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CLASS, COLOR AND PLURALISM IN DAVID NICHOLLS' CARIBBEAN

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CLASS, COLOR AND PLURALISM IN DAVID NICHOLLS' CARIBBEAN
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I THE DAVID NICHOLLS I KNEW

No one acquainted with David Nicholls' life and scholarship would find any irony, much less contradiction, in the fact that I (a Trinidad French Creole) have been invited to give this Memorial Lecture during Black History Month. Timidity and political correctness were both alien to his thoughts and behaviour. This is what led me to identify him with the adjective "unreconstructed". To the extent that that adjective describes one who does not easily or uncritically reconcile themselves to the latest trends in social, political or economic thinking, David was just that: unreconstructed and outspokenly so! And, he has even given us a hint on how self-conscious he was about this intellectual posture. In the Preface of *Deity and Domination* (1988) he recalls a poster he saw on a wall in Littlemore: "Behold the tortoise! who only moves forward by sticking out his neck." In every one of the three intellectual "arenas" I shall outline in this presentation, David Nicholls stuck his neck out as an active "player", in his scholarship and in the public, participatory stances he took. The David Nicholls I first met at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad in 1971 had convictions and the courage of those convictions. Keep in mind that these were the immediate post-Black Power days when the ideas and emotions of that social movement were still smouldering. The island, and the University, were in frank upheaval.

It is not that he was a dyed-in-the-wool contrarian, much less an iconoclast. Only in today's milieu of political correctness with its invariably milk-toast commentaries and book reviews, would Nicholls' style be characterized as acidic. I certainly have found no word-slinging spats in the record. In fact, from what I read in such places as *The Times Literary Supplement* and other British publications, he was very much in a distinguished tradition of the thrust and parry of ideas. Yet, make no mistake, his sharp pen was a constant "equal opportunity" critic. I cannot

resist sharing some of these thrusts with you. This will help highlight another dimension of the David Nicholls I knew: the revealer of ironies and paradoxes, product of a whimsical sense of not just scholarship but of life itself, invariably conveyed through a lucid and humorous writing style.

David had the capacity to see the silver lining on the darkest cloud in the research process, surely a valuable lesson to graduate students planning to do field research in the Caribbean. In his Preface to *From Dessalines to Duvalier*, he pointedly, and by name, thanked the Director of the Archives Nationales in Port-au-Prince for “his unintended kindness in refusing to allow me access to the archives.” Why? Because, had that obviously spiteful official given him the permission requested, “I would probably have been faced with such daunting practical problems that this book might never have been finished.” (ix)

Then there is the tilting at the mighty windmills of academia. At a time when American structural-functional theory, and its undisputed guru Talcott Parsons, were dominant in university circles, David chided the “Parsonical chorus”, which “continues to repeat the sacred words.” Similarly with the work of David Apter, the high priest of modernization theory, which David describes as akin to a “Christmas Carol service with its theme of ‘from darkness to light’.” His powers of observation, and, thus, revealer of paradox and irony, are well displayed when in *Addressing God as Ruler* (1993) he described an “Anglo-Catholic” church in Boston, decked out with an “abundance of Royalist imagery”:

...no one would have guessed that the country had been a republic for over two centuries, nor that Boston had played a major role in the transformation. There seemed to be little connection in [their] mind, between tea party and last supper. (138)

If he was unafraid to take on the mighty Americans, a similar stance was evident in his dealings with some of the most popular doxas and sacred cows of the Third World. Marxists who opposed

his celebration of the entrepreneurship he saw in the Haitian Madam Sarah were portrayed as “encumbered with nineteenth-century cultural baggage...” (*H. in C. Cxt.*,14). More on Nicholls and Marxism later. Advocates of *négritude* were instructed that “Gobineau is, of course, the true grandfather of *negritude*!” (*Ibid*, 245, n11) He returned to the hateful legacy of Gobineau when critiquing those who argued a Third World “uniqueness”:

Gobineau would heartily have endorsed that commonplace of undergraduate essays, that one cannot successfully impose the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy upon the countries of the “third world”! (Ibid, 56)

Since I was at the time a member of Trinidad’s Constitutional Reform Commission which was attempting to save the Westminster system on the island by tinkering with it on the margins, this type of opinion made David an agreeable fellow in my eyes. One knows, of course, that an agreeable fellow is one who agrees with you.

