

# The Kingdom Of The Netherlands In The Caribbean. The Need For A Critical Imagination ~ Francio Guadeloupe (In Reaction To Denicio Brison)



*Reality is not defined by matters of fact. Matters of fact are not all that is given in experience. Matters of fact are only very partial and, I would argue, very polemical, very political renderings of matters of concern and only a subset of what could also be called states of affairs.*

(Bruno Latour)

The counter arguments put forward by Brison in this volume are eloquently phrased, and convey his concern for the welfare of Sint Maarten. Nevertheless they are fundamentally flawed. I shall not address all of his arguments in detail. Instead I will focus on the two major poles around which they revolve. These are Brison's defence of nationalism, and mathematics as a solution to solving the inevitability of autochthony politics. Reading against the grain and in-between the lines, I have come to the conclusion that he is advocating a sophisticated form of Black Nationalism.

Behind Brison's politically correct phrasing, excusing autochthony, mathematics creeps up as the magical solution. Through mathematics one would be able to find out who fits where in the world, which people should reside where in the world, and when a society has reached its tolerance level. Later in his rebuttal to my essay Brison asks why I call statistics, which to a large extent is based on mathematics, a weapon often employed to discredit the governing capacities of Antillean civil service, 'a moral science'? The answer is a simple one. Many intellectuals, who employ statistics to address complex societal matters, reduce the flow of life to a set of hegemonic variables upon which they make equations

and then state 'the facts do not lie'. What they omit is that these 'facts' are based upon the mathematical and computational models they choose, and the significance they assign to the variables. Moreover, there is always narration in mathematical models. And it is these narratives together with the techniques employed that define and construct 'the facts'. Mathematical facts employed in social life do not speak for themselves. There is power and interests behind these.

Unspeakable horrors have been committed when the moral science of statistics has been combined with a politics based on autochthony. Think of the far too little documented fact of eugenic projects implemented in the late 1800s and 1900s throughout the Americas. Statistics, mathematics, and the pseudo science of raciology, were presented as evidence that blacks were degenerates. Legislators and leading intellectuals in Brazil and Argentina reasoned that it was better to encourage immigration of European immigrants since these were supposedly fitter than Africans and Asians. Europeans would not exacerbate the tolerance level of these societies (Andrews 2004). In one sense, it is striking that these earlier proponents of mathematical solutions to immigration employed many of the variables that Denicio Brison does. Education, 'racial similarity', and prognosis of integration all ranked high in their elaborate argumentation. They were advocating a practical morality and not what they considered the unrealistic humanism of those who dared dream of a raceless and classless society. My unease at the similarities between Brison's solution and that of the white racists of old, and those who keep the faith in the many power centres of the world, was brought to rest after re-reading Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993).

*The traditional teaching of ethics and politics—practical philosophy—came to an end some time ago, even if its death agonies were prolonged. This tradition had maintained the idea that a good life for the individual and the problem of the best social and political order for the collectivity could be discerned by rational means. Though it is seldom acknowledged even now, this tradition lost its exclusive claim to rationality partly through the way that slavery became internal to Western civilisation and through the obvious complicity which both plantation slavery and colonial regimes revealed between rationality and the practice of racial terror. Not perceiving its residual condition, blacks in the west eavesdropped on and then took over a fundamental question from the intellectual obsessions of their enlightened rulers. Their progress from the status of slaves to their status of citizens led them to enquire into what the best possible forms of social and*

*political existence might be* (Gilroy 1993: p. 39).

Gilroy shows that most blacks were able to create practical philosophies that transcended ideas of nation and ethnicity, however, he also remarks that black nationalists coloured the racial philosophies of the former rulers brown. They eavesdropped on their former master's concerns without employing their critical imagination, and rebuked the humanism of the common folk for being too naïve: a case of false consciousness. And thus when one looks closely at staunch black nationalists and their white counterparts, one observes that throughout history there have been many similarities. If white was labelled an essential identity, then radical blacks asserted blackness. If whites argued that to every people belongs an exclusive right to a territory, then black nationalists forwarded the same logic. If whites claimed that the minority should lead the masses to the founding of a nation-state, otherwise it would never happened, blacks presented the same reasoning. If whites made hierarchies within the polity assigning some lesser citizenship because of skin colour, ethnicity, religion, or time of arrival then these black intellectuals in the Global South aver that their countries should do the same.

White and black nationalists are seamy sides of the same unusable coin that we should throw away, and with them the idea of exclusive nationalism and sovereignty. This idea has caused so much discord between the peoples of this earth. Decolonization was necessary but for C.L.R. James, Franz Fanon, José Martí, three of the finest minds the Caribbean and the world has produced, it was but a step to a humanism that encompasses the globe. My argument remains that those countries that did not pursue independence in the sixties and seventies, the heyday of the independence struggles, have to understand the world as it is today. It means forging a New International that transcends nationality and ethnicity. An International that uncovers and dismantles the mechanisms which keep the 'havenots' and the 'have-a-little' fighting for crumbs, while the handfuls of 'haves' eat the global cake. My stay on Sint Maarten convinced me that the most inhabitants of the island are susceptible to a New International attune to their particularities. As I stand in front of a class full of mostly white faces at the University of Amsterdam teaching the unity of humankind as argued by the Haitian Anténor Firmin (1885), the first anthropologist to discredit the idea of different human races, I realize that West Indian blacks who eavesdropped upon their former masters, while employing their critical imagination, spoke the truth

to power. I believe that we owe them that much and more. We need to imagine and create new architectures of human commonality in our politics.

*The continuous exploitation of man by man, inhumanity of man to man, is reinforced ironically, I believe, by ceaseless catalogues of injustice. We need somehow to find an original dislocation within which to unlock a body of claustrophobic assumptions which strengthen it by promoting a self-encircling round of protest - a continuous obsession with irreconcilable differences - irreconcilable frontiers - irreconcilable ghettos - like a static clock that crushes all into the time of conquest. Much of the character of civilisation as we have known it - has been geared to this static clock which obviously seeks to shape its material, all its human material, into time-tables of defensive capital, defensive labour, and other territorial imperatives. That is why the catalogues of deeds compiled by historians conform to dead time that measures man as a derivative industry making animal, tool-making animal, weapon-making animal. And the quest therefore for an inner clock is so necessary in our situation of social and industrial character geared relentlessly to static time (Harris, 1970: p. 28).*

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