

## Wendell Bell

### 1. How did you come to specialize in Caribbean Studies?

**Wendell Bell:** When I planned my first trip to Jamaica in 1956, I thought that I would be spending only one summer there. My intention was to do research on the social areas of Kingston to compare with research that I had been doing on American cities. In 1955, I had co-authored a monograph on *Social Area Analysis* that focused on mapping the social areas of cities differentiated by socioeconomic status, family life, and race and ethnicity. Additionally, I had done fieldwork in different social areas of San Francisco and Chicago studying the residents' differing beliefs, attitudes, and values and how they were shaped by the neighborhoods in which they lived.

When I arrived in Jamaica, however, I found myself in the whirl of Jamaica's political transition from a British colony to an independent state. It was a thrilling time. Everyone from sugarcane workers to merchant elites and from market women to my new colleagues at the University College of the West Indies (as it was then called) seemed to be looking forward with anticipation and consumed by questions of what would—and should—happen to Jamaica (and to themselves) when the island became politically independent. I confess to becoming totally caught up in their excitement, their hopes and in some cases their fears for the future.

Looking back, I realize that Eduardo C. Mondlane, a graduate student with whom I had been working at Northwestern University where I was then on the faculty, had prepared me to be receptive to Jamaica's march toward political freedom. While at Northwestern U., Eduardo tirelessly struggled to foster support in the United States for the political liberation of his country, Mozambique, from Portuguese domination. Although in our meetings together, we talked mostly about his progress toward the Ph.D. degree in Sociology, I was well aware of his political activities and was moved by his moral conviction and dedication to his cause.

[After receiving his Ph.D. and after some early teaching and work at the United Nations, Eduardo would return to Mozambique and become the founding President of the Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo). In that capacity he and his followers began a revolutionary war aimed at achieving political independence for Mozambique. Unfortunately, Eduardo never lived to see Frelimo's success. Before Mozambique became independent, he was assassinated in Dar es Salaam.]

I switched my research project from the social areas of Kingston to a study of the transition to political independence in Jamaica. I did not know at the time that I was also signing on for a quarter-century of research in the Caribbean.

Nor did I know that my Caribbean experiences to come would end up changing my life, leading me to get involved in a variety of other activities, such as becoming a co-founder of the Yale University African American Studies Program (now Department) and a long-term member of its Advisory and Executive Committees, and

to radical shifts in my professional life, first, by becoming a comparative sociologist and then a futurist.

## 2. How did your interest in and commitment to Caribbean Studies evolve?

**WB:** When I returned to Northwestern U. after that first summer in Jamaica, I was totally committed to the Caribbean and intrigued by studying the transition from colony to new, independent nation-state, while comparing them also to the dependent territories that chose to retain closer political ties to their European colonial power.

The Social Science Research Council granted me a 3-year Faculty Research Fellowship for the study of political change and leadership in Jamaica, which got me started. This allowed me to make several additional research trips to Jamaica, including a mail questionnaire study of Jamaican leaders in 1958—with, I gratefully add, the advice and help of many colleagues from UCWI, especially from the Institute of Social and Economic Studies, such as Dudley Huggins, M.G. Smith, Lloyd Braithwaite, George Cumber, and David Edwards, among others.

During this time, I moved to the University of California, Los Angeles, drawn back by the golden thread tied to the place from which I had received my Ph.D. While writing a series of articles and *Jamaican Leaders: Political Attitudes in a New Nation* from the 1958 data I collected, I also applied for a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York to expand my research to other English-speaking territories in the Caribbean.

Thus, by 1960, I was able to establish a West Indies Study Program at UCLA and enlarge the Caribbean research to include Antigua, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana as well as continuing research in Jamaica. The grant, *A Study of Elites, Nationalism, and Social Change in the British Caribbean*, provided for fellowships for graduate students, both from the United States and from the Caribbean (which included, among others, Neville Layne from Guyana, the late Andrew Camacho from Trinidad, D. Elliott Parris from Barbados, and for a time Anthony P. Maingot from Trinidad). There were a total of nine graduate students in the Program.

