Imagine being on a beach on the island of Saint Barts where some of the world’s wealthiest vacation—or taking a stroll down a privatized beach in the Dominican Republic’s Punta Cana where locals cannot set foot as planeloads of travelers mostly from Europe and North America party late into the night. This is the Caribbean as it is often known to well-off foreign tourists. But what of Tivoli Gardens in Jamaica; or the seaside community of La Saline in Port-au-Prince, Haiti; or the Laventville slum in Trinidad’s Port of Spain—the Caribbean experience where much of the region’s people survive on the bare minimum.

Those areas of the Caribbean are not dreamed about by wealthy foreigners, or even by the middle class of the First World who can splurge on an occasional trip to a well-guarded resort. The beautiful Caribbean basin that seduces tourists is actually disfigured by inequality: it is home to the most profitable tax havens in history combined with worker exploitation backed by governments (most important, the United States) that increasingly are using militarized policing among other tactics. This book offers an account of the Caribbean’s experience of economic globalization, while taking into account the marginalized and the exploitation of racialized and gendered working people.

The Caribbean was the place of the first colonial expeditions and colonial institutions. It was at the center of the brutal slave-plantation complex, where world capitalism’s racialized class relations were initially forged and
took shape by the mid-seventeenth century. But, significantly, it was also one of the first places to win independence from Europe and abolish slavery. In reaction, the United States, as a nascent empire, cut its teeth in the region, in the shape of repeated military interventions.

There have been revolts against four centuries of slavery and colonialism and a fifth century of economic dependency. It is a history that has left indelible marks on the people, land, languages, and cultures of the region—most of all in the ongoing daily life struggles of people facing grinding inequality and injustice. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the Caribbean has increasingly become a place for transnational companies and their local affiliates to get their way at the expense of the majority. So-called “vulture” companies have profited extraordinarily off governments in the region facing debt and high-risk “troubled assets” near default or bankruptcy—the starkest example being Puerto Rico, where of its $74.8 billion debt, $33.5 billion is interest and another $1.6 billion is from the fees paid to Citigroup and Goldman Sachs (Arbassetti et al., 2017).

 Meanwhile, some of the wealthiest people in the world stash vast fortunes in the region’s banks to avoid paying taxes or to avoid their home countries’ jurisdiction. The Caribbean has become home to some of the most successful tax havens in world history: In 2013, $92 billion flowed into the British Virgin Islands alone. It is estimated that tax evasion in the Caribbean costs the U.S. government upwards of $100 billion each year (Jilani, 2015). From the “panama papers” to the “paradise papers,” news reports in recent years expose a global web of financial holdings that intersect with the region.

The role and emergence of a transnational capitalist class (Harris, 2016; Phillips, 2018; Sklair, 2002), with its different fractions and allies, can be seen across the Caribbean region. The Cayman Islands is now the chosen headquarters for over 40 percent of the companies listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. Richard Branson, founder of the transnational Virgin Group, owns a 30-hectare island in the British Virgin Islands, where he hosted President Barack Obama shortly after he left office. In the Bahamas, the Walt Disney Corporation owns a private island, “Castaway Cay,” which its cruise line uses. Also in the Bahamas, China’s Export-Import Bank recently provided a $2.5 billion loan to develop the Baha Mar resort. An Iranian-born businessman Ali Pascal Mahvi, head of the Switzerland-based M Group Corporation, helped develop the Sugar Beach resort in Saint Lucia. A transnational company, Rusal, based out of Moscow (and in part owned by both a Chinese and an American tycoon, with its major owner being Russian transnational capitalist Oleg Deripaska), now owns some of the largest mines in Jamaica and Guyana (A Qatari sovereign wealth fund in turn is partial owner of one of the major investors in Rusal). In Jamaica and smaller islands,
such as Saint Martin and Dominica, hubs of Chinese businesspeople have formed (Grell-Brisk, 2018)). Meanwhile, in Cuba, Brazilian-based companies have largely financed a massive new cargo and manufacturing hub, managed by a Singaporean firm. Numerous transnationally-oriented U.S. capitalists use accounting strategies to “shift” profits to Puerto Rico to avoid mainland taxes, while blockchain billionaires taking up residency on the island are looking to remake it into a “crypto currency utopia.” In another example of the new globally competitive market relations subsuming the region, just shortly prior to the 2010 earthquake, Haiti privatized the majority of its public telephone company, selling it to a Vietnamese company. The region has become engulfed in a whirlpool of global capitalist accumulation.

