

Jamaica's Paradoxes

BRIAN MEEKS

In his new book, *The Confounding Island*, the eminent sociologist Orlando Patterson returns, following many intellectual detours, to considering the present and possible futures of his homeland. Patterson's preoccupation, one commonly found in Jamaican discourse and Caribbean studies generally, is what he refers to as the "Jamaican Paradox." What accounts, he asks, for the country's inordinately large international profile, its globally recognized excellence in sports and popular culture, and an accompanying name recognition far beyond its minuscule size? And why, at the same time, does the island seem caught in a developmental trap, with four decades of economic stagnation and a daunting social sclerosis glaringly evident in a murder rate that regularly registers among the highest in the world? Patterson's explanations are complex and difficult to summarize. Suffice it to say that while he eschews simple answers, he places significant weight on institutional solutions.

In the first chapter's title, Patterson poses another typical question: "Why has Jamaica Trailed Barbados on the Path to Sustained Growth?" Both Barbados and Jamaica are former British West Indian colonies with predominantly African-descended populations and outwardly similar histories. Yet Barbados, by far the smaller of the two, has outpaced Jamaica on all criteria for economic growth, development, and social well-being. Patterson counters the prevalent argument that "good policies" explain Barbados's success. He suggests that the peculiarities of its history led to the development of institutions that allowed an emergent class of black state builders not only to absorb policymaking techniques from the British, but also to learn how to effectively implement them. This did not happen to the same extent in Jamaica, where cultural and institutional learning followed a different path, leading to the emergence of

The Confounding Island: Jamaica and the Postcolonial Predicament
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state builders with limited capacity to make policy work.

This institutional turn by Patterson, building on perspectives advanced by the economist Daron Acemoglu and others, delivers many insights. I am concerned, however, that by emphasizing institutional acuity, he misses other essential distinctions between the two countries. In Barbados, for instance, the white planters settled and remained after slavery ended, unlike in Jamaica, where absentee ownership—always a main feature of its slave plantation system—only increased in the decades following emancipation.

This tendency for the owners of capital to hedge their bets was thus embedded in Jamaica's social DNA. That might help explain why, at the first hint of radicalism on the part of Prime Minister Michael Manley's democratic socialist government in the 1970s, local capital decamped—and has not truly recommitted to the island since then. While it is true that Barbados never experienced a radical moment comparable to the Jamaican 1970s, the long history of compromise and accommodation between white Barbadian capital and various black postcolonial governments has undergirded Barbados's relative economic stability by retaining significant wealth on the island. Patterson doesn't say much to counter this argument; his foregrounding of institutional capacity effectively ignores it. (Another question is whether Barbados can count as a success story any longer, in light of its own recent experiences with budgetary overreach and fiscal crisis.)

In his second chapter, Patterson addresses the agonizingly stubborn persistence of a culture of violence in contemporary Jamaica. Using transitional state theory and sweeping comparisons drawn from international development data, he concludes that Jamaica is stalled on both the curve to full democracy and the curve to "self-sustained" economic growth. This has been compounded, he says, by "overurbanization," very low levels

BRIAN MEEKS is a professor and chair of Africana studies at Brown University.

of employment, particularly among youth, and what he describes as pervasive miseducation that leaves many with sufficient schooling to see and articulate a better life, but insufficiently skilled to change their conditions. I find this chapter less convincing, both in its reliance on comparative global statistics, which elides a discussion of local causation, and in its underlying and far too sanguine assumptions about the actual democratic content of Jamaican democracy. Patterson pays too little attention to recent Jamaican history—particularly how, in the first postcolonial decades, politicians encouraged the arming of partisan factions and the institutionalization of so-called garrison communities.