M.G. Smith joined the UCLA Anthropology faculty, which was then a joint department with Sociology, so we had a group of people working on the Caribbean.

One byproduct of the Caribbean research was *Public Leadership*, which two UCLA faculty colleagues and I published in 1961. It is basically a review of the social research literature on leadership, which I had had to study as background for the “leadership” part of our Caribbean studies.

Among the publications that resulted from the Carnegie grant were *The Democratic Revolution in the West Indies*, which I edited; *Social Change and Images*

*of the Future: A Study of the Pursuit of Progress in Jamaica* by James A. Mau; *The Sociology of Political Independence: A Study of Nationalist Attitudes among West Indian Leaders* by Charles C. Moskos, Jr.; and *Black Intellectuals Come to Power: The Rise of Creole Nationalism in Trinidad and Tobago* by Ivar Oxaal.

In 1963, I left UCLA to join the Yale faculty. One regret that I had about leaving was that Roy Bryce Laporte had just arrived at UCLA to begin graduate work in Sociology.

At Yale, Jim Mau and later Elliott Parris joined me on the faculty of the Department of Sociology. And Tony Maingot joined us with a joint appointment in History and Sociology. Each of us became involved in the struggles at Yale at the time, including transforming both the students and faculty at Yale to make them more representative of the population at large, especially by adding more African Americans, and establishing a new program at Yale in African American Studies. Additionally, of course, we all continued our work on the Caribbean (Maingot, for example, headed an Antilles Studies Program).

Those years in the mid- and late-1960s were tumultuous at Yale, as they were for many campuses in the United States. In addition to the protest against the war in Vietnam and making Yale students more representative of America's minority populations, there were struggles to bring women undergraduates and faculty members to Yale, to establish a business school and an Institute for Social and Policy Studies, to start a Women's Studies Program, and to create other interdisciplinary centers and programs, from studies of the environment to AIDS. Moreover, despite the existence of a variety of area-studies programs, including the historic Yale-in-China program, Yale at the start of the 1960s was largely a national university. By the late 1960s it firmly had stepped onto the path toward becoming the international and world university that it is today.

Caribbeanists at Yale, including myself, were involved in these struggles, but in none more crucially than in bringing more African American students and faculty to Yale and in starting an African American Studies Program. Sidney Mintz in Anthropology, Richard Morse in History, and I all knew Roy Bryce Laporte and shared a high regard for him and his work. He had finished his Ph.D. degree in Sociology at UCLA and we proposed him as the first Chair of Yale's new Program.

Roy was offered the job, accepted, and did brilliantly in establishing the African American Studies Program. Not that it was easy for him; it wasn't. Roy constantly battled to get the resources that he needed to build the Program from the Yale administration, with frequent meetings with the Provost. His office was just a few steps from mine and we spent considerable time together sharing our hopes and fears for the Program.

The bottom line is that Yale's Caribbean connections were crucial for the creation of the Program. Without them, I doubt if it could have been done, certainly not with

the same level of scholarly competence, something that Jamaican Michael Cooke, a Professor of English at Yale, among others, insisted on. Such connections became stronger over the succeeding years with the addition of more faculty members with research histories in the Caribbean, including the appointment of M.G. Smith to the Department of Anthropology.

In 1969, two Yale colleagues and I received a National Institute of Mental Health Training Grant in Comparative Sociology. It was a generous grant and was to last for eight years, during which time we could offer several fellowships each year to students who wanted to do graduate study in Comparative Sociology. It included a commitment to do research abroad. Although we slowly expanded the regions of the world where the students went to do summer training research and then their dissertations, in the beginning many of our projects focused on the Caribbean (continuing what we had already been doing, e.g. Yale Sociology graduate student Arvin Murch finished his Ph.D. and published a revised version of his dissertation, *Black Frenchmen: The Political Integration of the French Antilles*).

During the next three decades, many Yale Sociology graduate students carried out research in the Caribbean, a considerable number as part of the Comparative Sociology Training Program, which included a restudy of Jamaican leaders twelve years after independence had been achieved, in which, among other things, leaders' pre-independence images of Jamaica's future were compared with their actual achievements 12 years after independence.