In addition, a growing array of transnational capitalists hail from the Caribbean. For example, Trinidad and Tobago is home to numerous transnational capitalists, such as the Sabga family, who originally migrated from Syria in the early twentieth century. Gustavo A. Cisneros, a Venezuelan Dominican national of Cuban descent, of the Florida-headquartered Cisneros Group, has a fortune estimated at over $1 billion. With financial holdings spanning the globe, he is a major shareholder in prominent Spanish-language media and entertainment outlets such as Univision and Venevisión. One of the wealthiest Jamaican businesspersons, Michael Lee-Chin, is an investor and philanthropist with dual Jamaican and Canadian citizenship, with an estimated worth of $1.1 billion. Among numerous other holdings, he was the executive chairman of AIC Limited, a Canadian mutual fund, and the chairman of the National Commercial Bank of Jamaica since December 2014.

In short, the Caribbean is fertile ground for a study of capitalism past and present.

Global capitalist accumulation has meant immense gains for many dominant groups, and as some segments of the population have become deeply entwined with consumerism—with new air-conditioned malls, high-priced real estate, and gated communities. Yet the vast majority of the region’s population face thoroughly exploitative or marginalized conditions. Even with improved access to health care and cheap goods, the majority of Caribbean people face numerous crises. Facing some of the toughest conditions in the region, of Haiti’s 10 million people, 6.3 million are unable to meet their basic needs and 2.5 million cannot meet food needs, with just 2 percent of the population con-
suming the equivalent of $10 a day or more, according to data from the World Bank. Meanwhile, a fifth of the population in Jamaica lives in poverty, according to the World Bank, yet the structural reality is clearly much starker with so many people facing underemployment or low wages alongside a lack of public infrastructure and rising costs of living. According to local Jamaican activists I spoke with, unemployment can reach between 40 and 50 percent in Kingston’s lowest-income neighborhood, Tivoli Gardens. As the world globalizes around them, impoverished people across the region struggle to scrape by.

Over recent decades, as state and transnational capitalist forces have recalibrated and facilitated new accumulation networks, many in the popular classes have been compelled to participate in globalizing value chains. By value chains I refer to the value that is determined by production for the ends of private accumulation via concrete social relations mediated by power interactions between unequal class forces at the point of production. Yet, even alongside capitalist globalization and the exploitation of labor, significant portions of the Caribbean’s population face structural marginalization and labor market exclusion and are, in turn, the main targets of state security forces. Many are in turn compelled to seek out new means of survival, such as migration. With shrinking options, if they seek employment that violates legal codes, the poor can expect the worst, suffering humiliation and repression. The struggle of the subaltern in a globalizing world remains an open-ended challenge.

As a historic crossroads, as an entrepôt or crucible throughout the modern era, the region has passed through all the phases of world capitalism—from mercantilism to national formation and international monopoly capitalism to today’s transnational/global capitalism. Throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century, the Caribbean has functioned as a laboratory for transnational capitalism and the neoliberal Washington Consensus, promulgating austerity policies alongside expanding tourism, nontraditional agricultural exports, and export-processing zones (EPZs) that serve as platforms for integrating local productive relations with the global economy. Periods of economic stagnation, political tumult, and renewed U.S. intervention (Grandin, 2007) have simultaneously affected the region. Acts of aggression, which include six decades of a U.S. led financial and trade embargo on Cuba, cost the country’s economy over $130 billion according to the United Nations (Acosta and Marsh, 2018). The larger backdrop to this turbulence has been the integration of the region into the new global capitalism, with novel rearrangements taking place among its social groups and classes (Regalado, 2007; Robinson, 2003). The region has been swept up in global crises of social polarization, the legitimacy failure of governmental officials, and capitalist overaccumulation with risky investments in cryptocurrencies and derivatives markets. Over the closing decades of the twentieth century and into the
twenty-first century, with the intensification of the global climate crisis, more than half of the region’s coral reefs have been lost and the damage done by hurricanes continues to grow.

