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Modern Caribbean Thought – A Critical Assessment

Abstract:

In recent years, Caribbean philosophy has received an enormous boost by the publication of a number of exciting new works. Authors such as Paget Henry, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, Edouard Glissant, Brian Meeks, Folke Lindahl, Anthony Bogues, and a few others are in the forefront of this development. As I intend to demonstrate below, there can be little doubt that this boost is, at least indirectly, a consequence of the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the related demise of grand narratives at the end of the 20th century. The argument could be made that to a large extent Caribbean philosophy has always been a reaction to metropolitan impulses – partly a reaction to colonial oppression and its racist ideologies, partly a response to liberating impulses in Christian theology, partly a response to political theologies of socialism and communism, partly an attempt to apply the theory and practice of capitalism and democracy – and to come to grips with the double bind implicit in its Western origin.

To various extents these different strands of Caribbean philosophy resonated with or were rejected by the very people they were supposed to benefit. Indeed, most of the literary and organic intellectuals in the region implicitly or explicitly expressed discomfort with the political ideologies of the day and in their literary and other works of art constructed alternative models. What can be said at this point already is that the New Caribbean Thought is making a great effort to both utilize indigenous modes and registers of thought, and to respond to the impulses coming from the popular (local) culture. In that sense it has started to follow the work of the literary and organic intellectuals of the region.

However, in some ways this departure still remains wedded to the old divisions of “high” philosophy and “low” philosophy, “high” or official culture and “low” or popular culture, with a concentration on the former and no systematic attempts to integrate both aspects of making sense of the world. It is my intention to make a few modest suggestions regarding the integration of the realm of “the popular” into the realm of formalized Caribbean philosophy.