West Indian Nationhood and Cricket in the 21st Century
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The most recent developments in West Indies cricket continue to illustrate in the clearest terms the opinion that the age of globalization is revealing the incoherence and contradictions of traditional forms of nationalist thinking in the West Indies. Neocolonialism imposed a proliferation of artificial political sub-units upon the Caribbean world, promoted them as viable nationalisms, and sought to stabilize them constitutionally as unitary states during the 1960s and 1970s.1

Today, an incipient social pessimism is emerging, coupled with a new sense of dependency upon multinational financial and corporate institutions as guarantors of economic progress, social order and political viability. Historical interpretations now show clearly that the invention of these subnation states in the West Indies during the anticolonial struggles was regressive and driven by conceptually weak, sociopolitical thinking. The desperate need to restore the integrity of the dishonoured integration movement remains, but the will of political management continues to weaken and pale before the reaction of shortsighted, factional interests.2

Cricket has carried the nationalist baton so far, and has done an outstanding job with respect to holding the people together, but it too is now falling victim to the persistent game of political insularity and factionalism. The fall of cricket, as a metaphor for nationalist society, indicates the ascendancy of new and more potent social forces within the region. The political inability of West Indians to construct an integrated nationhood, after decades of effort, suggests that cricket has functioned during this time on the basis of a promise, or dream, still unfulfilled. The thesis here is that it will not find new energy sources and new visions for the 21st century until the process of creating an integrated West Indian nationhood is advanced in concrete political and social ways.3

No greater mistake can be made than to assume that globalization presents the West Indies with ‘a level playing field’ on which all nations compete and cooperate on an equal footing guided by rules of mutual interdependence and social justice. As an ideology, globalization is articulated and legitimized by the powerful nations, and resisted by the poor nations with the will and courage to do so. Vulnerable and insecure nations are forced into line through fear of retribution from the institutions of wealthy nations, such as the World Bank, the IMF and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). These nations have had to suppress nationalist sentiment while their economies are ravished by policy doctrines designed to facilitate the rich nations and impoverish their own citizens.

Not surprisingly, the region is currently engaged in a debate as to whether cricket culture will wither away and die in the age of globalization. Focus on this issue began in earnest during the early part of 1997 with statements made by Austin ‘Jack’ Warner in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Cricket in the West Indies, declared Warner, president of the Caribbean Football Union and an International Football Federation (FIFA) Vice President, “is dying a slow death”. “Imagine,” Warner said, citing the second Test between the West Indies and India at Queen’s Park Oval, during the 1997 tour, “you have both Lara [Brian] and Tendulkar [Sachin] in the Oval and the crowd. I had more people in my office!” The reason he gave for this
prediction is that the administrative leadership of West Indies cricket has been “far too conservative over the years”, and is responsible for the game’s failure to move with the times”.  

Warner’s remarks may not have touched the raw nerves of West Indies cricket officials, but the public did ponder the extent to which they were valid. In Barbados, for example, consensus exists on the point that the quality and quantity of cricket played in the schools has diminished substantially. In Trinidad and Tobago, in the Leewards and Windwards, no more than a handful of spectators turn out to watch club cricket; Jamaica’s organization of a ‘county’ championship, drawing upon some Test and national players from other West Indian nations, has had only moderate success. There is, furthermore, considerable evidence to support the concern that this withdrawal of enthusiasm seems to go all the way up to Test matches where inconsistent and unpredictable attendances continue to bother cricket officials.

The needs of a 21st century cricket culture can only be met by real social advances in the integration of West Indian nationhood. Only a free and open social interface of West Indian citizens can release the levels of energy, the cohesive mentalities, the cosmological identities, and sense of collective purpose and struggle that West Indies cricket needs for the future. The social collapse of contemporary island mentalities, caused in recent years by insular subnationalisms that are frustrated under the weight of their limitations in postcolonialism, can only be reversed by such a shift in the paradigm of West Indian integration.

West Indies cricket has outlived the structures of existing subnationalisms, and is now tortured, torn and undermined by persistent efforts to contain it within them. At every level, the search for advancement and spatial liberation has manifested itself clearly. With respect to financing, management training, coaching, and education, the need for an integrated West Indies response stands before us like a monument. The social cohesion necessary for high performance requires a cultural infrastructure of existential oneness. West Indians must be allowed to live in real terms the meaning of their wider regional citizenship. At present, they are imprisoned with their West Indianness within the walls of islandism; they cannot live what history has made of them, and herein lies the tragedy.

