Patricia Noxolo, Kevon Rhiney & Ronald Cummings (Eds). (2025). *Routledge handbook of Caribbean studies.* Routledge. 443pp, hbk, ISBN: 978-0-3676-9427-2. US$240.

Specialists on the Caribbean increasingly define the archipelago as a palimpsest. Contributors to the *Handbook* share this conceptualization, allowing them to bring their diverse perspectives to issues ranging from class, gender and ethnic relations, to politics, literature, culture and the environment. Consistent with this approach, several of the contributors to this volume portray the region as possessing a complex, layered history containing traces of a past of "live inheritances" powerfully shaping the newly present; and not as one of lost traditions. In large part, the *Handbook* continues the innovative reframing of the region's identity as discontinuous, multi-layered, polychromatic and even fractal.

An intellectual upshot of this perspective is the original insight and recognition that the Caribbean is *not* where cultural contradictions wrought by history are present; but, rather, a distinctively liminal arena marked by "plurality" and the indeterminacy of being "betwixt and between" as its core identity. This existential vagueness is evident across all dimensions of Caribbean life, as several contributors in the *Handbook* make clear. In Caribbean politics, for instance, it is arguable that many anti-colonial rebellions result in ambiguous outcomes, with no clear winner or loser. The *Handbook* recognizes such a political duality in post-revolt Caribbean aftermaths in which – barring the notable exceptions of the Haitian and Cuban revolutions – there is neither transformational change nor undisputed political victory by one side or the other. Such is testimony to Caribbean studies' alertness to the phenomenon of the "changing same" and to the glacial character of change in the region.

The Caribbean as icon of existential indeterminacy appears to be the shared analytical assumption of several contributors. In looking at the region's quest for transformative political change, clean breaks with the past remain elusive. Hence, no matter the onset of disruptive revolts and even of social revolutions against empire, the multidimensional coloniality of European power hovers, ghostlike, over the colonized peoples' newly won reconfiguration of the balance of power in the region.

Several articles in the *Handbook* convey this style of innovative thinking and subtlety of analysis, adding to the discipline's intellectual authority as it "thinks the Caribbean" as an instance of a complex liminal identity and a non-teleological terrain of palimpsestic change; rather than a place of fixity troubled from without.

Arguably, credit for seeing the region anew in this way belongs to an earlier generation of Caribbean intellectuals – social critics, poets, artists, novelists, sociologists, historians and anthropologists – who created Caribbean Studies as a new discipline as part of university-based 'area studies' programs in the 1950s. Several of the 38 contributors to the *Handbook* acknowledge their debt to that generation of pioneering intellectuals. This shared perspective and the innovative uses to which the contributors put it, continue Caribbean Studies' long-standing insurgency in challenging the intellectually suspect assumptions of mainstream academic social science and political philosophy, tainted as they are by their Eurocentric cultural assumptions, binary formulations on comparative economic and political development, teleological conception of societal change and most importantly, their racist philosophical anthropology concerning human nature and the human condition in which the civilized and reason-driven human is imagined as only ethnically white!

The *Handbook* is also about confronting the "coloniality of power" and its associated intellectual hegemony in the region. This theme is echoed notably by the editors' introduction, Chapter 20 by Deborah Thomas (on how to think Caribbean futures anew) and Chapter 21 by Nelson Maldonado-Torres (on Caribbean decolonial thought).

Based on this recurrent concern in several of the articles, the *Handbook* should therefore be read as a direct assault on the lingering but tottering epistemic and political hegemony of the modern West. Contributors are looking for fresh insights about the archipelago's moral-political structures and social relations from perspectives far beyond academic social science.

The suspicion with which the conventional assumptions of academic social science is held can be seen from contributors' turn to the new physics, to chaos and aesthetic theory, to the region's poetical tradition and even to perspectives now arguing for seeing subaltern groups' emotions and oral-kinetic behaviour as legitimate and intelligible forms of moral-political reasoning.

Moreover, the contributions to the *Handbook* should be read as reflecting an intellectual and political humbling brought about by dashed hopes for regional development since the late 1970s. Electoral defeat for Jamaica's left-wing mobilizing regime (1980); the political assassination in Guyana of respected historian and left-wing political activist Walter Rodney (1980); political tragedy in Grenada and the US invasion there (1983); and disruptions triggered by failed neo-liberal economic policies, all helped nurture such a chastening.

Such harsh political realities and bitter political tragedy has had two surprisingly salutary effects on contributors' perspectives. Firstly, none has offered any big, alternative grand project for change, preferring instead limited proposals, typically at the micro, community and individual levels. Secondly, contributors' commitment to creating decolonial knowledge for the Caribbean has led them to an intellectual jettisoning of the baggage of mid-20th century 'development economics', whether from liberal or radical sources. Liberal claims for capitalist democracy as panacea have been abandoned; state sovereignty and national self-determination are revealed as chimera; and revolutionary Marxist politics as cure-all for Caribbean inequality are dismissed as naïve. In this regard, contributors to the *Handbook* reaffirm the remarkable creativity of the region's intellectuals, maintaining the region's historic role as a leader of the global Left and world-making pioneer of intellectual and political dissidence against empire.

As with any effort to challenge entrenched historical systems – particularly this multi-faceted capitalist world economy in which the Caribbean is currently embedded – contributors to the *Handbook* face the dauting task of imagining alternative Caribbean futures. They are creating the analytical tools to build decolonial thought in the region, while occupying the very political institutions they attempt to overthrow, and relying on a social science toolkit they now spurn.

This impossible condition is typical of major systemic transitions. It thwarts contributors' ability to escape epistemic capture and to imagine alternative forms of political authority and governance. As Deborah Thomas's largely experimental effort in rethinking shows, epistemic gains remain limited and efforts to hash out development lessons from Caribbean (including Jamaican) subaltern traditions raise a host of issues, not the least of which is the contradictory nature of those very traditions.

Despite these limitations, advanced undergraduates, graduate students, experts on the Caribbean region, historians of ideas and social scientists focused on the experience of small states and territories, will find much of comparative worth in this remarkable publication.

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