightrope to walk analytically speaking. Gray states that his project is not geared toward defining the extent to which lumpen antisociality and outlawry is emancipatory or conservative, or the degree to which it is motivated by ideological or material forces. He wants to move beyond the binaries that often shape analyses of subaltern political expression, arguing that what is critical is that states have had to take notice of forms of social outlawry since they raise questions regarding political legitimacy and authority. Here, Gray echoes other scholars who have argued that the search for everyday struggles among subordinated populations has led many scholars to romanticize resistance rather than examining the specific strategies of power implemented locally (Abu-Lughod 1990), and that the attempt to demonstrate that marginalized groups do, in fact, possess historical consciousness is often riddled with the acceptance of structuring binaries without an analysis of how these binaries are in fact produced as the result of conditions of power to appear external to practice (Mitchell 1990).

Yet Gray sometimes slips into exactly the kind of analysis he is attempting to critique here. For example, he argues, “the social power of the urban poor expressed itself through autonomous, small, persistent, and cumulative acts of individual and group empowerment inside and outside of state apparatuses” (12). The question raised here is “cumulative” toward what? Using that word signals a kind of teleological perspective, an expectation that these small acts will ultimately topple power relations as we know them and institute some other, perhaps more egalitarian, set of political and social arrangements. And further, his palpable disappointment with the PNP’s involvement in the development of mercenary violence, despite its history of socialist mobilization, signals a sense that an impending revolution was betrayed. Nevertheless, these infrequent instances do not overshadow Gray’s main objectives.

The great strength of Demeaned lies in its insistence on the mutual imbrication of middle-class politics and lower-class socio-cultural dynamics, and its blow-by-blow delineation of how this
relationship has changed (and deepened) over time. There are, however, two directions for critical commentary that I would like to take up and both, in different ways, raise methodological issues.

The Question of Evidence

The first point I would like to develop has to do with the ways Gray presents his arguments. He relies on many familiar published sources to make his points, as well as archival newspaper research and a few interviews with key political figures. This generally serves him well in the construction of his narrative. But in chapter four during his exegesis of the social consciousness of the poor, he makes various assertions that seem to rely on psychological and sociological argumentation without presenting readers with original evidence. One of the spaces this becomes clearest is when he discusses the influence of American popular culture within the sphere of ghetto life. He argues that some inner-city dwellers were able to creatively adopt and adapt American popular forms within a Jamaican idiom, but that for the majority this was not possible:

Indeed, locals with limited or no direct contact with American society and culture experienced nostalgia for the culture and ambience of that nearby industrial society as if it were their own. One consequence of this de-territorializing effect of America's cultural reach was that many among the urban poor experienced a palpable cultural disruption. For many Jamaicans, there was a disjuncture between the misery and hardships of their lived experience on the island and the imagined experience of participating in the material well-being, consumer tastes and popular culture imported from a highly industrialized society. This contact with distant American others through travel, film, music, radio broadcasts and pulp fiction therefore transported Jamaicans — including large contingents of the urban poor — into an American-dominated and worldwide political, economic and cultural space” (100).

While it is true that the United States became the dominant cultural, political, and economic force in the Caribbean region in the mid-twentieth century, this paragraph raises many questions. What does Gray mean by “cultural disruption”? What does this look like? What are its effects? Is the kind of “cultural disruption” occasioned by American media qualitatively different from that occasioned by
British colonialism? If so, how? Is "nostalgia" for American ways of life distinct from the nostalgia for empire that is sometimes expressed by those at all levels of Jamaican society? Beyond a short description of some musical performers, influenced by the figure of the black American hipster, who wore dark sunglasses and otherwise appropriated "a medley of expressive styles and affective-libidinal norms drawn from elsewhere" (108), we don't get any concrete examples of how Gray is linking American cultural influence to the development of political gangsterism in Jamaica. Elsewhere, he writes about how American Westerns influenced rude boy sensibility, and though these are important insights, Gray should do more to demonstrate how we get from A to B, rather than to just argue that we do.