History has situated cricket at this time to call forth advances in the formation of an integrated West Indian nationhood; the chickens have come home to roost. While West Indians remain marooned and detained within the boundaries of subcommunities and not free to be West Indians who can vote with their feet, the West Indies cricket team is likely to be perceived by all as an aberration of an ancient dream rather than a missile of a viable mission.

The era of globalization requires, as a strategic response to achieve a future performance rising, the creation of something structurally new but conceptually ancient – a politically independent, socially unified West Indian community. The subnationalisms that have their origins in English colonialism, and the insularity they have bred, have no place within the postmodern world. West Indies cricket culture demands one national expression, not 14, or 15, or 19. Cricketers need to represent a ‘real’ country, not the imagined, fragmented conceptual network that is the ‘West Indies’. The twenty-first century is demanding a brand new ball game.
The dominant strategic response of most West Indian states to globalization has been to go it alone. In most areas of economic and political life, they have charted and designed singular responses. The proliferation of foreign policy positions and tourism promotion projects attest to this. This approach, that has fractured and marginalized CARICOM, has found its way, naturally, into the cricket culture.

In an article entitled “A Kingdom’s on the Line”, Tony Cozier described a future in which West Indies cricket stands diminished and stripped of developmental values. While he clearly laments this state of affairs, he feels powerless in the search for restorative responses, and intimates that the first generation of good twenty-first century cricketers will be socially phenomenal rather than logically inevitable. He talks of a team lacking in “pride and discipline” and riddled with “internal bickering”.

While the compelling truth of such narratives cannot be denied, nor the accuracy of their detail questioned, they do fall short, however, of offering an explanatory framework within which conceptual insights can be gained. Essentially, they point to much larger questions that require urgent answers, particularly as they are necessary for the guidance and comprehension of the post-Lara generation.

Cricket, it may seem to some, is unlikely to be a site of cultural resistance in the future as it has been during the twentieth century. If this is so, and I do not think that it is, then the issue of its relationship to a refashioned nationalism does not constitute an ideological crisis. Neither should it exercise our imagination, since the view that a game is ultimately only a game would not be contentious, and questions concerning the public’s historic social investment in the game would be irrelevant.

But the issue of resistance, in many ways, will be more relevant in the age of globalization than before. For sure, the search for clear and precise ideas about identity and terms of survival now seems more frantic and immediate. Twentieth century cultural resistance had, as its focus, the legacy of British imperial domination. The bipolarity of the discourse, described variously as anticolonial and as decolonizing, nonetheless privilege the English as a benchmark and in turn sanctioned Englishness as inheritance. One of the effects of globalization will be to break down the walls of this ambivalence and to redefine the contexts of new forms of resistance.

It is highly unlikely, then, that cricket and nationalism will part company in the age of globalization. The importance of nationalism, in its new regional format, will be demonstrated in ways that correspond to the forms taken by globalist agendas. Furthermore, nationalism will require principal sites on which to display its relevance as a political and cultural ideology. The structural marginalization of the Caribbean’s poor, highlighted by the more aggressively integrated economies of the region into global networks, will set up contradictory political positions and processes. In turn, they will reveal the tensions inherent in the variants of nationalist ideology that confront West Indies cricket.

Globalization, furthermore, will promote, as a result of the dialectics of these developments, the struggle of the poor for institutional inclusion as a right of citizenship. This disenfranchised group of citizens will continue to see personal success in terms of effective access to regional
institutions, particularly those that offer considerable social status, prestige, and financial remuneration. Also, the traditionally included social groups will assert their hegemonic power and authority to ensure that institutions remain globalized rather than confined to local engagement. Globalization in this circumstance will serve two opposing purposes: to radicalize the poor, and consolidate the rich. Nationalism, then, will continue to function as a technique, or strategy, of seeking a global competitive advantage for the ‘local’ - both rich and poor within it. West Indian elites and masses will generate nationalist sentiments in these contradictory ways, and cricket culture will remain a principal site of political and social contest.  

But nationalism will not be presented and promoted in twentieth century ways: neither will its connections to cricket culture. Both will feature in a dramatic reorganization of ideological and political content, and will renegotiate the terms and conditions of their relationship. The overwhelming fact around which the renegotiation will take place is that the honeymoon period, the nationalist era, is agreeably over and that new loves are visibly competing for an equal share of attention. Cricket culture has monopolized the social gaze of nationalist sentiment for the better part of the twentieth century and, as a result, has generated considerable jealousy among the officials and practitioners of other sports. The ideological returns to the nation-states were considerable, if measured in terms of two decades of global dominance. While citizens will continue to expect similar returns on their enormous social investment, the market economy of globalization will not legitimize nor promote traditional monopoly activity.

