

# One Thing Led to Another

*Influences on my choice of subjects and approach*

## An Autobiographical Note by Norman Girvan

My field is the political economy of development. My work has been mainly concerned with the harmful effects of certain metropolitan institutions on the development of the Caribbean and other areas of the Global South, leading to strategies for independent development and self-empowerment. Within this broad approach, I have addressed issues and case studies in foreign investment and multinational corporations, dependency, technology, the IMF, debt, social development, Caribbean integration and the relationship between power and development knowledge. I realise that this is a somewhat wide range of subjects, but one thing always led to another, and the connecting thread is there. I get particular satisfaction from examining inter-relationships among issues that are normally compartmentalised; and relating them to a bigger picture. Over the years I have also mixed academic work with forays into the world of government and international organisations related to these subjects.

I was born in Jamaica in the early 1940s; a time when the society was emerging from colonial rule. My father had thrown himself into the [community development](#) movement spearheaded by Jamaica Welfare and the nationalist project of 'building a new Jamaica'; I think much of his passion must have rubbed off on me. At Calabar High School in the 1950s, we were fortunate to have a group of talented and capable teachers, possessed of a nationalist ethos and devoted to their calling. I learnt about the Arawaks and Rastafari in second form and about Toussaint and Christophe in the fourth; was immersed in the great Shakespearean political dramas; and studied the momentous political movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Class sizes were relatively small and there was intense student-teacher interaction, which lent itself to what is now called 'critical thinking'. History, literature and Spanish were my favourite subjects; evidently this was a major influence on the issues I later chose to address and on the way I addressed them.

In 1959 I won a scholarship to study economics at the University College of the West Indies. There was much excitement—Arthur Lewis had just been appointed Principal, and the West Indies Federation had been launched. In [Remembering C.L.R. James](#) and [New World and its Critics](#), I try to evoke the spirit of my Mona days. Significant intellectual influences included Roy Augier, M.G. Smith, Lloyd Best and Alister McIntyre. Fellow students Orlando Patterson and Walter Rodney were among my closest friends. I entered Mona as a Jamaican nationalist and left as a Caribbean regionalist. I have never recognised a contradiction between the two; the one melds into the other seamlessly; and I believe that anyone who thinks otherwise either does not know our history, or chooses to deny it. Regionalism is a passion and a recurring subject of my work.

In 1962 I received another scholarship to do my doctorate at the London School of Economics. My thesis was on the contribution of [foreign capital to Jamaica's](#) economic development in the post-war period; this was motivated largely by the 'industrialisation by invitation' policies of the time. Jamaica had experienced a growth boom due largely to investment in the bauxite industry; but I concluded that the growth was not self-sustaining because the required structural changes in the economy had not taken place (this was confirmed after 1972, when the investment cycle in bauxite came to an end). I attributed this in part to the effects of foreign-owned institutions in the economy, particularly in the bauxite industry and the financial sector, and to the pattern of public expenditure financed by foreign loans.

But it was the subject of bauxite and the multinational corporations (MNCs) that most excited me; and this was what I pursued in my early post-doctoral work. My thesis was that corporate vertical integration of the MNCs discouraged the kind of integration of the mining sector with the host economies that was required for it to realise its potential contribution to development. Inputs were sourced externally, raw materials were processed abroad, production could not be adequately taxed, and profits were reinvested abroad. So I argued that regional bauxite exporters should form an association to

negotiate jointly with the MNCs, increase taxation, secure state participation in ownership, and implement a regional industrialisation strategy. My [monograph](#) on the subject was part of the UWI Integration Studies best known for the seminal study by Havelock Brewster and Clive Thomas and was meant to be one element in a comprehensive programme of regional economic transformation. I subsequently generalised the analysis to the case of [multinational corporations in mineral-export economies](#) in the Caribbean and Latin America; this paper was prepared for the plantation economy study project of Lloyd Best and Kari Levitt. My work on bauxite became associated with policy initiatives such as the nationalisation of bauxite in Guyana and ownership localisation in Jamaica, the formation of the International Bauxite Association and Jamaica's bauxite production levy (I acted as a government adviser for the first two of these). My book on [Corporate Imperialism](#) represents a kind of synthesis of this line of my work.

Immediately after completing my doctorate in early 1966 I had joined the UWI Economics department at St Augustine; later that year I transferred to Mona, where I taught until 1973. During those years I was active in the [New World Group](#) (I served as Chairman of the Mona Group in 1966-1969) a Pan-Caribbean intellectual movement that aimed to indigenise economic and social thought in the region. I was also associated with the *Abeng* newspaper during its brief existence in 1969, which combined Black Nationalism and Marxism in a radical race/class perspective on Jamaica. In 1969/1970 I spent time in Latin America (mostly Chile), on a Ford Foundation/ISER Fellowship and then at the Economic Growth Center of Yale University on a postdoctoral fellowship to further the work on MNCs and the mineral industry. The study of [Chilean copper](#) was one of the results.