His third chapter, “Were Female Workers Preferred in Jamaica’s Early Development?” is more compelling. Retracing the brutality of slavery and the distorted version of capitalism that subsequently emerged, he concludes that the notion that the female population was disciplined and incorporated into the workforce, while men were marginalized and thus excluded from disciplinary regimes, is a nonissue. The system was equally brutal to both, but women still suffered, particularly through gender bias in pay and sexual violence in the workplace. I agree with Patterson’s conclusions, though I am uncertain as to how this chapter blends with and builds on the book’s earlier chapters.

TOP PERFORMERS

The following three chapters are, unsurprisingly, the most entertaining. Patterson brings his sociological lens to bear on two instances of outstanding Jamaican international success—in the spheres of athletics, particularly sprinting, and popular music, notably reggae. He also explores the specific historical forces that led to a riot in 1968 at a famous cricket match featuring the West Indies and England.

These three chapters show Patterson at his best, as he explores the deep institutional roots, cultural traditions, and reinforcing effects of cumulative success that brought Jamaica, over many decades, to the highest levels of sports and popular music, garnering huge global recognition. He explains how generations of Jamaican musicians have used the institutions and structures of globalization to absorb, while subtly modifying, various genres such as blues, calypso, and jazz in order to invent entirely new forms like ska, rocksteady, reggae, and dancehall. These new forms, in turn,

through secondary migration, have helped to give birth to further global hybrid genres, most notably hip-hop.

Patterson offers a bracing case study of the impact of cross-cultural fertilization and skillful interweaving of the global with the local, or “glocalization,” in the past half-century. He persuasively proposes that if the lessons derived from these experiences—particularly the sheer self-confidence and creativity that rocketed Jamaican music to the top, or made the sprinter Usain Bolt a global star—were deployed in other avenues of national endeavor, this might jump-start the country out of its long economic stagnation.

LIFETIME ENGAGEMENT

In a later chapter, Patterson revisits his own role as an adviser to Manley in the 1970s to describe in a very concrete and often heartbreaking way their failed attempt to introduce and implement basic welfare policies for the poor. By examining his experiences as the government official charged with not only designing these policies, but also guiding their implementation, he gives substance to his central proposal that the ability to implement policy was often inadequate or missing in Jamaican institutional and social development. The book’s final chapter is also about Manley—an interesting if somewhat nostalgic reflection on the personality, philosophy, and life of this leader of the 1970s social-democratic movement for popular empowerment.

The Confounding Island is a worthwhile read. Patterson’s lifetime engagement with Jamaica and its difficult postcolonial passage deserves careful analysis, and his focus on institutional weaknesses is clearly one important avenue of explanation that demands further consideration. However, it is pursued at the expense of others that equally require attention.

How much weight, for instance, should be given to the sheer power and obstinacy of Jamaica’s dominant elites, who, working with the United States, brought the Manley regime to heel in the years leading up to the bloody election of 1980? What effect did the defeat of Manley’s People’s National Party have in undermining the very sense of popular self-confidence that Patterson recognizes as a key element in any successful project of national development? How much emphasis must be given to the role of the international financial institutions that insisted on ruthless, ideologically driven austerity policies from 1977 to the present,

ravaging the poor and leading to an unprecedented emigration of skilled Jamaicans from the working and middle classes? What about the politics of partisan clientelism, which, pioneered by the right but ultimately indulged in by both major political parties, laid the foundation for deep divisions, tribalism, and urban warfare?

These questions suggest my own view: deep structural inequalities in Jamaica are reflected in the political system and routinely sideline the majority from participating in any meaningful form. This exclusion has been exacerbated in the neoliberal era by the effective gutting of the last ves-

tiges of a political sovereignty that had only begun to consolidate in the 1970s. Attempts to reset Jamaican development by reforming institutional, managerial practices will likely prove unsuccessful without also addressing the overarching problems of entrenched inequality, social marginalization, and limited democratic engagement. What's needed is the kind of political will that can both advance reforms to improve the situation of the majority, and work beyond the confines of the nation to build transnational coalitions able to confront the inequities created by concentrations of global financial and economic power. ■