This is the case as well when he discusses the lack of privacy within Kingston yards, and how the "intensely public nature of daily life in the ghetto caused slum-dwellers to adopt protective poses" which "allowed the poor to assume militant identities they hoped would ward off shame and protect their identity" (104). Again, here the analysis begs for evidence — some commentary by various slum-dwellers, perhaps an ethnographic observation, even citations from the ethnographic studies that have been commissioned by international agencies and conducted by UWI research teams — that can propel us beyond the reproduction of the kind of psychological argumentation presented in texts like Cool Pose (which Gray cites) and other aspects of the culture of poverty literature (which he doesn't). I do not raise this issue to challenge Gray's findings, but to make the point that because this is such a critical aspect of his intervention, it warrants further development. I was, by the way, surprised to find no reference to Erna Brodber's (1975) seminal work on daily life in Kingston's yards within Gray's extensive discussion of how these same yards provided the backdrop for lumpen social consciousness, and this actually brings me to the second issue I would like to address.

Gender Trouble

There is an unacknowledged debt to feminist scholarship throughout Gray's book. Feminist social scientists, after all, have been among those who have most forcefully argued for a concept of power as shifting, dynamic, and relational, and who have insisted
that we take seriously the cultural dimensions of politics. There are two consequences of not engaging some of the insights raised throughout this literature. The first is a lack of gendered analysis in the text, despite a couple very important (though short) analyses of the contours of Jamaican masculinity. What this means is that political actors seem exclusively to be men, and beyond occasional references, women are largely absent from this text altogether. The second consequence is that Gray misses important connections that he might otherwise make in relation to the links among nationalist projects, gender and sexuality, and notions of middle-class respectability.

Regarding the latter, Gray discusses the late-1980s and early-1990s concern with “slackness” in terms of the kinds of anxieties it provoked in relation to middle-class cultural hegemony. He argues that the preoccupation with slackness revealed something greater, that “clashes over sexuality starkly posed the issue of whether moral culture as an independent force was having negative consequences for Jamaican governance and economic development (316). This is an important point, to be sure, and is one that could have been made even more strongly had Gray pointed out that these concerns were not arising for the first time in the 1980s, but in fact were foundational to West Indian nationalisms. His discussion of what he calls “Jamaican exceptionalism” — the creole nationalist project that arose during the 1940s — misses the gendered dimensions of this project, arising as it did on the heels of the Moyne Commission Report that connected what the authors saw as “defective paternity” and “dysfunctional family structures” to fitness for self-rule (for an extensive discussion of these issues, see Reddock 1994). In other words, several feminist scholars have pointed out how notions of creole respectability and nationalism were founded upon gendered and sexual anxieties. This is a point Gray seems to acknowledge with the following statement: “sexuality and gender, like race and class in this postcolonial society, were bases of social stratification and determinants of social inclusion and exclusion” (313). Yet stating this and showing it are two different things, and he might have pointed us to the many analysts who have demonstrated the various ways in which nationalist (and post-colonial development) projects throughout the Caribbean have operated through gendered exclusions (see, for just
a few important examples, Barriteau 2001, Barrow 1998, Mohammed and Shepherd 1988, Mohammed 2002).

Reorienting his analysis in this way might have also pushed Gray to develop a point made by Brian Meeks (1994), one of his main interlocutors — that the death of the creole nationalist project can also be read as the death of a particular masculinist project. This kind of reorientation might also have given his discussion of slackness a sharper spin, especially in relation to the arguments he makes about how, within the context of 1980s cultural and political conservatism, “flaunting sexuality was now a means of social struggle, and an expression of badness-honour” (313). Here, he might have engaged more directly with Carolyn Cooper’s early work on the topic (1989, 1993), as he seems to reproduce her argument that overt expressions of sexuality among black women within the context of dancehall directly challenges middle-class nationalist notions of respectability and turns conservative Jamaican norms of propriety and comportment on their head. This is a point that has also been made by Gina Ulysse (1999), who has argued that dancehall culture has also served to liberate the black female body from the more patriarchal elements of Rasta queendom.

Relatedly, Gray presents us with extensive discussions of the domains within which men establish respect and leadership within ghetto communities and how this influences lumpen social consciousness, yet we do not get a similar sense of women’s activities, spaces for women’s leadership, or women’s work, with the exception of a short section on the informal economic sector and the proliferation of higglering as a form of self-help activism that develops among the poor in the 1980s (yet even here, we are not referred to the fairly extensive literature that has pointed out how women’s participation in this sector shaped more general consumption practices, patterns of self-making, and new measures of status among the population as a whole). The effect of this elision is that “black mastery from below” (113) seems to be something only developed by and embodied through men, despite the fact that ethnographic treatments of women’s lives in ghetto communities do exist (see, for example, Bolles 1998a, 1998b; Harrison 1988, 1997). The one place Gray begins to mobilize a gendered analysis is within his discussion of masculinity. Here, he argues the following:
As in the wider society, manly honour in the ghetto was based first and foremost on notions of sexual prowess, martial valour, skill in gambling and domino playing, as well as athletic prowess. A society-wide male capacity to drink and 'hold' one's liquor without getting drunk was also of some importance. That and respect for an ability to smoke large quantities of marijuana with masculine ease, all pointed to alternative norms by which some male ghetto-dwellers sought respect. In sum, proud manliness, overweening heterosexuality, norms of badness-honour and yearnings for community racial uplift distinguished these contrary jobless youths in the ghetto from their conformist peers (169).

