
The first book to focus on St. Lucia’s postwar politics, Decolonization in St. Lucia hints at critical elements of Tennyson Joseph’s argument from the cover photograph. The iconic picture of St. Lucia’s Pitons, a distinguishing feature commonly deployed metonymically and figuring especially in the marketing of the island, shows an idyllic village nestled beneath the Pitons and the Soufrière Estate Diamond range. But this tranquil scene, with its notable absence of human life, also hints at the book’s argument that St. Lucia’s postwar politics manifested a missed opportunity at decolonization of the “radical” variety that is a condition for the exercise of a genuine or unlimited sovereignty. In other words, the Pitons depict the way the island “sells” itself, producing a default landscape that reflects the passiveness of its politics of decolonization.

Through eight chapters, chronologically organized, Joseph demonstrates that the leaders of the early nationalist thrust compromised their chances to develop a truly autonomous state that would advance the anticolonial struggle. It was these early missteps that would cast a long shadow over the island’s future, forever tainting its politics and setting up conditions for a weakening of the will to pursue a program of decolonization and strong sovereignty.

St. Lucia’s early legislators, Joseph argues, were concerned that a ministerial system would erode the hold that the dominant elite and the powerful sugar planters had over the island’s affairs. In spite of the radicalism of the St. Lucian working class, expressed in its desire for a more interventionist state, legislators stalled the decolonizing movement, masking their conservatism behind the idea of economic development as the ultimate and necessary condition for the production of wealth on the island. This strategy, Joseph contends, green-lighted what amounts to a toothless sovereignty.

Much of the book’s attention is focused on the way in which this “limited sovereignty” manifested itself through a close scrutiny of the machinations of John Compton and his United Workers’ Party (UWP). Compton became the island’s first prime minister in 1979 and served as a parliamentarian for more than fifty years, including thirty as St. Lucia’s chief/prime minister. For
Joseph, Compton’s definition of government as an “umpire,” as opposed to being a “participant,” underscored a project whereby St. Lucia would serve the interests of global capital rather than setting and carrying out its own sovereign agenda. As a result, the anticolonial stance was blunted, and the shackles of colonialism were securely fastened to the politics of state building on the island. The island’s legislators, according to Joseph, thus played into the hands of Britain, which was eager to “reap economic benefits from a dying colonialism” (p. 33).

With the rise in 1982 of a more radical nationalist group under the auspices of the St. Lucia Labour Party (the SLP), Joseph argues that the way was opened for a substantive decolonizing path, given the radical nationalism of its leaders, particularly George Odlum and Peter Josie. But overtaken by structural adjustment policies and the rise of neoliberalism, the party was hamstrung by some of the previous government’s procapitalist policies and wracked by internecine leadership struggles. These factors led to the implosion of the SLP, cutting short the possibilities for a stronger development of sovereignty. With the UWP once again at the helm, St. Lucia sank even further into the ambit of neoliberalism over the next fifteen years. Perhaps nothing was more indicative of this development than the restructuring of the island’s [economic] mainstay, the banana industry. Into the 1990s banana production had been organized under a parastatal body, the St. Lucia Banana Growers’ Association (whose directors were hand-picked by the government). However, the free trade regime, encouraged by general grower dissatisfaction with the association, encouraged the proliferation of private companies, all vying for small farmer support.

Now operating in a world of “free” competition as a result of the World Trade Organization’s ruling that prohibited the continuation of preferential access to British markets, tens of thousands of farmers found it unviable to continue producing bananas and shifted to other sectors of the economy. In fact, Joseph concludes that the “new” (labour) SLP which came into office in 1997 under Kenny Anthony’s leadership facilitated this privatization of the banana industry. Mimicking the style and rhetoric of Tony Blair’s New Labour in the United Kingdom, the new party projected its strength as an able manager under the mantra of “good governance” (incidentally coincident with the post-Washington consensus). Joseph argues that in spite of the electorate’s resistance to neoliberal globalization, the SLP government rationalized its implementation of divestment policies and pursued poverty reduction programs, thereby acquiescing to neoliberal mandates.
Joseph's attempt here to fill in the gaps on the politics of small states is highly commendable, but his insistence on interpreting the political developments in St. Lucia in terms of “limited sovereignty,” “weak nationalism,” and flawed decolonizing strategies or tactics suggests that somewhere he has in mind Caribbean and other states that have unlimited sovereignty and strong nationalisms. Yet nowhere in the text does he provide examples of these. Indeed, I would argue that the idea of sovereignty—here defined in terms of absolute autonomy—misses the mark widely. What the text lacks is a broader interpretation of the idea of sovereignty itself, one that goes beyond formal de jure property to one that focuses on states in relation to nations (Hansen & Stepputat 2005:2). Considering sovereignty within this wider context, including the ways in which it is exercised within states in relation to subject/citizens, makes for a more productive engagement. This is particularly necessary since it cannot be expected that tiny states such as St. Lucia could (or can) exercise any significant influence on other states. Many of the examples cited within the text—the Taiwan/China debacle, the Hess Oil transactions, the conditions of the privatization of the banana industry, the response of the UWP government to strikes with its fatal casualties, et cetera—suggest a state with strong sovereign powers over the nation. Yet, as the political comedic group Lucians showed in its vox populi, and its parodies, such controls are unstable, given the economic incapacities of small states like St. Lucia (Crichlow 2009). What would have been far more productive here is an investigation of how such small island states exercise governmentalities, and with what effect. This approach would more fruitfully contribute to an understanding of the specific problems associated with the practice of governance (managing and administering territories) and the related practices of shaping the conduct of citizens and subjects at a moment when alternative forms of allegiances and identity shaping projects abound. These more complex frames foreground those vital state/society dynamics so necessary for an understanding of politics and governing in the present.

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References
