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The detachment of West Indies cricket from the nationalist scaffold

West Indian people have made their greatest single cultural investment in cricket. This commitment of effort and emotion profoundly shaped the mindscape of citizens, and led to the allocation of scarce financial resources that enabled physical infrastructures to dominate the landscape of each territory. As a deeply rooted historical process it has had several implications for critical aspects of anti-colonialism and the nation-building project.[1]

While the enormity of this enterprise is generally grasped, there are important aspects that often elude general attention. Two such aspects are the historic depth and ethnic participation of the process. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the zenith of the slavery period, masters and slaves were passionate participants in the game, and made separate preparations for its future. By the 1830s, when the regional slave system collapsed in the face of intense human-rights pressures, cricket was well on its way to becoming the first expression of Caribbean popular culture.[2]

This experience in cultural development is often narrated without specific reference to its fundamental multi-ethnic nature. While colonial white elites imported and domesticated the game, branding it for respectability with the 'whites only' tag, equally important was its appropriation by disenfranchised blacks who propelled its development as a site of racial and class contest. By the mid nineteenth century cricket had spilled out from these narrow social confines and found fertile ground in the larger communities of the emerging white and coloured middle classes, and the black labouring poor.[3]

This institutional transformation was associated with the smashing of entrenched social barriers that had hindered racial mobility for over a hundred years. Cricket culture assumed the most controversial reputation as the principal arena of colonial restructuring, a place for the public ventilation of proof that individual merit could be rewarded. No other public institution or social activity could claim this status. By the early twentieth century cricket as entrenched community culture was forcefully being democratised

and its achievements linked to the broader processes of political decolonisation and euphoric nationalism.[4]

Within the context of Caribbean social and political history this is considered a seminal achievement. In 1928, when the regional team was granted Test status and set off to England for an inaugural tour, it comprised a gathering of men of all classes and colours; it was a reflection and recognition of Caribbean demographic diversity. Men of means and players from poverty walked out on the field to represent a society less than a century removed from chattel slavery. White men from elite families continued to provide leadership, and assumed the right to this role, but in no other sphere of Caribbean life was this democratising experience replicated.

Black access and prestigious participation in cricket was explained by hegemonic white elite groups in terms of the inner logic and moral imperative of the game, which emphasised the principle of player equality 'within the boundary'. Black players, however, had a different perspective, as did the leaders of political protest movements who spoke in support of their ambitions. They provided an interpretation that highlighted the radicalisation of social life 'beyond the boundary', and the achievement of attaining recognition for the principle of merit in selection to office within public institutions.

The radical political process to which black players attached their claim emphasised the role of fair competition within team selection procedures as the best guarantee in defeating the power of race prejudice. In addition, grass-roots communities were determined to gain respect for the benefits the game was enjoying as it was refashioned to suit social needs with their performance culture. It was important to inhabitants in towns and villages that they were not seen as passive recipients of English styles and methods, but as creative participants in the crafting of a West Indian genre. To this end, cricket was bent into new shapes and forms in order to accommodate the cultural and political agenda that was endemic to the anti-colonial consciousness.[5]

The social score of cricket by the mid twentieth century was quite extraordinary. West Indians, having transformed the domestic circumstance of the game, had irreversibly modified, nay, revolutionised the international game in terms of its performance and personality. A strikingly new approach came out of the West Indies with a distinct brand which audiences throughout the world admired, feared, resented and celebrated. The game had come to the colonies from England under the strained racial circumstances of slavery, and in the hands of the freed slaves and their progeny was refined, repackaged and re-exported. Some of the finest writers and most generous

minds of organised sport have concluded, after experiencing the great West Indies teams of the 1950s, that the islanders had breathed youthful life into the old, dying Victorian game.[6]

A closer look at the scorecard reveals even more. Cricket, and no other activity, taught the scattered, fragmented West Indies the importance of collective organisation and collaboration. That the colonials were able to put together a West Indian team in 1886 and sustain that effort until today is remarkable if not miraculous. It is their greatest single political achievement, one that has become a model and mentor for other areas of collaboration such as the University of the West Indies, and the 'Caribbean Common Community'. Cricket, then, stands alone with ancestral pedigree as the leader of the nationalist movement for cohesion in a place of spatial and political division.