Some of the then-graduate students who did work in the Caribbean were from the Caribbean, for example, Juan Jose Baldrich; Percy Hintzen, who would later serve as President of the Caribbean Studies Association; Ronald G. Parris; and Palmira N. Rios-Gonzalez. Of note is John D. Stephens who worked in Sweden studying socialism during his graduate student time at Yale, but later in his career went to Jamaica and co-authored with Evelyne Huber Stephens (Yale Ph.D. in Political Science), *Democratic Socialism in Jamaica: The Political Movement and Social Transformation in Dependent Capitalism*.

3. When did you first join CSA and what did it mean to you then?

**WB:** Sorry, I can't remember the exact date when I joined CSA. It was, however, soon after I learned of its formation.

It meant a great deal to me. It was for me a fountain of information and learning as well as a place where I could actually meet, see, hear, and get to know many of the people whose works I had been reading and who were shaping various knowledge bases of Caribbean studies. Unlike my reaction to some conferences of other professional organizations, I was never disappointed in a CSA meeting. Such meetings were always filled with intellectual challenges and interesting people.

4. What were your goals for CSA the year of your presidency?

**WB:** My presidency in many ways was a continuation of the work of Angel Calderon Cruz when he was President and I was Vice President. If I recall correctly—and I may not, therefore please check the record when you can—Angel and some others then in the CSA were concerned that not all Caribbean scholars were willing to accept the CSA as a worthy endeavor and to participate in its conferences and other activities. Of course, the CSA was very new then, only four or so years in existence, so it was still getting established.

This concern dates from the very beginning of the CSA in 1975. For example, Simon B. Jones-Hendrickson (1990: xii), who attended the First Organizational Meeting and Conference of the CSA in Puerto Rico in 1975, also was invited to a “Counter CSA Conference” held in the home of Sybil and Gordon Lewis.

There were a few Caribbean scholars, including some Americans, who feared that the CSA was somehow a political tool of the United States and possibly had some hidden, nefarious purpose to serve American interests—or at the very least was not representative of the Caribbean. Thus, Angel was—and I, as President, continued to be—concerned that the CSA should be seen to be what we believed it was: a fully legitimate professional organization free from any particular political bias and a welcome place to all Caribbean scholars and researchers wherever they were from and whatever their views.

I hope that this concern has long since been put to rest. As Jones-Hendrickson wrote in 1990, “CSA is now the premier organization that studies the Caribbean” (p. xiii).

A second concern of Angel’s and others was financing for CSA activities. While Angel was still President, I remember one visit to New York where together, along with the then Secretary-Treasurer, we had meetings with several different foundation officers, trying to persuade them to provide some seed financing for CSA activities.

A third and related concern was the CSA Constitution. Many of us thought that it would be helpful to update it and, among other things, enhance the democratic participation of the membership. Angel asked me to head a committee to do the rewriting, which we did, both in face-to-face meetings and by mail. And the new Constitution was ratified by the membership.

5. What did you recognize to be the greatest obstacles facing CSA and Caribbean Studies during your presidency?

**WB:** My answer to this question is largely the same as the answer given above: to increase membership in the CSA; to make CSA membership more inclusive of the entire Caribbean; to make governing the CSA as inclusive, democratic, and effective as possible; to be financially solvent; to create more awareness of the Caribbean on the part

of the non-Caribbean academic and philanthropic communities; to enhance and promote research and scholarship on the Caribbean; and to provide a forum where active Caribbean scholars could meet, share their work and ideas, disagree about facts and interpretations as warranted (and in any field that is vibrant intellectual disputes are the healthy norm); and get to know one another as persons rather than merely footnotes or references.

6. What did you consider to be the greatest accomplishment of CSA that year?

**WB:** I can't think of only one thing. What we did was a joint effort, the Governing Council, various committees, e.g. the Program Committee, the Award Committee, the Constitution Committee; all made some progress toward a more vibrant and open professional organization.

7. Why did you choose the location you did for the CSA annual conference that year?

**WB:** I don't think that I chose it. Rather, the Program Committee, under the Chairmanship of Tony Maingot, chose the site, Curacao, although surely some consideration was given to the Netherlands Antilles in part to spread the meeting sites around different territories of the Caribbean.