All who knew David will agree that no description of his unreconstructed nature and bent of mind would be complete without an accounting of the role of the Venerable William Paley, Archdeacon Emeritus. This magnificent macaw from the Venezuelan Orinoco jungles, probably illegally entered into Trinidad but probably legally entered into the UK by David and Gill, had a distinguished career as a loyal ally of David, the scholar, as well as David, the journalistic jousting. The following letter appeared in *The Independent* (April 3, 1995):

Sir: It is reassuring to know that the Pope is against the ‘culture of death,’ particularly in view of the fact that he was the only head of state in the world to recognize the brutal and murderous military junta [in Haiti]. It would appear that the pro-life

*principle is selectively applied by the Vatican. Yours faithfully,
William Paley (Archdeacon Emeritus, Oxford)*

That others were in on the subterfuge is evident when we read two days later a letter from one Leonard Marsh, Chaplain, City University, London, agreeing with the position of “my old friend Archdeacon Paley.” Occasionally, David’s journalistic repartees ended up in his written scholarship. On February 29, 1980 Archdeacon Paley sent a letter to *The Times Literary Supplement* arguing that the amazement on the part of some writers on Haiti at the peaceful transition in 1971 from Papa to Baby Doc, stemmed from their failure to see such events in the context of Haitian history. Six years later, in a monograph written for the Universidad Inter-Americana in Puerto Rico, David would argue that “As archdeacon Paley has suggested (in *The Times Literary Supplement*), history has to be taken into account when interpreting Haitian politics.” A similar letter on Haiti from the Archdeacon appeared in *The Guardian* (January 13, 1982).

I cannot say goodbye to this loyal partner in educating the masses without retelling the following anecdote David appends to a very learned essay on Haiti’s religious and linguistic duality:

A vivid illustration of the linguistic ambiguity occurred in my house in Oxford, where we have a large and aggressive macaw sitting on a perch in the hall. The wife of a well-known Haitian playwright and poet came to see me some time ago. Her husband writes much of his work in Kreyol but I noticed (though without great surprise) that she was talking to her children in French. As she was leaving, the bird said in a loud and clear voice: ‘bye bye.’ Now as anyone who knows Haiti will be aware, bye bye is the Kreyol form of saying farewell. The lady looked at the bird,

somewhat reproachfully as she might have done to one of her children and replied 'au revoir.' I could not resist the remark: zwazo-a pa kapab pale Franse, selman Kreyol (the bird does not speak French, only Kreyol.) (H. in C. Cxt., 216)

This, then, is the David Nicholls I knew in the Caribbean and at Littlemore. Because his writings stretched over four decades and comprise an extraordinarily varied and complex set of themes, it is useful to divide his intellectual trajectory into what Pierre Bourdieu calls “arenas”. There are three distinct arenas: the phase of philosophical and theological writings after graduate school, the Caribbean phase and the post-Caribbean or Littlemore phase. All together he produced a total of some eighty works, thirty-five of which are on the Caribbean. This review can claim to be little more than an introductory look at some of these writings, placed in the context of the times. It is written un-apologetically by an unabashed admirer of the work.

II NICHOLLS ON LIBERTY AND MORALITY IN POLITICS

In an early (1961) essay on Gladstone, David notes that this politician was less interested in power than in “the faculty of moral perception”. Influenced by Burke and Coleridge, Gladstone was one of those conservatives who were suspicious of what government by “popular will” might do to individual liberty. This was followed in 1962 by an extraordinarily insightful piece of historical writing in the *American Political Science Review*, “Positive Liberty, 1880-1914.” This analysis of the debates over the role of the state in expanding liberty (seen as synonymous with freedom) and of the role of the rising political involvements of the Fabians, points to David’s evident preference for those who advocated a “positive liberalism” and sustained a viable moral sense of the responsibility of the state in expanding liberty by expanding the choices of the society. This emphasis on liberty would remain a n identifiable theme in his future work.

