

“La deuda es impagable” (The Debt is Unpayable): for Norman Girvan



D. Alissa Trotz

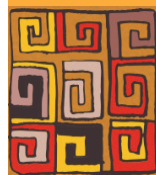
is an Associate Professor in Women and Gender Studies,
and Director of the undergraduate Caribbean Studies
Program at New College, University of Toronto.
e-mail : da.trotz@utoronto.ca

“La Deuda es Impagable” was how Norman Girvan paid tribute to the living example of the Cuban Revolution when he received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Havana in December 2008. “La Deuda es Impagable” is how Norman’s colleagues and friends in Cuba, that country that he loved so much and where he spent his last days, have paid tribute to his own contributions for a united and independent Caribbean. As we struggle to come to terms with the fact that Norman is no longer physically with us, we know too that he has left us with an extraordinary gift, a template of connection, solidarity and love for this region, these spaces we call home, these neighbours across sea and river and border and language. And we will keep Norman close, never far from thought and heart, by drawing from, enriching and extending the wellspring of his outstanding contributions.

There are so many places to start, like Norman’s revisiting of the dependency theory debates and his caution that while the Caribbean faces new and different challenges, we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Two years ago, and before a capacity audience gathered for the 50th Anniversary of Jamaican Independence (which Norman pointedly described as In-Dependence), he compellingly argued that what we were facing in the region was policy recolonisation, providing us with the incredible example of how this played itself out in the IMF requirements that the Jamaican government provide daily reports “on 13 items, weekly reports on 6 items; monthly reports on 22 items, and quarterly reports on 10 items.”

In his discussion of existential threats facing the Caribbean, Norman has given us a language beyond the failed state discourse that he so disliked, challenging us to think of what he described as “connections among seemingly unrelated phenomena.” One example would be his recognition of the significance of climate change to the viability of the region, and his participation in a workshop with the Climate Change Centre in Belmopan, Belize a few years ago to discuss an integrated approach to and the importance of economic modeling for discussions of environmental sustainability.

Norman played a leading role mobilizing critical discussion of the Cariforum (Caricom plus the Dominican Republic) negotiations with the European Union (EU) that led to the signing of the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) over five years ago. He set up and managed a list-serv that kept us informed of the issues: the meaninglessness of trade reciprocity when the playing field is so uneven; the divide and rule logic framing the EU’s decision to pursue separate EPAs with Africa-Caribbean-Pacific members; the fuzzy chain of command, particularly with regard to the Caricom Secretariat

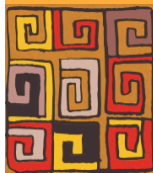


and the Caribbean Regional Negotiating Machinery; the dangerous precedent the EPA sets for future trade negotiations with Canada and the US. Norman was at the forefront of a campaign that was carried in the regional media calling for a full and public review of the EPA. He supplied memorable terms to describe the three card trick that we were played: **sweetification**, the dangling carrot that came in the form of hollow promises of development funds; **treatyfication**, binding legal documents that arguably contravene elements of the Caricom Single Market and Economy itself; and **technification**, the dense language over hundreds of pages of the Agreement that mystified the entire process. On this last point Norman was deeply reflective of the way in which the anti-EPA campaign – with the exception of Haiti where there was popular mobilization - remained largely at the level of an intra-elite disagreement, removing from plain view the devastating effects the agreement could potentially have on people's everyday lives. The lessons to be drawn are many, as we were reminded just two weeks ago when at a meeting in Guyana, the Caribbean Association of Industry and Commerce (CAIC) noted that the EPA "has not allowed us full access [to the European market] that we have envisioned." At the time of signing, provisions were put in place to evaluate implementation after an initial five years – meaning that a full and frank public accounting was due to the people of the region in 2013. CAIC's comments suggest that little to nothing has been done by Caricom, or the CRNM, or the Heads of Government, to ensure that we were collecting systematic information to enable meaningful discussion of what the EPA has (not) delivered to the region. Addressing this shameful lapse head on is part of the work to be done, while also engaging Norman's efforts (rooted in his idea of a Caribbean beyond the narrow insularities of the Anglophone countries) to think about different kinds of integration possibilities outside of neoliberal free trade arrangement logics, represented for example by The Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA) and PetroCaribe.