Given the research I was involved in, I think that I did suggest the general theme of our 1980 meeting, "Foundations of Sovereignty and National Identity in the Caribbean," but Tony Maingot and the Program Committee arranged the conference itself. I thought that Tony and his committee did a brilliant job, including inviting some prominent West Indian leaders to participate, such as the Hon. Errol Barrow from Barbados and the Hon. Cheddi Jagan from Guyana, who honored me by publicly discussing my presidential address. (Jim Mau chaired the Presidential session and the official discussants were Locksley Edmondson and Rene Romer.)

The presidential address, by the way, was a new addition to the CSA Conference and I'm happy to see that it has become a tradition.

8. Where do you hope to see CSA in the next ten years?

**WB:** To my regret I haven't been able to attend CSA meetings for many years now. The reason has been that, as I generalized my Caribbean research experiences, I became a futurist (see my answer to #10 below) and started attending futurist meetings, one of which met every year at nearly the same time as CSA meetings. Thus, although I try to keep up with the CSA newsletter and some of my old friends, I have lost touch with much that has been happening with CSA.

From a distance it looks to me as if CSA is thriving, including embracing the circum-Caribbean more fully. And that's mostly what I hear from current participants, such as Percy Hintzen, so I'm delighted. Needless to say, I hope that it continues to thrive.

9. What is one of your fondest CSA memories?

**WB:** I have so many fond memories of CSA meetings that it is difficult to pick only one. There is one, though, that my wife and I can never forget. Even without Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, and Paris, "we'll always have Guadeloupe."

It was 1988, when Andres Serbin was the outgoing President and J. Edward Greene was beginning his Presidency. The conference committee had planned a sightseeing trip that included a long walk in the rain forest. It was an instructive, fascinating exploration, but we learned in a big way why it was called a "rain" forest. As the walk began, so did the steady drizzle. As the walk proceeded, the drizzle turned to rain. By the time we returned to the bus, we were a dripping, sorry-looking bunch. Even those with the foresight to bring ponchos or other rain gear were not spared the pervading dampness. Most of us were wet to the skin.

Some time later, still wilted but a little dryer, our bus pulled up at a scheduled stop for a meal. The rum flowed. And then the music started. With the sound of the first notes, all of us jumped up and started to move to the calypso beat. For the next thirty minutes or so, music and rhythmic movements filled the room, as we joyfully bonded, sharing a moment in which time stood still and communal empathy filled the room. My wife and I still remember with wonderment the feelings we shared.

10. What are you doing now in terms of the Caribbean?\*

Unfortunately, very little by way of direct contacts with the Caribbean. Yet my Caribbean experiences remain a model in some basic sense for nearly all that I do in the field of futures studies. Let me briefly explain.

Starting about the mid-1960s, I began to explore the general principles of futures thinking and the role of images of the future in decision-making and social action. With the publication of *The Sociology of the Future* in 1971, jointly edited with Jim Mau, I started devoting more and more of my research and teaching to the new field of futures studies. Of course, it was my experience in the new states of the Caribbean that had sparked my interest not only in equality, social justice, and nationalism, but also in the study of the future.

My field trip to Jamaica in 1956 put me into a coming future that the transition to independence had made explicitly problematic. The processes of human construction leading to polity, society, and culture became transparent. Clearly, in the new states the

future was open. What would the new national leaders make of their former British West Indian colonies when they became masters of their own fate? What ought they to do in order to create a good future?

It was as if the mysteries of society and the engines of social change had suddenly been revealed. What was taken for granted in older states and clouded by custom, tradition, and myth as being unquestionable, sacrosanct, and inevitable—even in the first new nation, the United States—was prominently and visibly tenuous and open for revision in the new states.

One lesson I learned, though, is that the future is open in the old states as well. In fact, the future is at least partly open nearly everywhere. Everywhere, people produce some part of the coming future by their acts, whether they are aware of it or not. Everywhere, the images of the future some people hold may clash with images held by others and lead to conflict. Everywhere, the past is finished and cannot be altered, although *ideas* about the past can be changed. And everywhere the future offers possibilities of new and better lives, as well as possibilities of disaster. Among other things, these possibilities are contingent on the choices humans make and the actions they take.