The appearance of this splendid piece of analysis in the most prestigious North American journal of politics, leads me to make a comment about his Caribbean arena. Since David came

to the Department of Government at the University of the West Indies, Trinidad soon after that essay was published, and since that was a period of intense discussions on the island on the proper (or “moral” if you wish) role of the state in the newly independent country, and since so many of the island’s (and region’s) leaders had been influenced by Fabian thought, one would have expected that there would be substantial discussion of the essay. As far as I know there was not. Nor was there, again, as far as I know, much discussion of the next significant piece of writing, his editing of *Church and State in Britain Since 1820* (1967). Keep in mind that David had already been at UWI for a year when this work appeared. Crucial is the Introduction by the General Editor of the Series, Bernard Crick, who makes three methodological points which I believe describe very well Nicholls’ own thinking. First, the social sciences need to be taught and developed “in an historical context”. Secondly, that nothing in the present is strictly speaking “determined from the past...” Finally, the recommendation that social scientists “cut across established pedagogic boundaries between the various disciplines...”

Nicholls’ thesis in his contribution to this valuable book was sure to be controversial in Trinidad where these two dominant historical interpretations of slavery were written following a Marxist orthodoxy: Eric Williams’ *Capitalism and Slavery* and CLR James’ *The Black Jacobins*. To Nicholls, differences which at first sight appeared to be moral, often turned out to be factual disputes, including questions about likely consequences. As an example he cites the slave trade:

This institution was not abolished by the inculcation of new moral principles, but by the imaginative portrayal of what the slave trade actually involved; it was ignorance (quite possibly culpable ignorance), rather than faulty ethical principles, which allowed most people to acquiesce in the system. (18)

Predictably, this position was not going to please any of the three existing interpretations about the abolition of the slave trade: (1) the role of capitalism in the abolition, (2) those who still held on to the thesis of a moral/religious role in the affair, and (3) those who were hardly in

the political frame of mind to contemplate “ignorance” on the part of the White world. Positions (1) and (2) had already been famously debated by Eric Williams and Frank Tannenbaum at the first meeting ever held in the region on Caribbean Studies (See Vera Rubin’s edited book, UPR, Rio Piedras, 1961). The third position was, of course, part of the then growing scholarly and political emphasis on race as a major factor in history.

Nicholls’ contributions during this first phase or arena of his intellectual involvements contained all the necessary ingredients for an edifying grand polemic. Not only would Nicholls have made a formidable polemicist, his themes and analytical skills would have elevated the level of debate in these early years of nationhood. Alas, he never had the opportunity. The isolation of the University and the stultifying parochialism of the local press made it next to impossible. I cannot help speculating on how Archdeacon Paley would have fared in that environment! He (or was it a she?) fared much better in the third, post-Caribbean, phase.

III NICHOLLS ON THEORIES OF PLURALISM

The following analysis of student life at UWI, Trinidad during the years Nicholls was there appeared in the local press:

*The high-browns lime by themselves. The Indians stick together.
The Whites stick together and the few Chinese that we have on
campus come into one small group, or associate with the richer
Indians... You have the Indians... One of them borrows a book.
They pass it around the group. It never gets out of that group.
(Trinidad Express, Nov.24, 1968, 23)*

What body of theory best describes and explains such a situation? By the time David arrived in Trinidad there were at least two well-defined theoretical schools. First, those who followed standard American social science themes of the progressive homogenization of values and norms. This “consensus” (or “creolization”) school included R.T. Smith, Daniel Crowley,

Lloyd Braithwaite, Vera Rubin, and, indeed, the Prime Minister, Dr. Eric Williams. Pluralism, in so far as it existed, was seen as a by-product of social stratification, not of institutional divergences in the society. The other school was composed of scholars who followed J. S. Furnivall's description of the "plural society" as characterized by social, cultural and institutional divergences strong enough to keep them apart even as they lived in close economic and demographic interdependence. The Jamaican, M.G. Smith was the leading pen in that school.