This book focuses on the social and material nature of this new era of world capitalism, examining the sweeping transformations and contradictions it has ushered in. It investigates the changing political economy of the global era in the context of the Caribbean. A reconfiguration of social, economic, and political relations is taking place, rooted in the dynamic and ruthless competitive processes of globalizing capitalism. Instead of viewing the world as populations bundled into core and peripheral nation-states, the core and periphery can also denote social groups and classes through a transnational context (Hoogvelt, 2001; Sklair, 2002; H. Watson, 2015). This helps us consider how social polarization rooted in the rising transnationalization of material (economic) relations reflects on regions and nations. Pools of the “first world” (such as high-consuming strata) now also exist in the “third world,” and vice versa—large migrant and marginalized populations live in the global north. These groups are linked in diverse ways to new transnational networks of production, finance, and consumption.²

Global Capitalism: A New Phase in the History of World Capitalism

What accounts for the massive changes washing over the shores of the Caribbean and the world as a whole? Around us are advances unique in our species’ history: revolutionizing technologies, bursting flows of information, and global economic integration. Yet these occur alongside unprecedented inequality (Holt-Giménez and Patel, 2012; Kloby, 2004), shifting means for achieving hegemonic consent and coercive domination (Bieler and Morton, 2006; Robinson, 1994; Sprague-Silgado, 2018a), and a climate crisis that imperils life across our planet (Chew, 2006; N. Klein, 2014; Kolbert, 2014; World Bank, 2012).

While Caribbean societies have throughout their history exhibited differences and continuities, how are new dynamics taking shape in the Caribbean under the capitalist globalization of the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first century?

Analytical tools help make sense of the changes taking place. One such way to analyze the changes taking place is through the “transnational processes” that describe a diverse array of structural, institutional, and organizational phenomena that link regions and nations more organically with global society and economy.

Here it is useful to emphasize the differences between national, international, and transnational processes. Whereas national processes occur
within the frontiers of the national state, international processes occur across borders. A transnational process, while occurring across borders, takes place through functional integration. Functional integration refers to how amalgamations of different components (or agents) are constituted through their joint operation.

The nature of this integration is something completely new in the history of human civilization and regions around the world (including the Caribbean). Processes that take place across frontiers in this functionally integrated manner alter the very ways in which space and geography are implicated in material and social production. A new kind of immediacy has come into existence—through communications, finance, social media, information flows, and so on.

With these shifting political economic dynamics in mind, below I propose a periodization of the Caribbean’s relationship to the larger world system, arguing that what has taken place in recent decades is the region’s insertion into world capitalism under an entirely new (globalizing) model of economy and society.

Different methodological approaches have been used to make sense of the ways in which human social formation has occurred historically. The methodological approach deployed here looks at how the development of (and changes to) human society is rooted in how people together produce the necessities of life (Marx, 1867/1992). Fundamental to this is the conflict that occurs between social classes. “Social classes” are relationships generated and reproduced through the productive processes and economic life of a society. Social classes do not appear in isolation or as something permanent; rather they are a product of social relations in which human beings seek (or are compelled) to produce and reproduce the material requirements of life (Wright, 1998). These classes thus contain individuals who are carriers of productive relationships. Producing their existence in fundamentally different ways an antagonism occurs between different classes, such as between waged laborers and the owners of large companies (Szymanski, 1983). Furthermore, the very consciousness of individuals occurs through the life process, so how people perceive their situation (and their own class interests) undergoes change.

In considering how history is rooted in class conflict, the classical concept of “modes of production” helps us conceptualize the varied ways in which human societies have changed over time (Marx, 1867/1992). A mode of production refers to the combination of (1) productive forces: all of those forces that are applied by people in the production process (body and brain, tools and techniques, materials, resources, and equipment); and (2) relations of production: the sum total of social relationships that people must enter into in order to survive, to produce, and to reproduce their means of life.
The totality of these relationships constitutes a relatively stable and long-lasting structure.

The capitalist mode of production is qualitatively and structurally divergent from modes of production that had dominated the precapitalist world. Unlike the ancient, tributary, feudal, and other modes of production, capitalism is based on systems of production and distribution organized around private ownership and wage labor (De Ste. Croix, 1981; Donaldson, 2012). Though a market of trade and commodity production already existed, the capitalist mode of production came about through a new social relation: a monetized system based on land rents, wages, and (in the Caribbean) chattel slavery, used to create surplus value appropriated by a dominant class owning the means of production (Galeano, 1997; Wood, 1998). Even as the capitalist mode of production came to dominate, Eric Wolf (1997) observes: other modes of production have often existed alongside it, such as unwaged sharecropping or trade and barter systems during different historical periods in the Caribbean. More generally, though, capitalism as a system, has historically gone through different phases rooted in novel changes to productive forces and social relationships (Hobsbawm, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1996d).

