

# Bringing a Scholar Home

Sociologists gather to recover the life and intellectual legacy of Oliver Cromwell Cox, Trinidad-born scholar of inequality and its threads

BY AMY LI BAKSH

The Caribbean has had no shortage of great and celebrated thinkers over the past century. But, not every great mind has been celebrated on the shores that created them. Oliver Cromwell Cox is one who has contributed significantly to the global conversations on race, class, and sociology's relevance to the wider public.

The Trinidadian sociologist was recently highlighted by The University of the West Indies' Sociology section with their Oliver Cromwell Cox Conference from the 25-27th of April themed 'Caste, Class and Race' – after the name of Cox's magnum opus.

Cox was born in 1901 in Trinidad, and the titular book was first published in 1948. Despite this, he has been largely unheralded as a public figure in the Trinidadian sphere. However, his work remains extremely relevant to the understanding of society and culture in today's world. The conference – hosted by the Department of Behavioural Sciences in partnership with Johns Hopkins University, Connected Worlds, and the Université des Antilles – examined his work in its historical context and in a contemporary setting.

Campus Principal Professor Rose-Marie Belle Antoine said of Cox, "I sincerely hope that his work gains the recognition it deserves, and that our conference provides a platform for constructive dialogue and shared insights on the issues of caste, class, and race, and by exploring his ideas together, I'm very optimistic that we can develop a more comprehensive understanding on how to create a fairer and more just country, region and world."

## A Trinidadian in America

Although he spent much of his life in the US, Cox's work can be best understood through the lens of his Trinidadian heritage, and in particular, how his Caribbean upbringing has affected his views on the dynamics of race and class.

Dr Talia Esnard, Senior Lecturer and Head of the Department of Behavioural Sciences, noted, "This... celebration is about bringing home a scholar, a sociologist, a man of the soil."

She shared that the idea for the conference was born in conversation between herself and Professor Rhoda Reddock four years before, with the aim of bringing Cox's ideas to the university [and wider community].

"We wish to educate the public and the region about the scope of Cox's work," she said during the conference.

Prof Reddock also spoke during a panel discussion, saying that discovering Cox's Caribbean lineage helped her understand why his ideas seemed so familiar. Although much of his work focused on race and class, she spoke on how he also addressed issues pertaining to gender, although that aspect of his work is not as well known.

In unearthing the depth of Cox's work, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences Dr Acolla Lewis-Cameron



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lauded the conference as an example of what the faculty wishes to achieve – to be "socially engaged and solutions oriented".

Prof Reddock also noted that "The last four decades of social and economic neoliberalism... have resulted in the devaluing of the social, and the sometimes conscious destruction of social sciences education and practice."

She added, "today, sociology, along with other aspects of the social, is under attack. We hope that our reflections on the work of Oliver Cox can remind us of the power of his analysis, and the potential of socially engaged scholarship and the actions that must result from it."

## The most formidable sociologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

The featured speaker at the conference, Michigan State University's Professor John H McClendon III, highlighted the importance of the conference. Prof McClendon III, whose areas of study include African American philosophers and philosophical traditions, African philosophy and Marxism, considered Cox to be "the most formidable sociologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century".

He spoke on Cox's paralysis due to polio, which was instrumental to his decision to pursue sociology instead of law. Perhaps this lived experience of disability was also instrumental in forming his understanding of justice and equality.

The conference, he said was "...not just for the Caribbean, but for the African world. Not just the African world, but the anti-imperialist struggle; not just the anti-imperialist struggle, but the struggle for a new world; a new day, a new future, for oppressed people."

If Cox's body of work has such an enduring value, then why has his name not been more widely exalted? Professor Michael Goldfield of Wayne State University spoke on this during his presentation, noting that Cox was a "radical anti-capitalist" in the 1940s. He suggested that *Caste, Class and Race* was first published when McCarthyism (also known as the *Second Red Scare*) was in full swing, and Cox's ideas were deemed dangerous to the status quo. He wasn't alone.

Prof Goldfield notes, "Even the most prominent of this period, especially Black radicals, were dropped like the proverbial hot potatoes."

As we reflect on Cox's work and on radical Caribbean thinkers who have changed the world, the conference is a reminder of the value of exploring the minds of our past and how their social analysis can help us understand the world around us, how it became what it is, and how we can change it for the better.

■ To view the first day of the Oliver Cromwell Cox Conference, visit UWI St Augustine's YouTube page at <https://www.youtube.com/@uwistaugustine>