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# One Must Imagine Patterson Happy: Finding Hope for Jamaica in *The Paradox of Freedom*

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***Abstract:*** This review explores David Scott and Orlando Patterson's *The Paradox of Freedom*. Published by Polity Press (ISBN-13: 978-1-5059-5117-0), the interviews span approximately 241 pages and are available both as an e-book and in print. This review provides a guiding framework, situating Patterson and the book in a larger field of study. It emphasizes what the book reveals about Patterson's upbringing and career in academia against the backdrop of Jamaican decolonization, which fundamentally informed Patterson's development. This review includes a critique of the book's ease of entry and an appreciation of its value to scholars of Caribbean or freedom studies. It also allows the reader a glimpse into the internal conflicts and commitments of a prominent figure in freedom studies—a scholar characterized by hopeful anticipation of a new Jamaica, who recognizes the challenges but nevertheless displays a Sisyphean commitment to happiness in the task, not the outcome.

## Introduction: A Dialogue on Freedom

Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, David Scott, published a series of biographical interviews with Orlando Patterson in April 2023. *The Paradox of Freedom* is an engaging dialogue with the Jamaican-American historian and sociologist who has transformed the ways we discuss such lofty ideals as freedom itself. The sophisticated scholarly tone of the book makes it most appropriate to graduate students and advanced scholars of Caribbean or freedom studies.

Although the interviews are extensive, scholarly readers in the field will find *The Paradox of Freedom* accessible, and the book gives the impression of a genuine conversation with one of the foremost thinkers of our time. One of the book's virtues is its creation of an archive of original source material, which scholars can consult, excavate, and interpret to draw their own conclusions on the rich and layered subjects of freedom and culture. It is not a book that presents a single argument, but an expansive set of interviews that constitute original source material on the intellectual and personal evolution of Orlando Patterson. Scott's interviews illuminate Patterson's early life, his relationship with faith, his responses to Jamaica's shifting political landscape, and his reflections on contemporaries. The wide-ranging interviews appeal both to newcomers and longtime readers of Patterson's work, offering a foundation for understanding key texts like *The Children of Sisyphus* and *Slavery and Social Death*.

Some portions of the book explore dense theoretical terrain, while others are more biographical or anecdotal. This variation may cause the text to feel uneven for readers seeking a tighter conceptual arc. In an intellectual biography—particularly one centered on a living thinker—

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the tension between admiration and critique is delicate, and Scott's high regard for Patterson is evident throughout.

**Freedom Reimagined: Patterson's Intellectual Project**

In the introduction, Scott shares his own intellectual investments in freedom, inviting scholars interested in the etymology of ideas or the history of Caribbean scholarly networks to find a wealth of insight in Patterson's work. Scott shows how Patterson has challenged the dominant genealogies of freedom inherited from seminal thinkers like Locke, Mill, and Arendt. *The Paradox of Freedom* illuminates this work not merely as a debate over the definition of freedom—though that debate positions Patterson within a grand intellectual lineage—but as an effort to take up a new and transformative stance. His interdisciplinary method reimagines freedom as a condition rooted in *anticipation*, particularly among the marginalized—which is what Scott identifies as Patterson's distinct contribution to political theory and Caribbean studies. Scott's introduction also offers an overview of Patterson's most renowned conception of freedom: the anticipatory "point of refusal," inspired by Camus's image of the rebel slave who rises up and says, "no more."

**A Life in Context: Jamaica, Education, & Decolonization**

Organized chronologically, the interviews begin with "A Mother's Project," an intimate account of Patterson's upbringing. "Years of Decolonization," "Kingston College," and "University College of the West Indies" trace how political shifts shaped Patterson's intellectual trajectory. In "The Rise of the Social Sciences," Patterson reflects on being part of Jamaica's first generation of social scientists.