Thus, David would join the debate only after he had left Trinidad and returned to England. His book, *Three Varieties of Pluralism* (1974), provides a breadth and depth of analysis not found in the literature mentioned above. By looking at the English, American and West Indian cases, he expanded the theoretical treatment in line with his consistent methodological emphasis on understanding the historical processes of each society. As far as the Caribbean was concerned, Nicholls picked an argument with both M.G. Smith's theory of pluralism and Gordon K. Lewis' emphasis on social class and the evidence of an unfolding creolization process. The former he critiqued for the fact that he was using the term pluralism outside the colonial context in which Furnivall had used it. This line of criticism, he notes, had already been developed by Pierre van den Berghe and Harry Hoetink. But his most severe criticism of M.G. Smith related to the fact that Smith held on to a standard definition of "society" and "social structure" even as he argued cultural/ institutional pluralism. This, said Nicholls, was logically inconsistent and made the concept "plural society" a contradiction in terms (44). Lewis, on the other hand, by making "some ill-considered criticisms" of Furnivall and M.G. Smith, creates "conceptual confusion" and "obscured" his own position. While he agreed with Lewis' criticism of the willy-nilly application of the concept "cultural pluralism" to the region, Nicholls felt that Lewis had overplayed his descriptive hand by arguing that a process of creolization together with "an all-embracing nationalism" was binding together the various groups in a country like Trinidad. "It is my own view," said Nicholls, "that Lewis seriously underestimates the continued strength of ethnic loyalties though changes are certainly

taking place in this sphere” (47). In support of this position he cites his 1971 piece in the journal *Race*. That essay, “East Indians and Black Power in Trinidad”, written while he was still in Trinidad, is a good place to analyze Nicholls’ views on race and class. [Note: it is interesting that this same essay is reprinted in his 1985 book, *Haiti in Caribbean Context* under the heading “Ethnicity”.]

IV NICHOLLS ON RACE AND CLASS

In his review of Nicholls’ *Haiti in Caribbean Context* (*Times Literary Supplement*, April 11, 1986), Gordon Lewis notes that Nicholls tends to favor the variable ethnicity over that of class when talking about the Caribbean. “And,” says Lewis, “there are times (as in his other books) when he betrays a certain peevishness when arguing with his Marxist critics.” Even conceding Lewis’ point about “peevishness”, how would Lewis interpret the following statistics cited by Nicholls to make a point about race (over class) in the Black Power movement: (1) less than 1% of those who attended the all-important Black Power marches were Indian; (2) only two of the fifty detained after the aborted coup were Indian; (3) despite a conscious effort on the part of the radical leadership to adjust the symbols of the movement from Black to non-white, the effort could not overcome the suspicion and antagonism of all sectors of the Indian population, not just the bourgeoisie. This led Nicholls to the kind of “multivariate” explanation which did not sit well with any of the existing and competing schools of thought in the island:

...the black power movement in Trinidad cannot be understood simply in racial terms, nor simply in class terms, but that issues of race, colour, age, economic class, and social status are all important factors in assessing the movement. (Race [a], 443)

Given that complexity, he concluded, it was symbols, not ideology which united the movement, and the Indians did not buy the particular symbols used. (453). In a later essay he

would clarify the operation and role of ethnicity by reducing the number of explanatory variables involved. Somehow he had to unravel the meaning of statements such as “I have called colour the badge of class; but it is not the constitutive element of class.” (H in C.Cxt.,6). There was throughout the Caribbean, he said, a complex relationship between three elements sustaining social distinctions: status (defined in Weberian terms as status honor), economic functions and, physical appearance. The key thing, is that all these factors were used in the search for power which explains why so many “legends” and ideologies are constructed around them. (Ibid., 8-9).

The fundamental question becomes: is this theoretical formulation on the varying roles of race, class and color (ie. physical appearance) applicable to his 1979 *magnus opus*, From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti? In keeping with David’s own spirit of ongoing criticism and debate, I have to say that it does so only partially. Not surprisingly, Nicholls’ own non-deterministic, cross-disciplinary approach, when applied to a case as complex as Haiti, over a period as long as that spanning from Dessalines to Duvalier, lends itself to internal contradictions. One has to wonder whether any work of extraordinary descriptive history such as this is can easily coexist with the type of systematic theoretical explanation developed in the shorter, more focused case study or conceptual essay. Let me make my case.

