

Kristina Hinds (2019). *Civil society organizations, governance and the Caribbean community*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. xix+200pp. ISBN: 978-3-030-04395-7. Hbk: €74.89. E-book: €58.84.

This volume by Kristina Hinds represents a recent wave in critical Caribbean scholarship. This wave turns away from liberal, structural and Marxian economics, institutional politics and cultural pluralist paradigms that used to dominate Caribbean studies. These paradigms, driven by the academic elites at the University of the West Indies, had focused on class, race, ethnicity, market, mode of production and small size as organizing concepts for deterministic accounts of Caribbean reality. They lost traction under the changed conditions of neoliberal capitalism and its discourses. The new framing that Hinds represents is more nebulous, emphasising intersubjective meanings from standpoints of gender, language and ethical values. The interpretive methods familiar in History and Literary Studies are applied to social and political phenomena. This new Caribbean approach is part of the constructivist trend in global scholarship. In this epistemology, the main factor in the explanation of social change, is the constructed meanings arising from public discourses, and inherited from the colonial past.

Hinds employs this epistemology to address the phenomenon of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the English-speaking Caribbean. She describes the range of such organisations to be found in the region, analyses the usual patterns of their relationships with

national governments and regional inter-state bodies, and advocates for the greater inclusion of CSOs in governance at national and regional levels.

Her descriptions are clear and rich, amply supported by references. The writing flows well and the text is logical in layout. The colour graphics are crisp and arresting. We are given a general overview of the typical relationships between governments, CSOs and regional bodies, specifically in the Caribbean Community treaty system (CARICOM). She supports this with more in-depth treatments of Barbados and Trinidad & Tobago. Her empirical narrative is strong and provides a platform on which other scholars can build, even if they may disagree with her epistemology.

The main problem that Hinds considers is the paradox of democratic politics and authoritarian governance. Citizens are periodically mobilised to participate as the audience in election campaigns and as voters at regular intervals. Yet they are shut out of the on-going governance that proceeds between elections, even while the policies that affect their lives are developed, negotiated and implemented. Thus, Hinds' question becomes: how might CSOs play a more active role in governance and in the deepening of democracy in the Caribbean? The fact that these are small island states is implicit; but questions of size, location and distance are conspicuously absent from the analysis in this volume.

The elements of Hinds' analysis are mixed. Her brief historical analysis clearly shows us that the exclusionary instincts of governments and bureaucracies around the region are a legacy of British colonial styles of direct and indirect rule, slavery and suspicion of emancipated Blacks. While the incumbents are now locals, and race is less of an issue, the high-handed approach and classist authoritarian instincts remain. Such civic bodies as do function in the region, either operate as elite-led benign charities, or are engaged in activities that supplement or support state projects. Grassroots CSOs are of many kinds and are not necessarily genteel, polite or peaceful. They arise from social forces who have been left out of the trickle-down benefits of plantation economies and mineral resource monocultures. These groups create self-help organisations from their own agency and creativity, and in some cases from retained African strategies of collective micro-financing. Such CSOs are marginalised from engagement with the state or with CARICOM.

And yet, the dynamics of neo-liberal globalisation have deepened inequalities within and across the region. These arise from patterns of trade and investment. The ideological mechanisms that justify these global and regional relationships include positivist economic theories about markets and development, and political theory about the desirability of open institutions that can be monitored from Washington DC and Wall Street. Their policy prescriptions for accountable neo-liberal governance may look attractive from the perspective of grassroots CSOs but are more likely to serve hegemonic interests. It would have been helpful if Hinds had told us how bottom-up assertions by CSOs are situated in context of such global and hegemonic discourses, as they struggle over the attention and agendas of Caribbean states.

There are clearly structural features of power at play along lines of class, ethnicity, and institutional form. They are not purely the product of a failure of elites to listen to and in social conversation. It is not clear in Hinds' rendering how a constructivist explanation accounts for power inequalities, or why the older paradigms in the Caribbean are inadequate for the task. If constructivist explanations are not exclusive, then how are we to synthesize explanations that show how the dynamics of discourse shape the use of power to either block participation or open the democratic process?

Then there is the question of geography. Caribbean countries are islands and enclave territories strung out from each other. Hinds notes the closer cooperation that has long existed among CSOs, states and regional bodies in the English-speaking Eastern Caribbean cluster of countries. But she does not surface the analysis that size and proximity might have affected the flows of ideas, or even required cooperation because of economies of scale. What are the logistics of communication that shape discourses?

This brings us to Hinds' advocacy. Her normative preference is for deeper democracy through the widening of participation of CSOs of all class and gender backgrounds in management, policy-making and governance throughout the period between general elections. She presumes a consensus for the deepening of democracy throughout the region and gives evidence of it from publicly stated policy goals. However, Hinds does not closely interrogate the content and sincerity of that democratic vision, or whether democracy means the same things to all social groups in both public institutions and civil society. This is surprising for a constructivist. She calls for a culture shift that will lead to institutional change. Changed values will lead to changed conversations; and changed conversations, it is claimed, will lead to new institutional forms and practices. But who is the audience of this call? Who is likely to respond to such a message? If it is the poor and marginalised, how do scholars get them engaged and empowered to seize the initiative? If it is the political and administrative elites, what will make them want to ditch the status quo and move resolutely towards a more democratic culture and practice? Is it love of and adherence to democratic ideals, or pure moral reason? Is it the inexorable logic of liberal, free-market "development"?

Herein lies the difficulty in constructivism as a philosophy of history and as a theory of social change. It asserts that discourses lead and shape history; but does not explain how discourses themselves are affected by power structures in economy and polity, or where the motivations come from that lead to changes of heart. Nowhere in this volume do we get even an inkling of where the energy and appetite for reform will come from, in order to move Caribbean societies beyond deformed and stunted economic and political institutions. Yet it seems to be these structures that provide the unequal power, and entrench the interests that block the deepening of democracy.

It seems that we cannot so readily abandon the legacy of realism, market and class analysis that had laid the foundations of social-scientific and historical criticism in the Caribbean after all. In true Caribbean tradition of synthesis, we could combine theoretical insights. We could show how structural power in economy, bureaucracy, political parties, gendered divisions of labour, ethnic privilege and inherited habits of thinking shape world-views, norms and discourses. Earlier scholarship can still be of help in understanding the respective contributory factors, even if their models are outdated. Scholarship from the 1980-2000 period, by Norman Girvan, Rhoda Reddock, Cynthia Barrow-Giles, Don Marshall or Aggrey Brown, offers some promising ways to combine analysis of changing forms of political economy, with critical interpretations of the associated contending discourses.

Thus, while conversations and discourses do shape agency, they may not be independent historical factors, and may be weaker than entrenched power and elite interests. Whilst there may be contending discourses of democracy in the region, Hinds implies that there is national and regional consensus about what democracy should entail. Hinds' epistemology is descriptive, interpretive and normative, but not dialectical. It tells us what futures to aim for, but not how we will actually get there. If discourses shape agency, what are their psychological

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or communicative dynamics that move mountains, or push small islands closer? This volume has whetted our appetite for an answer.

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