

BOOK REVIEW

THE CONFOUNDING ISLAND: *Jamaica and the Postcolonial Predicament*

Orlando Patterson

2019, THE BELKNAP PRESS OF
HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

432 PP.

ISBN: 978-0674988057

The Confounding Island: Jamaica and the Postcolonial Predicament by Patterson (2019) has much to offer social work academics and policy makers who have an interest in Jamaica or in the Caribbean more widely. Patterson is a highly regarded professor of Sociology at Harvard University, where he holds the John Cowles Chair in Sociology. He was born in Westmoreland, Jamaica, and was educated at The University of the West Indies (BSc) and the London School of Economics (PhD). Before devoting himself more fully to an academic career, he was a special advisor to Michael Manley in the 1970s, a period he writes about in the book. Patterson's areas of specialization include slavery, the sociology of poverty and underdevelopment, political culture, and sports, especially cricket. He has received numerous academic awards, including the National Book Award for Nonfiction and the Ralph Bunche Award for the best book on pluralism from the American Political Science Association.

The book is a compendium of the author's research on a variety of topics. It is divided into three sections: Explaining Postcolonial Failure; Three Cultural Puzzles; and The Failures of Policy and Politicians. He explores topics ranging from development, to violence, workforce gender distribution, reggae, track and cricket. As the book title suggests, Patterson is particularly interested in the many contradictions that Jamaica poses and the "outsized" impact of this small country in a number of areas, good and bad. The volume draws heavily on sociological theory and is thoroughly referenced. The extensive reference section is a helpful resource for anyone wanting to explore more about Jamaica's development.

The first chapter (100 pages) of Patterson (2019) is an extensive exploration of the reasons for Jamaica's lagging development in comparison to that of Barbados. He uses 2017 figures from the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations Development Programme to illustrate the differences in post-colonial achievement. In 2017, Barbados had a GDP per capita twice that of Jamaica: \$16,978 for Barbados compared to \$8,095 for Jamaica. On the frequently cited Human Development Index of the United Nations Development Programme, Barbados is ranked 58th compared to 97th for Jamaica. Barbados also rated better on gender equality, literacy, and mean years of schooling. Perhaps most distressing were the numbers for homicide: 10.9 per 100,000 for Barbados

and 55 for Jamaica. One figure was in Jamaica's favour: Public debt was 157% of GDP in Barbados and 101% in Jamaica.

Patterson (2019) points out that Barbados entered independence with a number of advantages over Jamaica. He takes an institutionalist position on development, arguing that while good policies are important, strong institutions are more important. Barbados appropriated the institutions of the British colonials and built on them. He concludes that Barbados' success is largely due to "capturing, mastering, refashioning and deploying to their own ends the institutional knowledge and know-how of the ruling class and the broader cultural, political and economic context within which they were embedded" (p. 119). He contrasts this with Jamaica's proletariat who "take pride in rejecting the institutional and cultural practices of the elite" (p. 118). Patterson's argument is much more complex than this quick summary suggests, tying in differences in the settlement patterns of the British population and the contrasting economics of the slave systems in the two islands. Although both countries were colonized and subjected to a long period of slavery, Jamaica's experience was particularly savage; there "the 183 years of British plantation slavery may possibly have been the most brutal in the abominable annals of slavery" (pp. 4–5). Barbados had more British settlers, including a larger population of British women, and slaves were more likely to be seen as investments. In Jamaica, absentee landlords were common and the slaves were viewed as expendables, to be worked to death and then replaced. As a result, historians claimed that Jamaica "was the most unequal place on the planet" (p. 5). Patterson returns to the topic of the impact of the slavery experience in other parts of the book.

Social workers will be particularly interested in the author's analysis of violence in Jamaica in which he explores the causes of community violence and its devastating consequences. Patterson (2019) links tolerance and perpetuation of violence against women and children within the household and violence in the community at a level that continues to impair Jamaica's development and makes life miserable for many. The widespread and widely accepted practice of harsh physical discipline of children and abusive male–female relationships, he argues, contribute to community violence and Jamaica's high murder rate, although he acknowledges other factors, such as drug trafficking, unemployment and poverty. This argument is not new, as others including Horace Levy have linked child rearing methods to fueling the community gangs (Levy, 2009). As Levy (2009) wrote of the poor functioning of the family and lack of parenting: "beatings are the chief and only method of discipline and are often savage, driving many boys to escape onto the streets" (p. 74).