V NICHOLLS ON HAITI

At the risk of oversimplification, I would summarize the theme of the Dessalines to Duvalier book as follows. Haitian history can be represented by the clash between two fundamental attitudes. First, there is the idea of race, of being of African descent, which provided all Haitians, at all times, a solid sense of national identity. “Haiti’s independence,” he says elsewhere, “achieved after a bitter and bloody struggle, was based upon a conception of race.” (See Nicholls, “No Hawkers and Peddlers: Levantines in the Caribbean,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1981). This identity included very importantly an anti-white, anti-foreigner attitude

which all sectors shared. This explains why Levantines, so readily integrated in the Dominican Republic and elsewhere, had trouble being accepted in Haiti. Despite this solid, historically-grounded sense of Haitian national identity, there was another attitude which frequently raised its head: When conflicts over power took place, groups defined their interests in class and color terms and had no objection to seeking outside assistance for the cause. Since these conflicts were rather frequent, it is interesting to see how Nicholls describes the various groups which at one point or the other have had roles in these clashes over power. Between 1804 and 1915, he says, politics in Haiti was largely concerned with “a struggle for power between two elite groups, designated principally by colour;...” (From D. to D. 1979, 8). These “parties” that were competing for power did not represent the interests of two distinct social classes, “but are more properly to be seen as representing two factions of a single class.” (Ibid., 9). The problem, to which we will return later, is that Nicholls also tells us that each faction developed quite distinct ideologies, interpretations of history, indeed, political cultures and dominance in the cultural field generally. Is this not the class consciousness, the subjective element, we discuss below? “I use the terms ‘black’ (*noir*) and ‘mulatto’ (*mulatre* or *jaune* in French), “ he tells us, “partly because Haitians themselves frequently use them, and they see them as constituting a significant distinction.” (Ibid., 2). On what grounds can one assert that these are merely two factions of the same class? These and other such questions arise once you leave the diachronic analysis and attempt to deal with the issue of social class. This is the concept with which Nicholls clearly struggled and is, in my opinion, the unfinished conceptual part of his Caribbean phase. Let us, in conclusion therefore, turn to some of his thoughts on this subject and suggest some ideas for an ongoing debate on his work.

V CONCLUSION: NICHOLLS’ CONCEPT OF CLASS

I will take a page out of David’s own call for critical analysis and emulate that tortoise which he told us only moves by sticking its neck out.

Throughout the detailed analysis of Haitian history, that island’s social structure is described as follows:

Rural (vast majority): (1) big land owners (*gros habitants*); (2) intermediary class (*classe intermediaire*); (3) peasants (*paysans*).

Urban: (1) urban and suburban bourgeoisie; (2) urban middle class (*classe intermediaire*); (3) urban masses.

Throughout the analysis there is reference to the political action by this or that class. This becomes critical after the American occupation (1915-1934) and became even more important during the Duvalier period starting in 1957. This is when the father (like Estime before him) depended on the “intermediary” classes – urban but especially rural – for critical support. It was the support of this key class which the son then lost by marrying into the light-skinned mulatto class. In fact, there is virtually no period of Haitian political history as described by Nicholls which can be understood without reference to the race *cum* class interests of the protagonists. As he summed up in an essay written six years after From Dessalines to Duvalier: “Crudely the general (though not total) coincidence between colour and class can be said to date back to colonial times. As most of the slaves were black, so most of the poor are black today. As most of the *affranchis* were mulatto, so today most of the rich are light-skinned.” (H.in C.Cxt., 204). Beyond skin color, other attributes of status such as language and religion operate to sustain and perpetuate the social distinction and thus social distance. In a 1971 essay in the journal *Race* (where he seemed to have published most of his more theoretical pieces in the social sciences), David attempted to clarify the concept of class by emphasizing the “subjective aspect of class relations,” i.e., social consciousness:

“This subjective understanding and assessment on the part of those concerned will surely be influenced by the objective situation which confronts them, but there is no automatic or mechanical link. If there were we would not find ideological disagreements among members of the same economic class.”
(Race [b], 1971, 214)

Only the most orthodox and intransigent historical materialist would disagree with this analysis. The problem is that by the 1980s David is intellectually restless and theoretically curious; he pursues issues from many angles and his pursuit of a proper identification of social class is no exception. Turning to the Trinidadian, O.C. Cox, ' Caste, Class and Race, he insists that one has to distinguish between political classes on the one hand and social classes or sub-classes on the other. He proceeds to make the following surprising assertion:

“A political class is a coherent group or collection of groups whose members recognise a common interest....Social classes or sub-classes, for their part, are not social groups; they are not social entities, but are theoretical constructions of social scientists....part of a classificatory system devised by social scientists and used by bureaucrats.” (From D.toD., 1979, 9).