Human history is bound up with interconnections and movement, but it was under capitalism that a common system came to envelop a world society (Stavrianos, 1998). Capital is expansionary by nature, with an unending drive toward constant growth and the conquest of new markets (Marx, 1993a). The Cuban scholar Roberto Regalado describes how in recent decades this drive for capitalist expansion has caused a “merger of the national cycles into a single transnational cycle of capital flow and accumulation” (2007, p. 19). In examining history, four major phases of world capitalism can be identified here as: (1) the emergence of capitalism through Western Europe’s countryside, towns, and early manufacturing, alongside colonial mercantilism and chattel slave production that occurred from the 1400s through the 1800s; (2) the industrial capitalism phase that emerged in the late 1700s with the first industrial revolution and continued until the latter part of the 1800s; (3) the international capitalism (or international monopoly capitalism) phase that developed in the mid- to late 1800s and continued up through the decades following World War II and the late 1900s; and (4), most recently, the global capitalism (or globalization) phase that emerged in the later decades of the twentieth century and has intensified in the twenty-first century.

A key turning point in the emerging shift from the “international” phase to the “global/transnational” phase occurred during the 1970s, when a crisis of economic stagnation evolved in connection with inflation caused by high
wages in developed countries for unionized (mostly white male) workers, alongside the disbandment of the Bretton Woods system and the energy crisis of that decade. These occurred also as major new technological innovations were coming about, which business leaders sought to use to increase profits. Elites in the United States greatly intensified a push for the dismantling of welfare, statist, and domestically geared policies at home and abroad, bringing many governmental practices in-line with the logic of the market (Harvey, 1997; Panitch and Gindin, 2013; Robinson, 1996). Overtime these neoliberal policies were carried out not just in the United States but also (to different degrees) within other metropole and developing states, eventually spreading across much of the planet.

Capital needed to break free from the national constraints of the Fordist-Keynesian “new deal” era. This earlier era had been marked by protections and programs developed after significant popular struggles, not only in the United States but in other countries as well. Policy makers in many postcolonial and developing states, though with far fewer resources and faced with uneven exchange and legacies of colonialism, had attempted their own Keynesian-influenced policies: promoting forms of state-induced industrialization. Known as import substitution industrialization (ISI), this had sought to replace particular foreign imports with domestic production. Among the constraints that capital faced by the 1970s was the responsibility of ensuring the social reproduction of particular national labor forces (within the more highly developed “core” states), as well as the mounting barriers of ISI in many postcolonial and developing countries.

“Going global” thus allowed capitalists to do away with this concern, as they now could tap into an ever-growing worldwide pool of marginalized workers. Technological advances further allowed elites to expand capitalist modes of production in the semiperiphery and the periphery, while forcing indebted governments to serve foreign investors and sever many social and national commitments to their populations. In core states, many of the labor-capital compromises that had come about earlier in the century were replaced by “flexible” practices imposed on workforces (Harvey, 1991). Defining the “flexibilization” of capitalist accumulation, David Harvey writes:

Flexible accumulation . . . is marked by a direct confrontation with the rigidities of Fordism. It rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption . . . It has entrained rapid shifts in the patterning of uneven development, both between sectors and between geographical regions, giving rise, for example, to a vast surge in so-called “service sector” employment as well as to entirely new industrial ensembles in hitherto underdevel-
oped regions. It has also entailed a new round of “time-space compression” in the capitalist world—the time horizons of both private and public decision-making have shrunk, while satellite communication and declining transport costs have made it increasingly possible to spread those decisions immediately over an ever wider and variegated space. (1991, p. 147)

Capital also needed to break apart those areas of the world system that it had limited access to, such as with the socialist and postcolonial statist projects (such as in the Warsaw Pact nations and their allies in the Third World and many of the states participating at one time or another in the nonaligned movement [NAM]). Big steps toward achieving this goal occurred between the late 1970s and the early 1990s. Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin (2013) observe the role of the informal “American empire” and U.S. capital in the formation of the contemporary global system, pressuring the lifting of capital controls around the world in the wake of the economic crisis of the 1970s. Alongside this, an emergent transnationalization of capital began through ramped up foreign direct investment (FDI), cross-border mergers and acquisitions (M&As), a host of new financial cross-border interlinkages, and the rise of nontraditional exports worldwide.

By 1991, the United States (aided by its NATO allies) had succeeded in wearing down the Soviet Union. The USSR, in the context of the Cold War, also had developed many of its own internal contradictions, such as a structurally militarized economy, alongside numerous other economic, political, and social strains and a weakening of its ideological foundation (Lebowitz, 2012; Lewin, 2016; Sakwa, 2013). Meanwhile, “capitalist-roaders” had taken power in China in the late 1970s and 1980s (Harvey, 1997). This allowed for the extensive spread of capitalism across the planet.