The English crowd marvelled at the early West Indies teams, as did the Indians and Australians. Unfamiliar to them were such multi-racial enterprises operating with apparent ease at a time when racial segregation and apartheid were gaining ground as approved models of social living. Teams made up of blacks, whites, Jews, Chinese, Indians, Syrians, Amerindians and every possible biological combination of these ethnicities showed a violently imperial racial world the meaning of human toleration and co-operation. And, critically, it was a winning experiment because by the mid-1960s it had defeated all-comers under the leadership of the youthful Gary Sobers, considered the best player the world had ever seen.

By 1980, West Indians were dominant in the international game. They were able to sustain this status for near twenty years. In no other area of public engagement did West Indians achieve a commanding presence in the international arena. While many sectors of regional life have emerged globally competitive, from the literary arts to the services economy, cricket remains the pivotal expression of a unified vision and action producing the effect of excellence in the global space. It is an experience that has brought the region considerable benefit in terms of pride and prestige.

The investment, then, of time, space, money and passion has paid off handsomely. Importantly, there continues to be an expectation of high returns. The game draws upon deep wells of public goodwill across boundaries of age, class and gender. It has retained its commanding iconic status within Caribbean civilisation and is inextricably linked and interwoven into the fabric of romantic idealism. While other sports enjoy considerable public attention in the region, with spectacular achievements in the area of athletics, public opinion surveys consistently show cricket as the number one organised cultural engagement. Within the global imagination the West Indies stand apart as a nation built around cricket.

In the hands of West Indians, furthermore, the game was ideologically restructured and energised to serve a purpose bigger than itself: the struggle for social justice and political freedom. West Indian supporters are generally foot soldiers of this collective historical consciousness and future expectation. In each island the game has been asked to carry a greater emotional and political burden than in other places. Here, therefore, it is not just a game; it is the heartbeat of a young nation looking into an old world, searching for a place where dignity and honour can be assured.

Along the way there have been many moments when forces beyond the boundary have determined the reactions of West Indians to developments within a game. Primarily, they have found it necessary to ventilate their political nationalism, particularly in respect to issues of racial injustice and imperial arrogance. This much is captured during the many riots that have erupted following controversial decisions by umpires. The cricket crowd, James tells us, represents a barometer of political awareness and historical sensibility.[7]

If heroes live on in the hearts of nations, the great West Indian players are celebrated in memory like no other citizens. Sir Frank Worrell remains the one beloved public figure across the region, with memorials in many places beyond Barbados, the place of his birth. In Jamaica and Trinidad, his name appears on public buildings, and in Barbados his face can be found on banknotes and in the streets. From the 1950s, following the defeat of England in a Test series, the West Indian nation have considered these heroes in much the same way that ancient Greek society celebrated warriors such as Hector and Achilles. Cricket for the crowd is their finest theatre where the turbulent past and divided present are acted out in epic, dramatic proportions.

But there was considerable opposition to these developments in the popular consciousness. Whites from elite families had opposed the abolition of slavery and the introduction of civil rights in the nineteenth century; similarly, they opposed political democracy and national independence in the mid twentieth. Likewise, they opposed the democratisation of cricket culture with the consequence that the emerging nation found it difficult to embrace them as legitimate citizens. In the sphere of cricket, while they were willing to make concessions to the principle of meritorious representation, they were unwilling to relinquish control of the leadership.

Against this background Frank Worrell emerged in 1960, after ten years of highly organised black protest, as the first black player to be appointed substantive captain of the West Indies team. Residual racism in white Barbadian society had much to do with his decision to adopt Jamaica as his home. He never felt accepted among the local elite, who considered that he had taken from them a critically important instrument of their race rule in the

West Indies. He was considered an arrogant 'black boy' in some quarters. Significant sections of these families across the region switched their support to England and Australia. At the same time it was commonly, though informally, observed that a significant migration of white Barbadians to South Africa and other 'dominions' took place after independence in 1966, where the apartheid society seemed to their liking.[8]

But nowhere was the politics of West Indian cricket more emotionally felt than among the West Indian migrants in England in the aftermath of Worrell's appointment. Cricket success was their most reliable armour in the struggle for social respect, dignity and general wellbeing in the slums of inner cities. Cricket victories revived and enlivened the politics of decolonisation and identity they had left behind in the West Indies. When England won the third Test at Edgbaston in 1963, with Frank Worrell as captain, the West Indian population in Birmingham was devastated.

Worrell, they knew, however, was laying the foundation for something grand. Winning the odd match or series was not enough to pay back on their investment. Nothing short of global domination would suffice. From enslavement to world leadership was the narrative they wished cricket to write. In this tale, the conquering of England was the principal prize. By 1980 they were well on the way. The lion of this vision was Vivian Richards, who symbolised the irrepressible West Indian; the most dominant cricketing batsman of his time. It was anti-colonialism in action in its clearest form; an ideological power struggle which was universally recognised as such.