All concepts are in the final analysis theoretical constructions. The question is “constructed” around what? Clearly, when dealing with Caribbean societies one is not dealing with the urban, industrial working classes Marx thought he was dealing with. David’s work makes it very clear indeed that the construction has to be primarily though not exclusively around perceptions of race and color because social stratification--and the resulting inequalities--are based on race and color considerations. To the extent that we define class (as the synthesizing definition of Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan does) as aggregates centered around all the values important to a particular society, then concerns with race and color have to be central to any definition of class in the Caribbean. Perceptions (consciousness) of inequality and what it will take to overcome that inequality, are initiated from the vantage of racial consciousness. To speak of black, Indian, or white upper, middle or working classes is to replicate the usage made by Caribbean peoples’ themselves.

But Nicholls’ Caribbean teaches us something else, something which both Durkheim and Simmel insisted on: classes are not invariably engaged in conflict. Competition and cooperation are also used as mechanisms in the pursuit of equality or at least, reduced inequality. The point

is, however, that whether it is conflict, competition or cooperation, the actions are engendered and measured by racial consciousness.

In my opinion, David's evident struggle with the concept of social class had two sources: First, there was the tension between his insistence that dramatic political events in Haiti, and elsewhere in the Caribbean, were to be explained and understood in their own historical context, (i.e., they were *sui generis*), and his attempt to provide a wider Caribbean "context" for these events. All Caribbeanists and other "area" students who have attempted to go beyond the one island or the one linguistic grouping, will agree that the only way to deal with the clash between the unique and the generalizable is through concepts, or through what Max Weber called "ideal types." Anyone who has studied the debates following the publication of Weber's The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism will know that not even the master escaped unscathed. It is in Nicholls' effort to generalize from the Haitian case that he runs into conceptual difficulties in defining class.

Secondly, (and here I am really sticking my neck out) there was still the "unreconstructed" David Nicholls. Noting, as he did in the new Preface to the 1988 issue of the Dessalines to Duvalier book, that it now seemed "obligatory" among Haitian writers to begin their books with a first chapter "comprising misconceived attempts to force Haitian reality into 'Marxist' categories" (xiii), he resisted. Not one to be content to be a simple contrarian, however, he engaged in a conceptually brilliant discussion of class in Marx, Engels and Gramsci. The problem is that that theoretical analysis is engaged separately in the endnotes (see pp.257-258, notes 21,22, 23, 24) and is not integrated, into the historical treatment. Again, who among us can fail to identify with this methodological conundrum?

In the final analysis, this critique of Nicholls' use of the concept social class should be interpreted as a call to a further analysis and discussion of his work. It is as he would have wanted it as well as called for by the extraordinary merits of that work. Certainly, Nicholls' capacity to elucidate Haitian history has no par, in English or French, and his attempt to put that history in Caribbean context is equaled by only one other political scientist I know, Gordon K.

Lewis. And make no mistake: Gordon struggled as much with the issue of social class and especially class conflict. As I have pointed out elsewhere, Lewis' steady Fabian-like convictions (not unlike Nicholls') kept interfering with his occasional more radical inclinations. Not surprisingly since, and why not say it, they were both British, both students of, and in turn believers in, the European liberal pluralist political tradition, devout Christians (David an Anglican, Gordon a Methodist), and, critically, both charmed by and engaged with the Caribbean. Their legacy is the greatest confirmation of the universality of the human spirit when both mind and heart are put to the task.

Scholarship generally and that of the Caribbean specifically have been enriched by David Nicholls' all too brief sojourn in our midst. The most worthy way to honor his contributions is by continuing to engage his literary legacy in debate.

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