These events furthermore opened the door to the intensive expansion of capitalism, drilling down into the socioeconomic fabric of nearly every country, with the imposition of neoliberal economic policies and the emergent transnationalization of capital. Consumer culture, meanwhile, reached mesmerizing new heights. In the 1990s and early twenty-first century many remnants of the reforms and protections for working people (achieved through earlier struggles and class compromises) continued to be rolled back. Organized labor came under new attacks worldwide, and as new labor-eliminating technologies were developed through the digital age. A new round of U.S.-led interventions and regime change campaigns were launched from Yugoslavia to Iraq and Libya, to covert operations in Syria, to new strategies of soft power in Latin America, and the gruesome economic war targeting Bolivarian Venezuela. A “restoration of class power,” as Harvey
(1997) has described it, came about. Power was consolidated, this time, in the hands of an emerging transnational bourgeoisie. Though, as I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3, many divisions, tensions, and conflicts have emerged.

Transnational processes and practices have thus emerged operating across an uneven global system, interconnected with regional, national, and local constituencies in the economic, political, cultural, and ideological arenas. As global networks of production and finance promulgated by transnational corporations (TNCs) and other institutions redefine the scale of the world economy (Castells, 2009; Dicken, 2007), transnational social relations have formed within and between many classes and class fractions. Financial interests involved in the remittance industry, for example, spread through global networks of accumulation and became functionally entwined with local banks across the Caribbean basin. Growing diaspora communities, in sending home remittances, became integrated with their homelands in a new, more immediate way, with their money circulating through globalizing chains of accumulation. The role of transnational integration can thus be seen through the rise of many new social and class relations (Harris, 2006; McMichael, 1996; Robinson, 2004, 2014a; Rodriguez, 2010; Sassen, 1991; Sklair, 2001, 2002; Van der Pijl, 1998). Leslie Sklair argues, in fact, that operating outside of the global system “is becoming increasingly more difficult as capitalist globalization penetrates ever more widely and deeply” (2009, p. 528).

“Globalization,” a term often bandied about, is in fact the latest epoch in the development of the heterogeneous capitalist system—an uneven and diverse system of accumulation and exploitation. Theorists (starting in the early twentieth century) argued that a “law of uneven and combined development” existed, through which separate national capitals and power blocs conflicted and connected with one another. This led to varied histories of development in the interstate system, between nations and other geographic units, and the role of imperialism (Hilferding, 1910/2006; Lenin, 1917/1969; Sweezy, 1942). Uneven and combined development has been inherent in the fundamental capitalist process, stemming from the law of value/production for private capitalist accumulation (as theorized by political economists starting in the early twentieth century). Yet, combined and uneven development does not mean that capitalism is inherently organized to produce national economic development. Rather, capitalism is organized to produce private capital accumulation as an end in itself, a fact made all the more clear through the rise of transnational forms of accumulation (Robinson and Sprague, 2018). With the rise of globalization (or what is better described as “global capitalism”), I argue, along with others (Harris, 2016;
Liodakis, 2010; Robinson, 2003; Sklair, 2002; H. Watson, 1994a, 2015), that we need to understand how new and uneven transnational practices and processes are playing out through a heterogeneous world context.

Among the most important of these, I argue, is the rise of a transnational capitalist class (TCC), a hegemonic class oriented toward transnational accumulation. Within this class exist various fractions oriented toward different institutions and forms of accumulation. A deeper understanding of this class (and other social classes active in the region) can be gained by looking at the Caribbean in relation to the changing political economic and social dynamics: a study that gets at the shifting structural patterns and combinations of various circumstances (the conjunctural dynamics) that have occurred through the region but within a world framework and up to the contemporary period.

Capitalism has flowed and congealed through Caribbean societies (as structures) but through the complexity of unique human beings (as agents of production or carriers of productive relations) who do “make their own history” (Marx, 1869/1994). This means that even in the face of exploitative relations, humans create and construct new (and possibly emancipatory) endeavors yet are also constrained by the social structures through which they live. Their restraints are the restraints on humans everywhere because they operate under circumstances not of their own choosing but under the nature of their social system (with its class-related activities) and the many circumstances coiled back to the lives of lost generations.