Several sections are named after Patterson's major works, allowing readers to follow the arc of his evolving thought. For those particularly interested in his theory of freedom, the section titled "The Children of Sisyphus" may be the most illuminating. Here, Patterson and Scott explore the development of concepts of freedom and Camus' famous essay. The section includes an etymological study of freedom through the Rasta Dungle and the term *dread*. This section helps position Patterson's freedom work in relation to Elisabeth Anker's *Ugly Freedoms* (2022), Ana-Maurine Lara's ethnographic study in *Queer Freedom:Black Sovereignty* (2020), and the inglorious, nonsensical freedoms in Fred Moten's *Stolen Life* (2018). It also interrogates myths of freedom (such as modern researchers like Camille Reyes (2020) are doing in America currently) while situating Patterson among theorists who locate freedom in unexpected places—such as the often-overlooked and seemingly undesirable lives of the oppressed.

**Freedom in Praxis: Rastas, Slavery, & Hope**

Patterson saw Jamaica's Rastas as living in anticipation of hope—an absolute condition of freedom. "Their anticipation was glorious, a moment of tremendous camaraderie… Because there is a sense that you accept that, ultimately, we're all determined, but the idea of freedom is profoundly necessary and you have to live as though you are free" (p. 82). For Patterson, this act of living in anticipation— "as though you are free" —is an irrational investment in a freer future. It is in that anticipatory space—before actual liberation has arrived—when one stands staring out at the vast horizon of the sea, an endless expanse of possible futures, that freedom is found.

The following section, titled "The Sociology of Slavery," provides the historical context in which, as Scott puts it, "Patterson offers a deeply perturbing redescription of the self-image of

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Western civilization, in which its most vile and despised institution, slavery, is shown to be the fertile source and inspiration of its most honored and celebrated value, freedom" (p. 13). This portion of the interviews sharply contrasts Patterson's theories with those foundational to the Western tradition—such as Isaiah Berlin's *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958) and Hannah Arendt's "What is Freedom?" (1961).

## Political Engagements & Intellectual Legacy

"An Absence of Ruins" documents Patterson's experience of hopelessness during Jamaica's post-independence disillusionment. This part of the book is particularly moving, guiding readers through a period of personal and national despair. Reflecting on failed political movements, a loss of religious connection, and the pervasive desperation around him, Patterson describes a decisive refusal of that seemingly hopeless condition—a refusal by both himself and by Jamaica. It was during this time of anticipatory hope that he wrote *Die the Long Day* (1972).

"Engaging Black America" and "Making Public Policy in Socialist Jamaica" trace Patterson's engagement with race, identity, and policy in both the U.S. and Jamaica during the 1970s. These chapters place him in dialogue with controversial figures such as Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, and Michael Manley, highlighting Patterson's contributions to a broader historical moment. Historians and social scientists interested in the internal debates among such seminal thinkers will find these sections illuminating.

## Conclusion: Freedom as Anticipation

Scott's method mirrors Patterson's own: just as Patterson excavated the social roots of freedom, Scott uncovers the intellectual and emotional foundations of Patterson's thought. Patterson's work, like the concept of freedom itself, emerged from a constellation of social forces—not fully formed from the brow of Zeus (or Locke or Mill, for that matter). Just as Patterson's life work traced a genealogy of freedom, Scott's interviews genealogically map "the overlapping and successive problem-spaces in which, on the one hand, Patterson's life shaped his intellectual formation and, on the other, his intellectual formation refracted his life" (p. 21).

*The Paradox of Freedom* reveals Patterson's own life as a site of hope—his moments of refusal and assent lived through anticipation. As he continued to push for a freer Jamaica, watching the arc of progress wobble and bend under the weight of unrealized dreams, it was the repetition of that act of hope—the persistent fabrication of possibility—that allowed Patterson to stay in anticipation, and to keep working, sustained by a perhaps irrational belief that freedom was always just on the horizon. In the Camusian tradition, *The Paradox of Freedom* invites readers to imagine Patterson happy in his relentless anticipation and enduring hope for a new Jamaica.

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## Ethical Considerations

The author reports there are no competing interests.

## Notes on Contributors

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