



CARIBBEAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION

CSA 36th Annual Conference 2011

“Building a New House: Towards New Caribbean Futures in an Age of Uncertainty”

Conceptual Statement

“The youth of America are rolling up their sleeves, digging their hands in the dough, and making it rise with the sweat of their brows. They realize that there is too much imitation, and that creation holds the key to salvation. ‘Create’ is the password of this generation. The wine is made from plantain, but even if it turns sour, it is our own wine!”
José Martí (“Nuestra América,” 1881)

Introduction

The Caribbean Studies Association (CSA) is an independent professional organization devoted to the promotion of Caribbean studies from a multidisciplinary, multicultural point of view. It is the primary association for scholars and practitioners working on the Caribbean Region (including Central America and the Caribbean Coast of South America). Its members come from the Caribbean Region, North America, South America, Central America, Europe and elsewhere even though more than half of its members live in the United States many of them teaching at U.S. universities and colleges. Founded in 1974 by 300 Caribbeanists, the CSA now has over 1,000 members.

The Caribbean Studies Association enjoys non-profit status and is independent of any public or private institution. Membership is open to anyone interested in sharing its objectives, regardless of academic discipline, profession, ideology, place of residence, ethnic origin, or nationality.

Members of CSA have played leading roles in the Caribbean, most notably in public service and in academia. These include current and past service as leaders of governments, administrators in multilateral and bi-lateral regional organizations. Many of our current members serve in senior positions at Caribbean, North American, and European universities.

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c/o Dr. Holger W. Henke
York College (City University of New York)
94-20 Guy R. Brewer Blvd., Rm. 2H07C • Jamaica, NY 11451 • USA
Email: hhenke@verizon.net • Tel: 718-262-5338 • Fax: 718-262-2786

The Annual Conferences

Since its first conference in 1975, held in San Juan (Puerto Rico), the CSA has provided a space where every year hundreds of scholars and practitioners come together present and discuss their research, build networks, groom students and young scholars, and generally promote an interest in social, economic, political and cultural affairs of the region. By meeting in a different country every year, the CSA demonstrates its lived commitment to a pan-Caribbean vision. Indeed, through holding its 2007 conference in Salvador da Bahia (Brazil) the Caribbean Studies Association made an important symbolic point in claiming this cultural space as a legitimate point of scholarly interest and part of a new and extended definition of the Caribbean region. A similar argument could be made for other conference venues, such as Mexico (1994), Colombia (1997), Panama (1999), and San Andres (2007).

In terms of selecting a conference site CSA strives to give equal opportunity to countries in the French-, English-, Spanish-, and Dutch-speaking Caribbean. Exposing our members to a new country every year engenders a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the diversity of socio-economic, political, and cultural experiences and realities that make this region, in the words of Jamaica's Rex Nettleford, pre-modern, modern, and post-modern all at the same time.

For the country hosting the CSA conference, the conference space itself is an opportunity to learn the latest research on many aspects of life in the region, gain a comparative perspective, and meet with the top Caribbean Studies scholars. At a minimum this opportunity tends to energize local research just as much as it inspires the CSA membership. In addition, the CSA is a space that allows the host country to present itself close-up to the CSA membership and to exchange arguments on a variety of issues that are often shared by other countries in the region. Finally, the conference is an opportunity to develop new perspectives on regional and international problems.

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As we have entered the 21st century, it has become more and more apparent that apart from the many foreseen and intended consequences of globalization, new uncertainties and unforeseen consequences are also a result of this relatively new and distinct phase of world history. In particular, and possibly unintended by the main architects of the legal and political frameworks of globalization, is a certain leveling of economic discrepancies and the rise of new economic players at the world level. Simultaneously, there is a growing realization that military power (while far from being irrelevant) increasingly becomes either inapplicable or useless in attempts to impose order, compliance or even just comparative advantages.

As Fareed Zakaria points out in his book *The Post-American World* (2008), “it might seem strange to focus on growing prosperity when there are still hundreds of millions of people living in desperate poverty. [...] The 50 countries where the earth's poorest people live are basket cases that need urgent attention. In the other 142—which include China, India, Brazil, Russia, Indonesia, Turkey, Kenya, and South Africa—the poor are slowly being absorbed into productive and growing economies. [...] This is creating an international system in which countries in all parts of the world are no longer objects or observers but players in their own right. It is the birth of a truly global



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order” (p.3). As we know all too well, many in the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean region are negatively affected by globalization and its protagonists, and need the attention Zakaria speaks of.