In his autobiography, *Hitting Across the Line*, Richards explained the link in his consciousness between West Indian cricket and identity:

> I believe very strongly in the black man asserting himself in this world, coming as I do from the West Indies at the end of the colonial era. I identify with black power, Rastafarian [sic] and all the movements of black liberations. Once I was offered one million dollars to play cricket in South Africa, I could not go as long as the black majority in South Africa remains oppressed by the apartheid system. I could never come to terms with playing cricket there. I would be letting down my own black people and I would destroy my sense of self-esteem. Cricket has always been politics and especially for us in the Caribbean.[9]

Elsewhere he wrote that he would like to be remembered as a cricketer who carried his bat for 'the liberation of Africans and all oppressed people everywhere'.[10]

Before his career had ended, Richards considered himself in conflict with the conservative establishment forces that had sought to frustrate Frank Worrell some years earlier, and that were determined also to deny

him access to the captaincy. In Richards's case, opposition came from the black members of the Board, led by Clyde Walcott, who saw him as a radical black power figure, who would not represent the Board's views. The extension of Lloyd's tenure of captaincy, in spite of Richards's obvious success as vice-captain, was seen by Richards as an act of hostility towards him.[11] This ideological tension between the conservative and radical traditions remained strong on account of having deep roots. In the political expressions and postures of officials and players evidence of this conflict could be found. The cricket crowd became astute in the reading of subtexts, and participated in public dialogue that assured few official cricket secrets.

West Indians were not alone in this regard. Cricket crises in the Caribbean attracted a fair share of journalistic commentary, some of which engaged the politics of issues beyond the boundary. Robin Marlar, writing for the *Sunday Times* on 4 July 1993, against the background of the change-over from the Richards to the Richardson captaincy, said:

> It is clear that the West Indies Board thought that when Vivian Richards retired it was time that the leadership of West Indies cricket shifted its centre of gravity away from black activism and back towards the mainstream of the international game. Haynes was too close to his predecessor to achieve his objective and the mantle passed to the younger, less confrontational Richie Richardson.[12]

This shifting of the ideological centre of gravity in West Indies cricket, therefore, is as much a part of the making of the modern nation as the emergence of political parties and trade unions. It is by large measure the history of the people as mirrored within the area of popular culture. It is, also, the idealistic expression of a political discourse that seeks order and coherence in a fragmented neo-colonial nation in search of sustainable political independence and a viable nationalist identity.

This magnificent edifice of performance achievement, driven as a synergistic combination of technical competence and political passion, crashed by the end of the 1990s, and was reversed as the doors to the twenty-first century were flung wide open. The West Indian Test team, invincible in the last generation, is now ranked the weakest of traditional competitors in the international arena. Critically, the team is no longer recognised as being an element within the grand pan-African project; it has no commitment to any political cause or movement. Not only is its diminished status ridiculed by old and new opponents, but it is reviled in some Caribbean and global quarters for having turned its back on the political agenda of post-nationalist radicalism.[13]

Media experts and academics have described this descent from awesomeness to awfulness as one of the most dramatic dislocations and losses of excellence in the modern history of sports. In the midst of this decline to despair is situated, as cause and effect, the rejection of cricket's relation to the radical political process and the popular consciousness. The discourse is hinged on the impact of Brian Lara and Chris Gayle, both superstars and captains of the team in the age of globalisation. While Lara is considered the batting heir to Viv Richards, beyond the boundary he is received as his antithesis, a leader who distanced himself from the political roots of the West Indian game and focused entirely on the construction of his brilliant personal career. He represents, then, the end of the nationalist paradigm in West Indies cricket, and the detachment of the game from the historical discourse.[14]

The golden patch in Lara's career as the best batsman in the world began at the end of the 1990s. It was the moment that marked the onset of deepening defeats of the West Indies team. As he broke batting records with apparent childlike ease, the team he led seemed infantile in the competitive world of adult sport.[15]

Eventually the West Indian game struck an ideological vacuum when the team, led by Lara, went on strike, suddenly, on the eve of the historic tour to South Africa, leaving President Nelson Mandela in ceremony at the airport awaiting the team that never arrived. The unimaginable had happened; the great West Indian team, whose previous members had contributed so much to bring apartheid to an end, now opted to stay in London for salary talks rather than meet a man who desperately wanted to thank them for their role in facilitating human liberation.[16]

