

Preface: The Disquieting Decency of Richard Hart

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Between October 1977 and June 1980, I was an undergraduate in the Department of Government at the University of the West Indies, Mona. It was an extraordinary time to be at Mona, to me, then as now, not merely an academic institution but an ambiguous landscape of hope and disappointment. There was a pervading atmosphere of radical change, of real, concrete transformative possibility, but also a creeping sense of worry and uncertainty, as though, maybe, it was all already too late. On a platform of democratic socialism, Michael Manley and the People's National Party (PNP) had been returned to power by a landslide victory in the 1976 general election. Some friends and I had been involved in a small political education organization, calling ourselves the 15 December Movement (for the date of the 1976 election), basically working for the PNP Left. By early 1977, however, even before I'd formally arrived at UWI, it was unclear whether the socialist project could in fact be sustained. Not unpredictably, Manley was wavering. The right wing within the party was regaining the initiative. Would there be an agreement with the International Monetary Fund, or would there be a People's Plan? Manley, perhaps, had already decided—the former over the latter. These were crucial years for my own intellectual evolution, away from experiments with Rastafari toward experiments with Marxism, in many ways made possible by a remarkable teacher at Jamaica College, Wesley Van Riel, who taught economics to sixth formers and, after school, led discussions on modern African history, African liberation movements, and Pan-Africanism. I would often visit Van Riel to borrow books and talk politics.

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Not surprisingly, three of my teachers at UWI—Trevor Munroe, Rupert Lewis, and Don Robotham—were ranking members of the Marxist Workers Liberation League, founded in 1974, and which, in 1978, was to become a formal communist party, the Workers Party of Jamaica (WPJ). Munroe, Lewis, and Robotham together authoritatively framed the field of Marxist debate on campus. It was more than once suggested to me that I could be considered for membership in the party. But I was then too close to another Marxist intellectual, Michael Witter, to be seriously attracted to the “scientific socialism” to which the WPJ adhered. Witter was an intellectual of a freethinking sensibility, more interpretive than legislative in cast of mind, closely attuned to the idioms of Jamaican popular cultural life. He and I would attend the public session of the first congress of the WPJ, held at the (then) Regal Theatre in 1978, and we would wonder out loud at a Marxist project so ensnared by middle-class cultural conformism. It was through Witter that I met George Beckford, easily one of the most original Jamaican intellectuals ever. I vividly remember Beckford walking into the UWI lecture hall in October 1977 to begin his course Caribbean Political Economy, looking out at us naïve youngsters with that inimitable grin and saying, “I am one of the most dangerous men in Jamaica!” He was, I now, belatedly, recognize—but, fragile and frequently unwell, he never returned to class.¹ Like Beckford, Louis Lindsay was scarce, but unlike Beckford Lindsay seemed austere, gloomy, obscure. His essay on the “myth” of Jamaican independence had a huge impact on me.² I’d met him in passing before UWI, when I worked at the short-lived Ministry of National Mobilization, where he was an advisor to the minister, D. K. Duncan.

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Memorably, someone who visited UWI to speak during my three years as a student was Richard Hart (Dick Hart, to those who knew him), the legendary figure of the 1940s and 1950s Jamaican Marxist Left who, along with Arthur Henry and the Hill brothers, Ken and Frank (the 4 H’s, as they were called), had famously been expelled from the PNP in March 1952. Hart visited UWI more than once in those years, if my memory still serves me. He was always introduced by Trevor Munroe, the WPJ’s general secretary. Curiously, though, or maybe not so curiously, Hart never spoke publicly about the then contemporary Left and its challenges, its ambiguous relation to Michael Manley and the PNP. There was never an exchange in which he offered any comment whatsoever about current affairs. Reserved, courteous, above all, unpretentious, he spoke almost exclusively about formative political moments in the 1930s or 1940s or 1950s—the turmoil he witnessed in the streets of Kingston in May and June 1938; the special party tribunal that decided the fate of the PNP Left; the attempt to refound the

1 Beckford would do me the great honor of quoting from one of my student essays in his review article on Ken Pryce’s *Endless Pressure*; see *Social and Economic Studies* 31, no. 2 (1982): 170.

2 See Louis Lindsay, *The Myth of Independence: Middle Class Politics and Non-mobilization in Jamaica*, ISER Working Paper No. 6 (Kingston: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1975).

Left in the People's Freedom Movement (which he initiated in 1954); Norman Manley's decision in favor of the Puerto Rico development model; the increasing influence of the United States and the Cold War on Jamaican politics throughout the 1950s, and so on. Hart virtually always spoke from documents: letters, policy papers, pamphlets, and the like. The *facts* were essential to him; personal memory was never trustworthy enough. It was an incredible experience listening to him. He brought a part of that political past so tangibly and unforgettably into my 1970s present.