Patterson (2019) further ties family violence to the legacy of Jamaica's slavery past. The especially brutal system of slavery in Jamaica left a legacy that includes "the belief that all forms of discipline and persuasion ultimately rest on force" (p.156). He argues that "this valorization of corporal punishment was also culturally perpetuated in child-rearing practices" (p. 156). In addition to the damage caused to the child victims, this "violence within the family then breeds violence toward others outside the family" (p. 160). He makes this very strong statement linking child abuse with the murder rate: "There is a straight pipeline from the 'murderation' of children by their parents to the murder of others by those very same children before they even become adults" (p. 168).

It should be clear that Patterson does not see child-rearing and other cultural factors as the sole explanations of Jamaica's levels of violence and homicide. Patterson's (2019) discussion of violence

is extensive and goes beyond the cultural dimension. He ponders the question of the links between democracy and violence and asks “Why is so genuine a democracy so utterly violent?” (p.7). Contrary to popular view, in fact is violence a component of democracy? He explores numerous factors that contribute to high levels of violence, explaining that studies continue to show conflicting results. He cites a 2011 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime study concluding that inequality was among the important drivers of high homicide rates, but explains that other studies have contradicted its importance and looked at other factors, including poverty, unemployment, and urbanization. In each case, disentangling the threads is complicated. There are also externally introduced factors such as the drug trade and a ready supply of guns. He concludes that although it is challenging to directly link lack of development to violence, it is clear that high levels of violence negatively impact development by discouraging investment and leading to emigration of the skilled population.

Patterson calls for “much needed changes in interpersonal, gender, and child-rearing beliefs and practices” including the “island’s horrendous homophobia and violence toward LGBTQ individuals” (p. 165). Of course, social workers and policy makers in Jamaica are aware of these issues and have taken steps to address them, including parenting training, child abuse reporting laws, and the establishment of a Child Advocate. In the diaspora, child discipline is often a flash point for conflicts between Jamaican immigrants and social workers, as immigrant parents decry what they see as undisciplined children in the majority population and unwarranted intrusion into family life by child welfare officials. The recent reckoning with racism and the legacies of slavery sparked by the killings of George Floyd and others in the United States—a reckoning that has spread beyond the borders of the United States—could offer an opportunity to link the need to modify child rearing practices with rejection of the negative inheritance of behaviors from the slavery era.

Another important question asked in the book is why policies and programs designed to help the poor often fail. In the 1970s, Patterson was an advisor to Michael Manley and worked on a project to improve the lives of people living in the urban slums. Recognizing that it would be impossible to adequately replace the housing units with new housing, the approach he recommended was to build on Jamaica’s successful public health model to apply a basic needs and services strategy to the slums. This would entail improving sanitation, water, health care and other essential services, while selectively repairing and upgrading existing housing. As he put it, this would improve the well-being of the population, but would leave the slums still looking like slums. Ultimately, the project was rejected by politicians who relied on the clientelism of rewarding supporters in the garrison communities with the promise of new housing. Returning to the theme of the importance of institutions, he concluded that the project failed because of “flawed and inappropriate institutions, or, where the appropriate institutions exist, as they often do in Jamaica, institutional incompetence and bad politics” (p. 311).

There is much more in the book, including commentary on Jamaica’s phenomenal success in track on the global scene—by far the most Olympic medals per capita than any other country—and on the country’s global impact on music. The popularity and influence of reggae challenges assumptions about globalization and cultural homogenization. This is an interesting lesson for social workers interested in international issues. Patterson (2019) lauds the quality of The University of the West Indies— of which he was a beneficiary—but recommends that Jamaica divert more funding into improving primary and secondary education for the masses.

The book concludes with a fairly optimistic epilogue. His discussions of democracy and violence notwithstanding, Patterson (2019) applauds the strength of Jamaica's democracy and notes that the Jamaican press has been cited as one of the most free in the world. Jamaica has also demonstrated some success in taking control of external debt. As a small island nation, Jamaica's ability to chart its own course in development is limited by larger political, environmental and economic factors. A global pandemic such as the current struggle with COVID-19 can disrupt the economy and throw thousands in the tourist industry into unemployment and deepened poverty. Climate change probably poses an even more serious set of risks from rising sea levels to an increase in the number and severity of storms. Patterson sees hope in the new generation of leaders and in the resilience of the population. There is much for social work to learn from this book and to contribute to addressing the challenges it identifies.

Lynne M. Healy, PhD
Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor Emerita
University of Connecticut School of Social Work
lynne.healy@uconn.edu

References

- Levy, H. (2009). *Killing Streets & Community Revival*. Arawak Monograph Series.
Patterson, O. (2019). *The Confounding Island: Jamaica and the Postcolonial Predicament*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.