This is not to say that the future always turns out as people hope and plan. There may be unintended, unanticipated, or unrecognized consequences of human action. People don't always know what they are doing. Also, there are natural forces beyond human control. Constant monitoring is necessary, as is a willingness to change one's methods and policies when they are not working as planned.

All of this so impressed me during my research in the new Caribbean states that I have spent more than four decades trying to understand the role of futures thinking in social change—to discover how images of the future are born and shaped, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to learn how images of the future interact with individual and collective beliefs, values, decision-making, and actions to shape the future of individuals, societies, and cultures. I keep asking, what constitutes a “better world” and how can we humans help to bring such a world into reality?

These are issues that I discuss in *Foundations of Futures Studies* (1997). For example, volume 1, *History, Purposes, and Knowledge* (paperback 2003), deals with possible and probable futures and how we can make grounded, reliable, and valid assertions about them. Volume 2, *Values, Objectivity, and the Good Society* (paperback 2004), deals with preferable futures and how we can justify, both rationally and empirically, the assertions about what constitutes the good society. Underlying these works and my other futurist writings is a basic model that I learned from West Indian new nationalist leaders as they faced making the decisions of nationhood.

Since the publication of my *Foundations* volumes, I have continued to work toward the development of futures studies and for increased futures thinking among social scientists, especially sociologists (unfortunately, with limited success). Also, I have

continued my exploration of the good society of the future, focusing on universal values and the eternal struggle between good and evil. For example, we know that nearly everyone is capable of evil acts and that ordinary people engaged in the mundane tasks of everyday life carry out much of the cruelty and violence in the world, even though they may believe they are acting rightly. Using the principles of futures thinking, critical realism, and social inclusiveness, I have tried to show that people can learn to curb their demonization of others and the sometimes terrible escalation of harm to others that it produces and to adopt a code of behavior that emphasizes being responsible for themselves, doing no harm to others, and helping other people when they can.

#### 11. Where do see the future of Caribbean Studies?

A proper answer to this question would be too long to write here. Let me simply say two things. My hope is that Caribbean scholars (1) will continue their commitment to truth and the expansion of knowledge of Caribbean peoples, economies, politics, societies and cultures.

And that they (2) will retain their dedication to the freedom and well-being of Caribbean peoples by using their knowledge to inform decision- and policy-making.

Caribbean peoples and scholars have much to teach the rest of the world. I know, because I have been so taught by them.

#### 12. What would you recommend to a young scholar starting in Caribbean Studies?

First, I would congratulate the young scholar on making a wise decision about his or her topic of study. Great choice! You won't regret it.

Second, I would add the usual admonitions about being open-minded, ready to learn and listen to others, prepared to work hard, and willing to see the world through the eyes of others.

Third, I would say, enjoy the experience. Get to know the land, the sea, the flora and fauna, the people, the music, the dance, and the food. Learn how Caribbean peoples enjoy the moment.

Fourth, I would recommend learning about the past and present of Caribbean societies and cultures, and especially the past of whatever topic you have chosen for your work.

Fifth, I would add, but also look at the future. Where are Caribbean societies headed? Ask, what is possible? What is probable? And what is preferable? Ask these

questions in the context of the topic of your work and what you hope to contribute, both to knowledge and to the Caribbean.

Sixth, I would say, as you live and work in the Caribbean, be responsible for yourself, do no harm, and help others when you can. You may not always live up to being the decent person you hope to be—certainly I personally have often failed to do so—but you can keep trying.

Seventh and finally, good luck!

**Note:**

\*My answer to this question is adapted from Wendell Bell, “From Fresno to the Future,” a chapter in a book in which retired Yale professors describe their intellectual trajectories. It is now in press.

**References**

Jones-Hendrickson, S. B., (ed.). 1990. *Caribbean Visions: Ten Presidential Addresses of Ten Presidents of the Caribbean Studies Association*. Frederiksted, V.I.: The Eastern Caribbean Institute.