The Caribbean, the first region of the “new world” to be conquered by the late-feudal absolutist states of Western Europe (P. Anderson, 1974; Wolf, 1997), has passed through all of the different phases of capitalism. The region was a major site of wealth accumulation that helped jump-start capitalism (Galeano, 1997, p. 28; Williams, 1944). Caribbean societies were inserted into international chains of accumulation, with social and material relations moving back and forth slowly across frontiers and over long distances. These international processes developed through particular systems, such as British, French, and Spanish mercantilism, where international trade with the colonies was funneled in large part back into the empire’s internal metropole market. Most notable among these international processes were the triangles of Atlantic trade, which resulted in the forced mass movement and enslavement of millions of Africans. During the oceanic passage from Africa to the Americas, regularly more than 20 percent of the enslaved would die. The accumulation of the vast new wealth was thus steeped in extreme violence.

International relationships intensified into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and under the new nation-states that formed. Major developments
occurred that impacted the Caribbean region, such as the collapse of mercantilism, the overthrow and abolition of slavery, the completion of the Panama Canal, and the rising role of U.S. imperialism and international corporations.

The nature of these international processes, and the social formation therein, was qualitatively distinct from the transnational processes emerging in the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. This is because in the earlier phases of capitalism the mode of production was largely articulated within the production relations of various nation-states and colonies and through the interstate framework that existed. What has changed is that with the rise of global capitalism the prior processes of material and social production within these territorially confined units is breaking down.

As national and international circuits of accumulation fragment, they are becoming enveloped by newly emerging transnational circuits of accumulation. As William I. Robinson (2003, p. 16) writes: “There has been a progressive dismantling of autonomous or ‘autocentric’ national production systems and their reactivation as constituent elements of an integral world production system.”

Key to this process is what Harvey (1991) describes as “time-space compression” where many forms of transportation, communication, and economic processes overcome long-standing spatial limitations and barriers. The very qualities and relationship between space and time are altered. The ongoing transformation of the time-space dynamics of accumulation and the apparatuses and arrangements through which they take place is fundamental to the new global epoch. A central feature of this is the spatial reconfiguration of social relations and place, as a growing array of processes are becoming transnationally oriented (see also Robinson, 2003, pp. 106–110). This book notes particular examples of how this is playing out in the Caribbean, such as: the exploitation of flexibilized labor through the export-processing model and in the tourism industry and the manner in which the labor power of migrant communities is inserted into transnational remittance networks and new transnational chains of accumulation.

Authors such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001), Jerry Harris (2006, 2016), Ankie Hoogvelt (2001), George Liodakis (2010), Philip McMichael (1996), Roberto Regalado (2007), William I. Robinson (2004, 2014a), Leslie Sklair (2001, 2002), Bastiaan van Apeldoorn (2003), and Hilbourne Watson (2015) and others, take the view that “globalization represents a new stage in the evolving world capitalist system that came into being some five centuries ago,” thus advancing a “global capitalism thesis or school” (Robinson, 2004, p. 2). Although there are many differences between the approaches of these authors, all of them suggest that (1) global capitalism represents a qualitatively new epoch in the history of capitalism, and (2) the fundamental structure of our global system is not only driven by U.S. imperialism but rather is increas-
ingly propelled by a much wider array of interconnected material and social
relations (Sprague, 2011a). Thus, together these approaches are described well
as the “global capitalism school.”

In addition to the studies of the “global capitalism school” and many other
past works on political economy, this book takes inspiration from critical ap-
proaches to Caribbean and Latin American studies (to just list a small num-
ber: Beckford, 1999; Itzigsohn, 2000; Mintz, 1974; Regalado, 2007; Trouillot,
2000; H. Watson, 2015; Williams, 1944; Valdez and Miranda, 1999). During
the mid- to late twentieth century, prior to the end of the Cold War and before
the flood of literature on globalization, many other scholars published class
analyses, Third Worldist and historical materialist-influenced studies that fo-
cused on the Caribbean region or on specific countries in the area.

While there have been numerous studies on the political economy of
the region and many of its nations under globalization (G. Baker, 2007; Bishop,
2013; H. Dunn, 1995; Klak, 1997; L. Lewis, 2012a; Palmer, 2009; Sansavior
and Scholar, 2015; Sheller, 2003; Werner, 2016), there has yet to be a major
study of the Caribbean from the perspective of the “global capitalism school,”
emphasizing the novel and contradictory nature of the transnational pro-
cesses that have developed over the last decades of the twentieth century and
into the twenty-first century.14 While understanding capitalist globalization
as part of a longer process of world capitalism, this book also emphasizes the
uniqueness of what has come about in the most recent epoch.

This book thus focuses on (1) the underlying socioeconomic structure of
the Caribbean, (2) its political dynamics, and (3) in general, how, through
capitalist globalization, many nationally and internationally oriented pro-
cesses in the region are becoming transnationalized. Prior to going more in
depth about the novel relations occurring through the globalizing Carib-
bean, let us first lay some groundwork by clarifying this book’s class analysis
approach with its gendered and racialized dynamics.