Richard Hart was born in August 1917 into a well-known near-white Jamaican upper-middle-class family. His father, Ansell Hart, was a solicitor and writer, the author (perhaps tellingly) of an early study of George William Gordon.³ Richard revered his father, who was a kind of liberal and cosmopolitan bibliophile. Ansell had become a member (partly through Richard) of the Left Book Club, started in London in 1936 by the publisher Victor Gollancz, the London School of Economics professor Harold Laski, and the mercurial socialist writer John Strachey. The Left Book Club was a profoundly important initiative in the interwar years. As one writer put it, in Britain in the 1930s "the Left Book Club became the giant umbrella under which most progressive, left-wing activists found shelter."⁴ Members of the club would receive a monthly selection of a previously unpublished book chosen from the lists of Gollancz's publishing house as well as a copy of the club's monthly periodical, *Left Book News*. While there was a marked pro-Soviet Union orientation, the club aimed at a wide audience of broadly Popular Front antifascist supporters. By the late 1930s it boasted a significant network of readers not only within Britain but across the British Empire and beyond. John Strachey was one of the club's most influential Marxist writers, through books such as his 1932 *The Coming Struggle for Power* and the 1936 *The Theory and Practice of Socialism*. Indeed, it was the latter book, discovered in his father's library, that would introduce Richard to Marxism.

When I founded *Small Axe* in 1996, I knew I had to meet Richard Hart. He was a living connection to my inheritance of the historic Jamaican Left. It is with Hart that my interview project in *Small Axe* really got going. His was the first long—*biographical*—interview I carried out in which the relation between *life* and *work* began to take shape.⁵ I met him in London in August 1997 and again in January 1998, and we remained in touch over the years afterward. Later, in March 2005, by which time he'd moved to Bristol, I was again in communication with him over the Grenada question for the book I was then writing.⁶ Hart was one of the few people I knew who simply refused to be persuaded by the conspiracy story that Maurice Bishop had been murdered by a cabal within the central committee of the New Jewel Movement led by Bernard Coard. Hart had been appointed attorney general to the People's Revolutionary Government

3 See Ansell Hart, *The Life of George William Gordon* (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica, 1972).

4 See, helpfully, Stuart Samuels, "The Left Book Club," *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, no. 2 (1966): 65.

5 See David Scott, "Memories of the Left: An Interview with Richard Hart," *Small Axe*, no. 3 (March 1998): 65–114.

6 David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). I very vividly remember Hart collecting me from the Bristol train station on my arrival from London and driving me at a furious speed to his house to be welcomed and fed by his wife, Avis.

in May 1983 and was at work writing the new constitution when the revolution imploded and the United States invaded. He had gotten out of Grenada only because he was in a civil service and not a political appointment, and thus his name was not on the list of persons being sought by the invasion forces.⁷ Richard Hart died in December 2013, at the age of ninety-six.

The thing that most struck me, listening to him, was the quality of decency he exuded, embodied: a compelling, *disquieting* decency, ample without bulging, unmistakable without excess—disarmingly ordinary, impervious to spite. It didn't seem a decency derived from explicit principle; it didn't have that methodical, mediated character. It seemed, rather, to simply grow out of who he was, a matter less of commitment than of *duty*. Hart always appeared to me, astonishingly, *beyond* resentment. He never had an angry word for Norman Manley, for example, who had sided with the PNP faction fixed on kicking him out of the party he had sacrificed to build. Unaccountably, Hart and Manley would remain on friendly terms, exchanging information, swapping old memories, being exactly who they were, men of a certain background and place and time. In all this Hart seems to me so unlike the political elites and pundits now tramping about postcolonial Jamaica, entitled, loud, insincere, shockingly unembarrassed by their own mediocrity.

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I recall all this now because there is so much to do by way of *reorienting* our relationships to our pasts. Published in this issue of *Small Axe* are essays from a symposium on the Jamaica 1950s that gathered in Philadelphia in April 2019, thanks to Deborah Thomas. It was the third in the open series that Donette Francis and I have imagined as part of rethinking Jamaica's modern cultural and political history. To *theorize* Jamaica, and to theorize *through* Jamaica, as we are trying to do, is not to hypostasize, let alone fetishize, Jamaica. It is, rather, to take Jamaica as an *exemplary* instance of a past-in-the-present, one in which we participants have—all of us, if differently—a consequential *claim*. Richard Hart is a past to claim. How might we variously but critically inherit his life and work? What is the *autobiography* of ourselves into which his lived experience of the past might be folded? How should his example help us to reimagine the story of the Marxist Left of the 1970s? These, naturally, are questions we cannot hope to answer all at once, but they are nevertheless questions we cannot entirely neglect.

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⁷ See Richard Hart, *The Grenada Trial: A Travesty of Justice* (Kingston: Foundation for Phyllis Coard, 1996), and *The Grenada Revolution: Setting the Record Straight* (London: Caribbean Labour Solidarity, 2005).