Most recently and at the time of his tragic accident, Norman was actively involved in a campaign that brought together colleagues from the Caribbean, North America and Europe, outraged by the discriminatory and racist Ruling 168-13 of the Constitutional Tribunal of the Dominican Republic (DR) that effectively stripped citizenship from potentially hundreds of thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent. The position that Caricom eventually took (condemning the ruling and suspending consideration of the DR's request for membership of Caricom) cannot be understood outside of this activism that pressured the region's governments to take a stand. Norman's online blog kept us abreast of ongoing developments, taking care to feature oppositional voices from the Dominican Republic to remind us to always take our cue from those most affected by and mobilizing against the ruling. In

late November, in what was perhaps his last public appearance to be captured online, he participated on a panel hosted by the Institute of International Relations (IIR) on Ruling 168-13, opening the event with a clear and passionate outlining of the facts of the case and why it was politically, ethically and morally imperative to oppose it. The following day he was member of a small delegation appearing before the Caricom Bureau in Port-of-Spain and presenting them with the petitions from Jouvay Ayiti and Concerned Caribbean Citizens. And just two weeks later, Norman would attend the annual Conference organized by the Caribbean Chair of the University of Havana in December, where he spoke of the importance of Cuba and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) speaking out against the ruling. He understood that it is only continued pressure that can keep this in the public eye and that can deliver justice for the women, men and children of the DR facing civil death. We must extend Norman's work, in the face of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights hearings last month where Juliana Dequis Pierre (whose application for a Dominican identification card is the act that triggered the court case and the ruling) was prevented from leaving the DR to appear before the Commissioners; in the face of the fact that the Dominican Republic has astonishingly been allowed to assume the Chair of the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States; and in the face of the fact that Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves, who led the call for Caricom to take a clear and definitive position, is now Caricom Chair.

Norman has bequeathed to us all the blog he started some seven years ago (www.normangirvan.info) and that now stands as an incredible archive, a living trace of these and other tireless examples –at one talk in Jamaica, he returned to his seat to a standing ovation and even before he was approached for copies of his paper he had already uploaded it to his blog! Given Norman's facility with social media, we asked him once how he operated in the days of New World when computers were not around. His response –he quipped that they would do things like stuff their suitcases full of copies of New World Quarterly when they were moving between islands, or ask people who were travelling to take pamphlets for them – underlined how for Norman, connectivity was a way to practice and deepen connections born out of a decades-old commitment to the region. For him public intellectual work was a loving obligation and form of giving back, a process that involved not just putting what one learned at the service of a wider community, but crucially of being enriched by the conversations this act of sharing initiated. The Stabroek News diaspora column, which I began in 2008, is indebted to Norman's mentorship and encouragement. He has contributed several pieces and ideas over the years, and we have jointly published articles in the blog and column as a way of reaching a wider audience. And just over a year ago a small



group of faculty and students (headed by Norman and social activist Alex Gittens) launched 1804caribvoices.org, a web forum intended to connect groups and individuals across the linguistic divides of the Pan-Caribbean. Even after his accident, Norman requested that we send publishable material to editor@1804caribnews.org. A fitting tribute is to nurture this regional initiative he was part of, and in so doing to honour the inter-generational collaboration that was such a significant part of his life. Aleah Ranjitsingh, one of his doctoral students, puts it best when she says simply that he will always be her teacher and that she is (not was) his student. Cuban economist and lecturer at the University of Havana, Laneydi Martínez Alfonso spoke of being afraid to meet Norman at first because of his international reputation, and of being overwhelmed when she finally did by “his infinite curiosity, his humbleness, his fearlessness and also carefulness, his endless spirit for collaboration and help, his extremely beautiful and genuine humanity.”

In his keynote speech at the Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies to mark the 50th anniversary of Jamaican Independence in 2012, Norman concluded on a personal note:

“My son, Alexander, is also presenting at this Conference.

You, and your generation, stand on the cusp of your own life’s journey as Jamaica faces the challenge of its second independence; as I and my generation did on the cusp of Jamaica’s first, half a century ago. It is like the handing over of the baton. But I want to remind you all that the runner who passes the baton, doesn’t stop running; he keeps on for a while longer, and cheers on his successors!”

It was a moving and public affirmation of how he was shaped by his commitment to his family, of the ways in which the familial, the national and the regional were deeply interwoven in his life’s journey. We thank Norman’s partner and wife Jasmine, and his children Ramon, Alexander and Alatashe, for sharing him with us, and whose grace and positive spiritual energy over the last four months have been an example, comfort and inspiration. May you all now find support in the outpouring of love and respect. And we know, amidst our unspeakable sorrow, that Norman Girvan continues to cheer us on with his unceasing optimism and excitement for the incredible promise and joy that is the Greater Caribbean, a promise only to be made real through our collective labour and commitment.

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