These are, indeed, critical points that support Gray's assertions regarding the ways normative lumpen masculinity has shaped more general notions of what it means to be a man (and an effective politician) in Jamaica (see also Chevannes 2001, Douglass 1992). But here is where an engagement with some of the literature on performativity may have helped him to make stronger inroads into a gendered analysis, especially since he uses performance metaphors such as “dramaturgy,” “performance culture,” “theatre of identity” throughout the book with some frequency. Given Gray's ample interest in the use of the body (e.g., “the infra-politics of the urban poor therefore depended on a dissident black body that was employed as a cultural weapon” (117), he might be interested in drawing from feminist philosopher Judith Butler's (1993) reworking of linguist J.L. Austin's notion of the performative power of words (1975) to address questions of identity and identity politics, and in particular, of the use of the body and the development of ideas about gender and appropriate sexuality.

I have gone on about the gender issue at some length here not to single out Gray for chastisement, but to suggest that this elision is a common problem within political analyses of West Indian societies, and one that persists despite the now enormous body of literature written by feminist scholars within and beyond the region. To talk about a gendered analysis of politics is not only (and I would argue, not primarily) to talk about so-called “women's issues.” It is, instead, a way to analyze how national formations are not only racialized and classed, but are also structured and effected through ideologies about gender and sexuality. These are not separate domains of analysis (that is, gender is not some kind of
superstructure hovering above the “real” problem of class analysis), but race, class, gender, sexuality, and generation all constitute each other within and through changing formulations of nationalisms and counter-nationalisms.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Gray, like most Jamaicans, is interested in what the future holds, and in how Jamaican politics can move beyond its historical beginnings, beginnings that have resulted in a “fusion of warlordism, political gangsterism and democratic politics” (320). Toward this end, he concludes the book by looking at two new developments that occurred in the 1990s—first, the articulation of a language of political reform by politicians and public officials; and second, an awakened civic and political activism among middle-class Jamaicans, evident through the establishment of organizations like the New Beginning Movement, CAFFE, the New Democratic Movement, Jamaicans for Justice, and others. Despite this burgeoning activism, Gray seems pessimistic about its ability to really transform, in part because he contends that the contemporary political scene is dominated by a turn toward neoliberalism and managerialism that accords with the terms of the Washington Consensus, yet does little to actually democratize political institutions or ideas about what it means to be a modern citizen. In fact, he argues, managerialism coopts oppositional voices by seeming to give them a stake in power. This point may be underlined by the Chief Justice’s recent outburst at the conclusion of the trial of former police superintendent Reneto Adams and other policemen for the killings in Kraal, Clarendon, chastising what he perceived as disrespectful gesturing on the part of Carolyn Gomes, leader of Jamaicans for Justice.

What, then, are the solutions? For Gray, one important beginning would be to jettison concepts of “civility” and “civilization” which, he argues, because they are integral to the cultural logic of capitalism, stress hierarchical racial difference and therefore eternally marginalize black lower class Jamaicans (357). He suggests various models for renewal, including the Rastafarian notion of “social living,” “grounding,” the “partner” system of lending, and popular pedagogy (“each one, teach one”). His point here is that critical intellectuals must replace the narratives of
modernity and progress that have undergirded elite nationalist visions with the “concepts and problematics that are informed by the contributions of Caribbean Africanisms” (361). That this is not a concrete programme for action only reflects the difficulty of our contemporary position. Gray is tackling important questions at a critical time, and like other political analysts, is attempting to rethink the legacies of modern democracy, a political system that, in its ideal, boasts equality and liberty but in its actually-existing forms, has proven to be compatible with (and, indeed, forged through) slavery and other forms of racial terror. Demeaned gives us a window into the specific dynamics of these processes in Jamaica, providing great insights into the dialectic that shapes hegemonic power in Jamaica, and provocatively suggesting new directions for research and action.

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