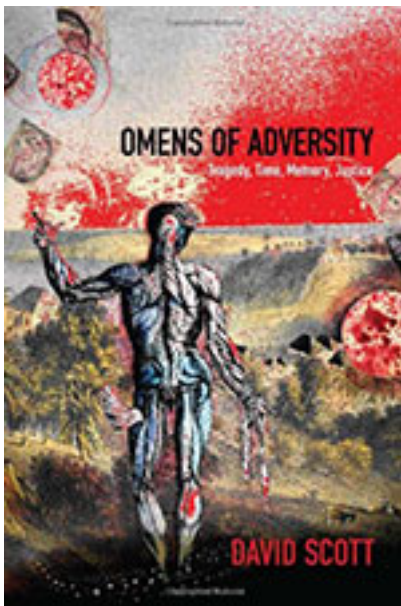


***Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* by David Scott**

Matthew Garrett | Wesleyan University

David Scott. 2014. *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. 219 pages; \$84.95 cloth, \$23.95 paper.



For a reader whose political education included the firm Marxist lesson of refusing to conceive of politics in terms of tragic collision—that is, to reject the desperation behind efforts to precipitate a *moment of truth* out of the movement of *social process*—the recent return to tragedy on the left has been a surprise. David Scott’s brilliant book may be taken as one of our most profound contemporary reflections on reconstructing the sensibility of leftist politics in a tragic mode. Yet *Omens of Adversity* is equally important for its striking—and utterly convincing—claim that the Grenada Revolution lies at the center of “the temporal ‘afterness’ of our postcolonial, postsocialist time” (21). The book represents a proper event within Caribbean and postcolonial studies, and it should be read by anyone with an interest in how radical politics might navigate the treacherous historical channels ahead.

Omens of Adversity extends, theoretically and historically, Scott’s work in *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (2004), which sought to cashier the residual teleology of the anticolonial movement, with its romance of progressive human emancipation. In the new installment of this project, the high promise and precipitous fall of the revolution in Grenada leads Scott into four zones of conceptual engagement—tragedy, time, memory, and justice—each circling around the foundational problem of temporality, of the irreversibility of action in time. Readers who know full well that the Grenada Revolution (1979-1983) “was the first casualty of the rise of the Reagan era of a belligerent neoconservative anticommunism” will

be riveted by Scott's further insistence that the Revolution is an "exemplary terrain" on which to consider "the contemporary aporia of the crisis of political time" (5). With its collapse, it "was almost already 'the end of history'" (4).

Scott, a distinguished anthropologist and editor of the journal *Small Axe*, is a painstaking narrator of the history of the Revolution, a generous reader of those who have provided his primary sources, and a relentless interpretive miner who turns over his central texts for tools to think the Revolution and its consequences. The first chapter develops a rich theorization of tragedy as "the ineradicable risk to which we expose ourselves in the act of using our capacity for freedom" (64). Scott weaves an informative account of the Revolution into a survey of theories of tragic action, pulling together a variety of fundamentally Hegelian threads. Scott takes his keyword seriously: his theoretical work gathers more from aesthetics (Aristotle, Hegel, A. C. Bradley, Raymond Williams) than it does from political theory or philosophy tout court. But whereas a certain strain of voluntarist leftism has taken the tragic moment to be a license for spectacular combat, Scott ends with a call—all the more powerful for its steady and implacably revolutionary tone—for modesty and responsibility in political action.

That call leads into a chapter on time that elaborates both a history and a theory of political generations through contrasting readings of two works by Grenadian novelist Merle Collins, *Angel* (1987) and *The Color of Forgetting* (1995). Collins's novels stage divergent generational responses to the Revolution through opposing modes of emplotment: *Angel*, as Bildungsroman; *Color*, as allegory. The eponymous protagonist of *Angel* is of that novel's youngest generation, coming of age during the revolutionary moment, and for her its collapse is experienced, as Scott writes, as "an *absolute* ruin, the very ruin of time as a source of possibility, the absolute end of a temporal journey" (87). *Color*, by contrast, retains the generational division only to recover the present as material for the future—though in this case, it is a future that must be routed through the blunt uncertainty of the past. The result is a recognition of the danger of forgetting, an injunction to remember and to persist with a "moral *generational* responsibility" (93).

When Scott turns to the problem of memory as such, in the book's third chapter, it is through the reading of a truly extraordinary text. In 2002, a group of teenage secondary-school students at Presentation Brothers College in St. George's prepared a study of the disappearance of the body of Maurice Bishop, the leader of the revolutionary New Jewel Movement, after his murder in 1983. The resulting booklet, entitled *Under the Cover of Darkness*, is not only—astonishingly—the most reliable guide to the facts; it is also, in Scott's reading, a real *act* of mourning. By "draining" Bishop's body of the "surfeit of phantasmagoria and mythological longing" it holds for Caribbeans of the revolutionary generation (117), the students of Presentation Brothers College properly *inherit* a traumatic history without foreclosing their ability to act upon it.

EMISFÉRICA

It is a little puzzling that Scott ends with a chapter on justice. The turn from politics to ethics is dictated by Scott's eagerness to do battle with militant liberalism and its claims for transitional justice. Scott is a resourceful warrior, though the work of the liberal political theorists and the Grenada Truth and Reconciliation Commission alike is well summarized by the chapter's title: "evading truths."

The real question, as Scott puts it in the emphatic first-person at the close of the book, is: "what *we*—Caribbeans as a whole—have learned in all the years since the collapse of the Grenada Revolution and the U.S. invasion that followed in its wake" (170). That learning surely will have nothing to do with tragic action's *moment* of truth, and everything to do with the humility required to act—with a sense of tragic responsibility—in time. Any further consideration of radical politics (and not only in the Caribbean, of course) as temporal, flawed, and always open to *learning* must reckon with Scott's formidable intervention.

Matthew Garrett teaches English and American Studies at Wesleyan University. He is the author of *Episodic Poetics: Politics and Literary Form after the Constitution* (2014), as well as essays in *American Quarterly*, *Critical Inquiry*, *ELH*, and other journals. He is writing a book, entitled *In Place of Reading*, on the history and ethics of reading since the sixteenth century.