After a decade dominated by the aura of Lara, in 2008 Chris Gayle emerged as the undisputed leader of 'the band of losers'. Critics and officials alike have been eager to agree with divided supporters that Lara's leadership and legacy laid the foundation for his successor to detach even further West Indies cricket from the sensibility of the nationalist project. Lara, his defenders retort, was just the messenger whose beheading has served to satisfy the emotions of the moment while preventing the process of sober intellectual reflection that was needed.[17]

After Lara, the WICB searched in a frenzied fashion to find a team leader who could hold his own on the field and offer West Indies cricket a lifeline to the rich performance legacy of the pre-Lara era. The mission was to find a mentality driven by commitment rather than cash, history rather than hubris. Lara, driven into exile for making it clear that it was the Board that needed to enter the twenty-first century, was not a part of the search party.

It was agreed that wherever Lara had taken the team, the new leader should take it in the opposite direction.[18]

All roads and reasoning led to Chris Gayle. Lara, unsolicited, endorsed the choice. Gale, he intimated, spoke his language and read the future from the same manifesto. A regional dialogue ensued in which post-nationalist socio-political tensions were aggressively ventilated as a crisis of cricket culture. Viv Richards stood his ground and made it clear that his successors were selling the family silver. He reminded the team of his famous refusal to play for money in apartheid South Africa and of his speech emphasising that lining his pocket with such blood money would poison the roots of West Indian cricket. Lara, however, was the first West Indian cricket millionaire, and this was the age of financial globalisation.[19]

No previous generation of West Indian cricket leaders has had as divisive an impact on Caribbean development discourse as that of Lara and Gayle. The failure of their teams to compensate for the spreading sense of despair in West Indian socio-economic decline and political disillusionment led to an intensely critical perception of both as politically unfit for the role of leadership. The public feels, furthermore, that despite its insistence on the team having an important political role 'beyond the boundary', the game has been hijacked by an uncaring cabal of mercenary money seekers, players without attachment to traditional sources of societal concerns.[20]

Fans and fraternity are not prepared to concede to Gayle a right to renegotiate for cricket a new, diminished role, even as the team struggles to be taken as a serious competitor. Lara had found the traditional values attached to the captaincy too burdensome to carry, and declared at a moment of despair that 'cricket was ruining his life'. Gayle's response to claims that he lacks the intellectual comprehension to perform the role was equally shocking and demeaning. He told the press that he didn't campaign for the job; that it was imposed upon him by his employers, and that he is willing to discard it if continually criticised.[21]

Like Lara, who tore away the nationalist scaffold, Gayle is believed to be the titular leader of a youth movement that rejects earlier conceptions of the national interest, and is in revolt against the regional socio-political and economic establishment. The political independence project, despite its many achievements, did not succeed in uprooting institutionalised ghetto poverty, and players drawn from such communities, such as Gayle, do consider the state and its affiliate governance systems the enemy rather than the enabler.[22]

Meanwhile, the general fear at the level of regional leadership is that cricket culture will fall fully into the monetary embrace of foreign controlled

globalised market forces. Citizens are generally satisfied with the idea of the cricket millionaire, but the image of the cricketers as a freelance agent on the money market with no sincere attachment to national emotions is considered a price too high to pay.[23]

Lara was keenly aware of the public vexation associated with the discourse that surrounded his leadership. He often spoke candidly about the challenges he faced in socially integrating his 'guys' from different 'islands' into a West Indian team. At the same time he resisted the 'entrapment' of the historical social construction of the cricket hero, and team, as political ambassadors of the West Indian 'nation'. No one, it appeared, was more hyper-sensitive to the ideological imprisonment of the category. He considered himself politically framed and socially hung; and he broke free.[24]

The perfect picture of Frank Worrell did not hang comfortably on the walls of Lara's mind. Behind him was a stream of financially compromised, and socially abandoned, superheroes. For him Gary Sobers's financial discomfort was a sobering example of the fickle and unreliable sentiments that constitute the national ambition in the Caribbean. The majority of his cricket mentors, in his estimation, were never financially compensated with hard currency at a level commensurate with the degree of hero-worship they attracted.[25]

Cast aside and cash-challenged, it appeared to some spectators that old stars were looking in envy at the glitter of gold that symbolised the new commercial order of West Indian cricket. Lara's stand constituted the new West Indian brand; he was global, and his image was golden. With this armour he protected himself from the political swords drawn to suppress his alleged mutiny. With his wealth he bought protection and surrounded himself with foot soldiers and surrogates to ensure his safety. He won his battle and is about to be rehabilitated by the establishment that now sees him as what he was – the messenger of a new age and not the designer of the debacle.[26]