Class and Inequality

How has humanity reached the extreme inequality that characterizes our
present era? Furthermore, what are the structural features of the globalizing
social order in a region such as the Caribbean? How is this social order being
reproduced?

While many theorists (going all the way back to the Enlightenment) have
suggested that capitalism is a naturally evolved “system” that reflects natural
human urges and striving, nothing could be further from the truth based on
a concrete observation of how it emerged out of qualitatively new and exp-
loitative relations.
It was the development of capitalism that introduced the capital-labor relation, in which a part of society came to own the means of production while another was compelled to sell its labor “on pain of extinction.” Vital also during this period was the development of new technologies and methods—the “productive forces” as Marx described them—that allowed for higher levels of surplus output in farming and manufacturing. Communal small farmer and familial landholdings gave way to monetized property and production relations, and a new capitalist class arose. This represented a qualitatively new distinction between possessors and nonpossessors (Wood, 1998).

Interconnected to the transformations in Europe were the extermination of many indigenous peoples and the brutal mass exploitation of chattel slaves that began in the colonial Caribbean, appropriating vast wealth and producing significant surplus for European planters and merchant capitalists (Galeano, 1997; McAuley, 2001). Elites, while competing among themselves (with some succeeding and others failing), gained tremendous wealth through the expansion of international trade and colonialism (Brenner, 2003), their power solidifying further through the modern nation-state and the rise of industrialization and international business monopolies. Meanwhile, among the popular classes (the working, marginalized, and poor populations) divisions formed along various lines, including economic differences, racialization, nationalism, culture, religion, and other dynamics. While a splintering among subaltern strata is often generated, there also exists a constant relation of mutual aid, solidarity, and struggles from below. The divisions though (also fomented by the upper classes) can make it more difficult for different fractions of the popular classes to cooperate in a common class struggle.

For the purposes of this book, which focuses on political economy, it is important to elaborate on the structural features of the class systems that emerged. A class system refers to the division of society into social classes made of people related in different ways to the production and distribution of wealth. Szymanski (1983, pp. 84–119) describes, for example, the capitalist class (who owns the means of production), the working and popular classes (who have nothing but their labor to sell), and the intermediate or middle strata (“middle-class positions”) in class structures.

Within the broader working population there are certain privileged strata, often composed of individuals with professional and skilled jobs that allow them to obtain better wages and positions. Going back to the early twentieth century some theorized the existence of a “labor aristocracy,” or those well-paid and better-off members of the working class (often within comfortable and nonmilitant labor unions, or those working in professional and often
high-status careers). One class fraction often associated with the “middle strata” is described as the “petit bourgeoisie,” who are the small-scale merchants, shop owners, and semiautonomous farmers who often identify with and seek to imitate the owning class but, who, for the most part, do not own the means of production themselves and instead are compelled to work alongside their employees. Over recent decades in many parts of the Caribbean, and, for that matter, throughout the Third World, there has evolved a vast expanse of gated community enclaves, where the middle and upper strata live spatially apart from the popular classes (Atkinson and Bandy, 2005).

A variety of other class fractions exist, such as the unemployed (or what we might describe as the “reserve army of labor,” whose very existence ensures a downward wage-pressure on working people) and the structurally excluded (or marginalized). The structurally excluded or marginalized are those sectors of the population whose labor power is not required by capital. The international system that spread through colonialism and world capitalism developed in a manner where some were employed in new forms of wage labor, while others were unemployed and yet others became structurally locked out (among them vast pools of people marginalized and forced into desperate conditions). Today, this continues to occur but in the context of a globalized system. As discussed in Chapter 2, many dominant groups and states operating in the Caribbean alongside powerful supranational institutions have sought to contain these structurally excluded populations through various mechanisms.

Another dimension of the labor-capital relation is “superexploitation.” This refers to the practice of paying workers less than what would be required for them to remain on even the fringes of mainstream society (paying them less than what they require to socially reproduce themselves). The “superexploited” thus form another part of the popular classes. In the contemporary period, we can see how many such workers serve as cogs in a negatively racialized market with its bureaucratized institutionalism. These workers often face situations of “illegality” without official citizenship status or the papers needed to obtain certain rights and protections, or they have been stripped by the state of protections that benefit those with full citizenship. This is especially relevant when considering the condition of superexploited migrant labor and how many such people are struggling daily to get by and at the same time have become inserted into transnational chains of just accumulation, such as through their jobs, the money sent through remittance companies, or the markets where they can purchase a variety of goods.