In some respects this is a healthy and progressive development that indicates the considerable social and cultural growth of the region in recent decades. The fact that West Indian societies functioned, essentially, as a one-sport culture, represented as much an imposed narrowing of possibilities as a conscious decision to consolidate and efficiently maximize the use of scarce resources. During the twentieth century, most young men with sporting ability were forced by circumstances to focus their vision and energies on the pursuit of cricket excellence. This was both a blessing and a curse. Critical mass was achieved for cricket as a result of the monopoly practice, but society was denied the opportunities of achieving cultural excellence in other fields. The success of West Indies cricket in the age of nationalism was in fact the triumph of village culture, and the celebration of the processes that informed the making of the village. Gary Sobers was an urban villager of the 1950s and Viv Richards a rural product of the 1970s; both learnt cricket in much the same way and connected their respective villages to the national and international with the same set of codes and commands that gave social meaning to the development discourse of independence and sovereignty. In the village you not only learnt how to play cricket; you learnt how to master it, and why being excellent was necessary.

The village as a development project is now obsolete. The postnationalist village is stripped of its moral and cultural integrity, and functions primarily as a materially depressed environment without intellectual self-criticism and conceptual direction. Being from the village will no longer denote exposure to high standards and critical discourse. Rather, it will indicate entrapment and marginalization. As such, the village mentality will emit a hardened anger flavoured by low self-esteem. Suburbanism has ripped the spirit from the village leaving it exposed to a public policy of pity that is framed in language such as rural renewal and urban development. The village is no longer a land of hope and commitment to social idealism. It therefore cannot be expected to enhance the twenty-first century cricket culture.
Inhabited by spiritual despair, villages now harbour safe-houses for narcotics, crime, and the worst types of antisocial action. Today, village youths are exposed daily to the crisis of care and character that stalks their journey to maturity. The implosion of culture has rocked cricket to the core. Mentalities so designed cannot be shaped by the quest for mastery and excellence. Neither can they be networked into the culture of the team as a philosophical metaphor for social living. The sense of simmering violence that connects one street to another does not discriminate between sex and age, and the notion of not bowling short to tailenders as a principle of social conduct is read as farcical rather than comical. No cricket culture can survive in this environment and produce results consistent with the public expectations of nationalism.

Cricket, furthermore, will continue to shed elements of its reputation as offering an avenue out of the social chaos lived daily by the underclass. There are other options; but most of these carry a high leisure component. Cricket requires too much discipline and dedication for these minds bred in a culture of low self-esteem and disillusionment. As the factories of the old towns close, and high-tech information jobs in the service sectors develop in the new towns as the lead employment areas, the underclass will be driven into further despair and desperation. Cricket cannot hold their imaginations because its value system is antithetical to their survival strategies. Furthermore, as these economic problems intensify, middle class suburbia will see them as the pool of criminal material that threatens civic society - including the very value system of cricket and organized leisure. Cricket, then, will become a principal site for the class struggle in much the same way that it expressed racial contest during the twentieth century. The main difference will be that the working class will wish to undermine and refashion the traditions of the game rather than demand popular inclusion and leadership.

In all of this the extent to which cricket is truly reflecting postmodern sensibilities and mentalities will become clearer. The rejection of discredited mid twentieth century notions of nationalism will be complete, and young cricketers will speak of new forms of ideological representation. The first concept to be fully abandoned relates to playing for one’s country as the ultimate priority - above self and beyond the grip of the market. The liberation of the individual player from the dictates of cricket boards and other nonplaying officials is the objective of this process of change. Players will require their own agents to represent their financial interests in all negotiations with officials, and the team, as a collective, will be more clearly seen and understood as an aggregation in pursuit of maximum market returns. It is in this sense that cricket will finally shed its nineteenth century aristocratic ideological baggage and go headlong into postmodernity.9

The nature of the decision will have enormous significance for the manner in which cricketers are represented and understood socially. The concept of the gentleman player will finally give way to the superstar icon of the mass media whose identity is created and reproduced as a necessary strategy to ‘sell’ news. The privatization of players by the media will alienate them further from real-life communities, and their media relationships will emerge as the primary form of public engagement. Such persons will not be able to represent real-life communities in the traditional ways. It will be their constructed personalities that will do the representation, rather than their sporting competence. Citizens will identify with players not exclusively for their performance results, but because their projected characters legitimize certain forms of social conduct and opinion.
There is no turning back. Lara, the first multimillionaire, globally commodified, entrepreneur of West Indies cricket, has opened the doors for the twenty-first century generation. Those coming behind him will see his corporate style and connections as the global norm, and will articulate their entrepreneurial interests in ways that transcend the WICB’s notion of what is good for West Indies cricket.