My interest in Latin American *dependencia* thinking was a natural outgrowth of work on MNCs and Caribbean dependency; the similarities were obvious, and I returned to Chile for two months in 1972 to do research comparing the Latin American and Caribbean dependency schools. Another product was a think piece on the Political Economy of Race in the Caribbean and Latin America that has attracted some interest. Contact with Latin

America heightened my awareness the region's rich intellectual tradition and more sensitive to the cultural prejudices that cause the Anglo-Saxon world either to ignore it or to belittle its importance.

In 1973 I resigned from UWI to take up an appointment at the UN's African Institute for Development and Planning (IDEP) in Dakar, on an invitation from Samir Amin, then Director. My main responsibility was to develop IDEP's research and teaching on multinational corporations. It was around this time that I began to work on the subject of technology transfer--I had earlier done a study of transfer of technology arrangements in Jamaica, and MNCs were the main channel in which this was supposedly taking place. When I returned to the Caribbean in 1975 it was to coordinate a regional (University of Guyana/UWI) project of technology policy studies that had been developed by Maurice Odle. The task was intellectually challenging in that the team of researchers was both regional and multidisciplinary. My contribution was to propose a conceptual framework of technological dependence, technological underdevelopment and technological dysfunctionality for interpreting the Caribbean situation; and then to identify policies for capability development to break the vicious cycle. My own book on the subject was one of four which resulted from this project (Owen Arthur, the current Prime Minister of Barbados, was a member of the project team and co-authored of one of these).

By the time the studies were published the policy environment had changed, and the kind of active technology strategies we proposed were discouraged by the Washington Consensus of the 1980s and prohibited by the TRIPS agreement under the WTO in the 1990s. The TRIPS agreement is now widely recognised as being inimical to the interests of the developing countries, as I pointed out in my [Patel lecture](#). I believe that the conclusions of the CTPS studies are relevant today.

Around the time that the technology studies were being completed I got caught up in the ideological debates over democratic socialism in Jamaica and the role of the IMF. By early 1977 I had joined the Michael Manley administration in Jamaica as head of the government's planning agency, in order to oversee the preparation of a 'people's plan' as

an alternative to the proposed IMF programme. The plan was completed in record time, with several thousand suggested projects coming from the general population. The government nonetheless negotiated an IMF loan, believing that it was the only means of staving off complete economic collapse. I stayed on to prepare a five year development plan. Within less than four years, and after two failed IMF programmes, the Manley administration was voted out of office. The experience taught me a great deal about the real world of government, economics and politics. My reflections on the lessons learnt continued for several years: initially I focused on the role of the IMF; subsequently I emphasised the nature and dynamics of the internal [political economy](#) as decisive factors in the failed experiment. My paper for the Conference on the 1970s, Not for Sale, should be read by anyone with an interest in that turbulent period and in my interpretation of events.

Shortly after the fall off the Manley Administration, in 1981, I accepted an appointment in the research arm of the United Nations Centre on Transnational Corporations in New York. This was my first experience as an international civil servant. The work was interesting—I prepared a chapter in the Centre’s Third Survey on TNCs, and studies of TNCs and the transfer of technology and of their role in non-fuel primary commodities; the last being a kind of reprise of my earlier work on bauxite. But it was also frustrating—although the Centre was created to strengthen the hands of developing countries in dealing with transnationals, we were not allowed to publish anything that might offend the Americans or the Russians. During this period, I also directed a series of month-long training workshops on technology transfer and development in Africa and the Caribbean; my book with Kurt Hoffman distils the substance of what we learnt and tried to communicate in this project.

In 1985, I was happy to return to Jamaica and to academic life at the Consortium Graduate School of Social Sciences on the Mona Campus of the UWI; first as a faculty member, and then as Director from 1987. Here I was challenged to provide leadership for an experimental multidisciplinary programme of postgraduate training in the applied social sciences. I view with satisfaction the fact that under my stewardship the CGS

produced around 100 graduates, many of whom went on to make notable contributions in academia and government; and established a reputation for excellence in research and multidisciplinary studies.

The responsibility also encouraged a degree of cross-disciplinary excursion on my part. I found myself engaged in Rethinking Development as well as discussing Jamaica's external debt; in reflecting on Jamaica's experience in community development as well as researching the impact of new information technology; in speculating on the relationship between economics and the environment as well as bemoaning the social consequences of Jamaica's currency liberalisation. Cross-disciplinary orientation is most explicit in a book resulting from the conference on [Poverty, Empowerment](#) and Social Development and a monograph on the Caribbean rather provocatively entitled Societies at risk?