Another intensifying phenomenon over recent years has been the exploitation of precarious workers, a layer of the workforce that some describe as a “precariate” (Standing, 2013). This refers to those workers who often hold multiple part-time jobs and labor without contract, workers who are
often constantly in search of jobs and alienated from other workers through the new more mobile and flexible workplaces of the twenty-first century, giving them shrinking bargaining power with capital. Individual workers may even be treated as subcontractors, competing with one another (such as with Uber or Lyft drivers); atomized conditions under which labor organizing is made extremely difficult.

Historically many other classes have existed as well, such as chattel slaves, who through the initial phase of world capitalism made up a large portion of the Caribbean population. In many parts of the Caribbean, slaves far outnumbered European planters and colonialists, sometimes by a proportion of up to twenty to one (Horne, 2014a). The term “chattel” emphasizes that these slaves were considered valuable property and were exploited through despotic labor regimes. This emergent capitalist process developed over long periods of time, through what Sidney Mintz (1986) described as a synthesis of field and factory.

At first this occurred through a “formal subsumption,” under which capitalists took command of labor processes (or slave labor processes) that originated prior to or outside of capital’s imposition of wage labor. It was only over a longer time that a “real subsumption” occurred, where labor processes were internally reorganized to meet the dictates of capital. Capitalist slavery in the Caribbean functioned then as a vital but also emergent and anomalous process in the new social order.

In regions such as the Caribbean, colonial expansion lugged with it these early social relations of the capitalist mode of production. Yet these new exploitative social relations also carried seeds of resistance and liberation, as human beings by their nature will seek out freedom (C. James, 1980, 1989). For this reason, the new plantation and extractive industries of the Caribbean became cauldrons of class struggle and slave rebellion (C. James, 1989; Linebaugh and Rediker, 2013; Shepherd and Beckles, 1999).

Ultimately, how a class is formed depends on a variety of subjective and objective factors. Here it is useful to differentiate between a “class for itself” and a “class in itself.” A “class for itself” is class conscious: its individuals are aware of their shared interests and consider themselves as a unit that acts upon the basis of a common feeling in pursuing their general class interests. This has often been used to refer to, for example, a proletarian working class whose workers are mobilized to fight for their class interests against capital. By contrast, a “class in itself,” while sharing a common position in relation to production, is not class conscious as it neither understands its group interests nor thinks of itself as a collective or a class.

As E. P. Thompson (1963/2002) further elaborates in regard to social formation, the individuals of the working class are not just victims but also
proactive agents of history, developing their own culture that leaves a legacy through the stories, art, and songs passed down over the generations. Class has become central, then, to the actions, dispositions, and ideologies of poor and working people, impacting the role of institutions and political struggles (Katznelson and Zolberg, 1987).

The class systems of the Caribbean have of course involved many subjective and objective dynamics. Ken Post, examining Jamaica’s social formation, points out how the “process of the determination of forms of class consciousness and action” occur on two levels: (1) “the generation of social actions (most importantly, but not exclusively, that of classes), necessarily involving some level of consciousness,” and (2) “the shaping of such action into particular forms of certain points in time, what have been termed . . . instances of practices” (1978, p. 51). Class subjectivity can become more pronounced at certain times and at others recede. This is interesting to think about in regard to how Guyanese scholar Clive Thomas argued that class structure in the periphery is more fluid and fragile, with social changes occurring at times very rapidly and sometimes out of desperation (Thomas, 1984, pp. 62–63). What is clear is that particular subjective and objective dynamics develop through the experiences of colonial and slave societies, as individuals’ lives are in part shaped as colonial subjects or as the human property of a planter elite, but also through their own agency in society. Contradictory sets of ideas thus develop through the consciousness of people experiencing specific historical circumstances (Bakan, 1990, pp. 15–17). Objectively structured and experienced, the lived experience of social class (with its racialized and gendered dynamics) involves different perceptions and responses, for instance, to work, family, community, culture, religion, and politics.

Furthermore, within a social class there are “class fractions,” which are segments or portions of the whole class—who are “grouped around different forms of economic activity or around the place occupied within these activities” (Wright, 1980, p. 335, quoting Francesca Freedman). There also exists the “social group,” a group of people who come together based on some common interest but may or may not be made up of individuals from the same social class. Another term, “strata,” often used by sociologists and political economists, refers to a layer of society with internally consistent characteristics that distinguish it from other layers.