However, we can also note the influence of new players in the region. For example, on his two-week trip to Latin America in 2004, Chinese President Hu pledged billions of dollars in investments in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Cuba. It has been China that has built stadiums for the recent cricket world cup held in the region. In the case of the Dominican Republic – one of the few nations in the region that maintains formal relations with Taiwan – it has continued to increase its trade; up to US\$490 million in 2006 compared with just US\$180 million with Taiwan. India’s Essar Group is building a \$1.2 billion steel plant in Trinidad and Tobago. And Manipal University in India has announced that it is establishing a campus in Antigua that will offer education in a number of disciplines including communication studies, nursing, pharmacy, and tourism. Other powers such as Brazil and Russia are also expanding their involvement in the region. In the case of Brazil there are significant development impulses expected from the new road connecting Guyana’s capital Georgetown to Brazil’s underdeveloped Northeast. Brazil is also undertaking significant investments in the Jamaican sugar industry. Guyana’s Prime Minister Jagdeo visited Moscow to discuss a large possible investment by the Russian aluminium giant RusAl, the second largest primary producer in the world of aluminium.

With new regional initiatives like ALBA and the Bank of the South (Banco del Sur) it becomes evident that new alternatives of regional integration and economic relations are being contemplated that go beyond the neoliberal model. Whether or not these new alternatives will be successful is not only a question of geopolitical constellations and interests, but also a question to what extent regional governments and societies have the political will and capability to shape new socio-economic relations and ventures that will take the region beyond a neoliberal model that increasingly reveals its limitations.

What these few examples demonstrate is that there are both great new opportunities for the Caribbean, as well as new fields of foreign relations, which require expertise and consideration. It means that there is a shift underway away from the region’s historically closest partners. It also bears out the need to be clear about the rules of engagement within often excessively under-regulated international regimes. Thus, in a recent speech given at the Inauguration of the Caribbean Association of Judicial Officers Sir Shridath Ramphal argued for a new level of judicial independence in the region: “In a globalized world, activities which were previously limited to the local or national levels are internationalized, requiring law-making beyond the single state. The result is a rules-based system of international relations including, with special relevance to our countries, international economic relations. [...] ... as small developing countries we need a rules-based international trading system, rather than face the hazards of trade in a globalised world without equitable legal rules that bind all countries – a world in which economic power holds sway unimpeded. [...] If, in the Caribbean, domestic law, and what I believe we must now begin to recognize as regional law, is to be applied consistently with international law we had better gear up ourselves as lawyers for the new realities. That is a challenge of our time.”

Without doubt these shifts in power at the global and regional level open up new opportunities to create new coalitions of regional solidarity, new challenges for countries and populations that remain excluded from the development of well integrated and self-sustained growth, growing pressures on the environment and for economies to adopt new technologies, and the need for

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societies to adapt through education and innovation. How will the countries of our region adjust to these new challenges and opportunities? Which local and translocal efficiencies can be built as part of a regional political agenda? Indeed, can the region continue to see itself in terms of economic cooperation, somewhat divorced from political unity?

How do societies of the region react to new environments of uncertainty, new economic demands, and new social and economic players in their midst? Can young people, women, and other particularly vulnerable groups, who are often sucked into social and behavioral downward spirals without perspectives in a globalized scenario with uncertain futures, be brought back into a new development model that transcends or works outside of these mechanisms? How can these initiatives or options be expressed and furthered at the regional and global level? Where new economic and political pressures translate into social re-colonization, what options do governments and society at large have to mitigate and resist these pressures? In which way may countries such as Venezuela or Cuba, which have proposed different development models, benefit from a recalibration of regional affairs? What lessons from history are relevant in regard to building new Caribbean Futures?

But the proposed conference theme does not only have relevance for political scientists, economists, historians, and sociologists. The current conjuncture has also relevance in terms of the cultural production and reproduction. For example, how do issues of sovereignty, nationality, regionalism and culture collide in this age of uncertainty? And how does a people continue to produce a national culture in light of the weight of the very powerful influences of a globalizing culture, which emphasizes individualism, materialism, and persistent commodification? How can the creative imagination that has inspired the region's art life help to build community, create meaning, foster alternative visions of the future, and point in new directions? In which way can research contribute to create positive and constructive agendas that creatively respond to new crises and opportunities? How can Caribbean Studies as a field of inquiry respond to the challenges imposed by existential uncertainties and absurdities?

These and similar questions shall be among those that the 2011 annual conference will pose its members. In its multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary and interactive panels, CSA scholars and practitioners are invited to respond to the present dimensions of opportunity and crisis, and to develop new conceptual ideas and perspectives that will enable and promote new Caribbean futures in the midst of unpredictability and persistent change.



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