During my CGS years I began to think of myself as a kind of 'transdisciplinary political economist'--a hybrid creature that does not command ready acceptance in an academic environment marked by increasing disciplinary specialisation and compartmentalisation. For the same reason my idea that the CGS model of postgraduate training could form the basis for the creation of a single graduate faculty in the social sciences did not find favour with colleagues in the regular departments. The epistemological issues related to inter-, multi- and trans-disciplinarity were explored in a paper I co-authored with Kirk Meighoo. Although interest in this subject appears to have died; I believe there would be value in revisiting it. My recent report on a [Vision for Caricom](#) employs a holistic multidisciplinary perspective; and its positive reception suggests that this might be an effective approach for building stakeholder consensus around developmental goals.

Another aspect of my work in this period was Caribbean integration. In 1987 I had helped to found the Association of Caribbean Economists (ACE), the brainchild of my colleague George Beckford, as a pan-Caribbean association of economists in the critical tradition of the New World Group. ACE has held regional conferences and workshops and published books on [structural adjustment](#), the social aspects of development, alternative development strategies and regional integration. I was particularly interested in

strengthening links between the English and non-English speaking countries of the region as a means of enhancing their sovereignty in the wider world and especially vis-a-vis the hegemon of the North. For instance, there was the need for collaboration in confronting the challenges posed by the FTAA project.

The opportunity to work on this ‘from the inside’ came when I accepted election as the Second Secretary General of the [Association of Caribbean States](#) (ACS) to serve from February 2000 to February 2004. My efforts were aimed at rationalising and prioritising the ACS’s programme by focusing on functional cooperation in trade, transport, sustainable tourism and natural disasters; and to ‘build bridges’ between the English- and non-English speaking countries. I succeeded in the first task but not as well in the second. Caricom countries tend to give priority to building the CSME and to their extra-regional trade relations; the Central Americans opted for a trade agreement with the US (CAFTA-DR), and the countries of the Group of 3 and Cuba have preferred to pursue their regional goals through bilateral programmes. The ACS experience is evaluated in my book, [Cooperation in the Greater Caribbean](#). During these years I did a number of occasional lectures on various aspects of Caribbean integration, and wrote a weekly newspaper column; many of these can be still be found on the ACS website or in the book.

On leaving the ACS I returned again to academic life; at the UWI’s [Institute for International Relations](#) in St. Augustine, Trinidad, as Professorial Research Fellow. I have continued to work on Caribbean integration, specifically the Caricom Single Market and Economy (CSME), focusing on the problem of the ‘[implementation deficit](#)’, issues of sovereignty, and the limited benefits expected from a purely market-centred approach to [integration](#). I have proposed that the vision for the Community’s development should be all-encompassing, and not just about trade. My report on this subject was approved by the Caricom Heads of Government as a framework for the future development of the region. Currently I assist the Caricom Secretariat by coordinating the preparation of a Regional Strategic Development Plan.

I have also deepened my interest in the development of Caribbean economic thought and on issues of knowledge and power. This subject has become topical because of growing disenchantment with neo-liberalism (and its correlate, corporate-led globalisation) and renewed interest in contextually grounded economic analysis. It was interesting to revisit [Caribbean dependency thought](#) after a break of over three decades and to speculate on its contemporary relevance. This review led to papers on the New World Group, on the contribution of [Arthur Lewis](#), and on the relationship between Lewis's work and that of [the plantation school](#). I have drawn on this work to explore issues of [policy autonomy in the Global South](#). A recent paper on power imbalances and development knowledge is an overview of North-South relations from a political economy perspective and on the use of knowledge as an instrument of domination/empowerment. I subscribe to the view that true sovereignty begins with independent and critical thought, which this must remain the goal for those who have been subjected to centuries of colonisation and metropolitan imposition of one kind or another.

One particularly enjoyable offshoot of my work has been preparing tributes to outstanding individuals with whom I have been associated in one way or another. These include [George Beckford](#), [Lloyd Best](#), [John and Angela Cropper](#), my father D.T.M. Girvan, C.L.R. James, [Kari Polanyi Levitt](#), Arthur Lewis, [Michael Manley](#), and [Surendra Patel](#). These appreciations have helped me to better understand the intellectual, social and political currents that shaped me personally and the times in which I lived.

The years have passed quickly: I am still startled when I meet young people who were not yet born at the time of the New World Group, the Rodney Riot in Jamaica, Trinidad's Black Power Revolution, or the 1970s. Absence of personal memory is understandable, less so is absence of knowledge of these and other events, and of the people who helped to make them, among the younger generation. We cannot chart our future unless we know our past; nor can we see further than those who came before us unless we 'stand upon their shoulders'. Reading is a constant source of pleasure and discovery; and I enjoy writing even more now that the pressures of academic publication are absent. The world has obviously changed a great deal since the 1960s: to old problems, such as global



inequality, have been added new and infinitely more complex issues, notably the environmental crisis. In my youth the fear for the future of mankind was of nuclear annihilation; today it is of damaging our planetary life-support systems beyond repair. It is also astonishing to me that the kind of 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialism that was thought to have been banished by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has returned with renewed force in the 21<sup>st</sup>. I do not see how thinking and informed people of today can fail to address these issues; or at least can fail to take account of them in the work that they do.

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