Lara is undoubtedly the esteemed hero and role model for teenage West Indians. For some, his unprecedented financial success represents proof of the arrival of their generation at the gates of the global corporate economy. At a time when the region’s economy is characterized by structural decline and a general inability to guarantee that living conditions for the majority will improve, Lara’s success brings a gloss to an otherwise dull and dreary economic landscape. Others admire his courage and tenacity in telling the WICB that they cannot rule his life nor determine the contents of his decision making. In addition, his declaration of a right to lead, based on his success, represents for the youth a triumphalist mentality that is not intimidated by traditional convention and by the authority of conservative elders. For all these reasons, the youth support Lara’s style and strategic reactions while turning their backs on what the WICB represents and the positions it adopts and defends.

For the post-Lara generation cricket will still be called to perform similar to that experienced in the 1950s and 1960s. It must, despite pressure from other games, recapture the imagination and interest of the majority of youths. The spark generated by Lara at the grassroots level at the end of the twentieth century, will be expected to generate light for as long as possible. To extinguish it will be to the region’s peril; if skillfully protected it can rekindle a sense of hope desperately needed among socially disillusioned poor.

The post-Lara generation will, more than likely, be youngsters who suffered through a poor educational experience, or dropped out and became social victims of the class war. Many of them will be persons whose chances at reasonable levels of education were severely diminished by virtue of the structural inadequacy of the educational system in general. In other cricketing countries, on the other hand, cricketers will come with a more advanced exposure to formal education, including knowledge of the technologies of modern societies.

How then, will cricketers of the post-Lara generation, marginalized and unprepared for the technology driven age of globalization, be prepared to come to terms with the transformations of international cricket? For sure, there need to be a strategic response from the tertiary education sector, and UWI should provide the lead. Basically, what must be done is that each cricketer should be taken through an educational process that seeks to nullify the damage done at the secondary level. Specially designed programmes in science and humanities, with critical exposure to pedagogical issues, should be integrated with training and coaching programmes. The objective is to advance the cricketer’s mentality by two decades with respect to information technology, history, strategic planning, psychological dexterity and financial organization.

By the time each cricketer makes it to the Test team, he should be competent in the skills necessary for engagement in the age of globalization. He should also be computer literate, knowledgeable in the political sensibilities required for social representation. The educational
The programme should be designed to produce the results obtained socially by cricketers in more advanced technological societies. That is, it should leap over the socioeconomic reality of Caribbean society and locate the cricketer ahead of the times. As a special operation in educational development the programme should focus on the target of professional performance, and should be systematically offered to all levels of regional cricketers.

The creation of a cadre of specially educated cricketers in a controlled academic environment would be a reasonable strategic response to the enormous social investment in cricket made by West Indians in both the ages of colonialism and of nationalism. If the region cannot be expected to produce certain mentalities naturally, an institutional intervention should prompt the process by means of a conscious simulation of the future. This is important, since the evidence suggests that West Indian societies in general are likely to lag far behind in technological modernization as we progress into the twenty first century. The creation of a special cricket enclave should be seen in much the same way that governments and entrepreneurs see special export processing zones and technology parks. It would keep West Indians in the ball game until such time as the society as a whole can be restructured and energized for active engagement with globalization. 11

It will be renewed remit for West Indian cricketers, invested with a relevant education exposure, and rooted within an expanded sense of regional identity, that will provide an important decisive site for the promotion of 21st century brand of sovereignty. The significance of this achievement cannot be underestimated. West Indies cricket can continue in 20th century modes. In much the same way the West Indies cricket under the leadership of Sir Frank Worrell won the debate as far as West Indian national independence was concerned, the post - Lara generation will be faced with such questions. As such they will reflect the wider challenge facing the Caribbean in post modernity.

Notes


10) Ibid.