Gayle's recent aggression towards the West Indies Cricket Board, and his apparent general disregard for public opinion, is indicative of the widespread youth disillusionment that characterises the post-national Caribbean society. The official relationships between 'star' and state in most cases are sour, sullen and not likely to be mutually supportive. The attitudes and allegories of dejected former stars that shaped the social landscape which produced Gayle and his cohorts constitute an energy source that drives their determination to defeat the employers and resist public judgements by all means necessary.[27]

What has happened in the post-Lara era is that the anti-colonial dream of building a legitimate, sovereign West Indian nation as a supportive

environment for the West Indies team has eluded political leadership, collapsed under the weight of a cocktail of crass opportunism and mind-boggling mismanagement. The political consequence of this reality has been the emergence of a string of impoverished micro-states that cannot, after thirty years of independence, legitimise their existence in serious, sound and rational ways. As retreating regimes, they are insecure and pessimistic about the future. The price tag for this new commodity has been placed around Gayle's neck.[28]

The severe implication of this new circumstance is that traditional leadership forms and styles no longer appeal to youth. If, for example, with respect to the West Indies cricket team, Sir Frank Worrell was the Founding Father, Sir Gary Sobers the King, Clive Lloyd a Statesman, Sir Vivian Richards a General and Brian Lara a Prince, then Chris Gayle is undoubtedly the Don of the posse – unchallenged leader of the 'gang'. Gayle is the man his team wants, though the West Indian community is deeply divided as to whether he is who it needs.[29]

West Indies cricket is now challenged to free itself from the anti-social values of the street gang culture that rocks the development efforts of communities across the region. The islands, large and small, and Guyana, are struggling to produce youth leadership that does not celebrate the community 'don'. Church and state speak of the importance of a rescue act. Cricketers are accused, for the first time in the history of the game, of setting a bad example to youth, one that typifies indiscipline, greed and selfishness.[30]

The ability of Gayle to command the loyalty of players from across the region attests to the proliferation and regional acceptance of Jamaican-style street culture; its music and imagery, dance and demeanour, macho and money-first mentality. While there remain positive values for youth development in aspects of this culture, such as the willingness to engage with, rather than fear, the global, its inability to promote the learning systems necessary for international competitive standards suggests its general inadequacy as a pillar on which West Indies cricket can rise.[31]

The idea of playing for one's country as an ultimate status that drives player motivation has become obsolete on the streets of Caribbean towns and rural villages. Players drawn from economically dispossessed communities that have been exposed to no experience but high unemployment, police brutality, drug trading and endemic violence have asked the question 'What has my country done for me?'. In so asking, they point to the political concept of 'failed nations' that dominates social science discourse on post-colonial developing countries, and identify themselves as targeted victims of the nation they are expected to represent.[32]

For them, the benefits of nationhood neither poured into, nor trickled down to, their households, while official fiscal and monetary policies left them exposed to corrosive unfettered market forces. They now wish to engage and benefit from these very forces that once held them as captives. While corporate commercial elites defined them as 'unemployable' and middle-class-led political parties consider them a 'social problem', the market economy of cricket welcomed them as free, empowered persons in charge of their personal destinies.[33]

Not surprisingly, there is frequent assertion that the team is populated by pariahs and pirates who should be cast out with their cash. For such critics there remains an enduring hope that a new mentality, connected to the earlier dispensation, will emerge, bringing with it a familiar commitment to high performance and broad-based leadership excellence. Much of this, however, rings hollow. The West Indies today, like other parts of the world, is participating in a process whereby political discourses are being refashioned to accommodate both the positive and negative aspects of social and financial globalisation in a post-imperial setting.

While the success of earlier teams had much to do with their willingness to draw upon and connect to public discourses as a source of motivation and discipline, their excellence was a direct result of extraordinary skills and the capacity to innovate. The de-skilling of contemporary cricket, and the reduced capacity of young players to learn the postmodern game, has more to do with the leadership crisis of the cricket establishment than the social condition and consciousness of young players. The West Indies have made the least provision for the training and professional development of their players. In a game where talent needs to be honed by programmes for team development, the region chronically requires major investment in the human and material resources that will allow it to yield future returns. This is a strategic choice that needs to be made within the boundary.[34]

NOTES

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