

Perry Mars, *Ideology and Change: The Transformation of the Caribbean Left* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999).

This book explores the history (and seeks to contribute to the post-Cold War agenda) of the Left in the English-speaking Caribbean (especially Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago and Grenada). Defining the Left (a category that the author might have subjected to greater scrutiny) in broad terms as encompassing everything from “reformist politics” to “radical and revolutionary political movements,” Perry Mars emphasizes that it “represents a varied array of agencies which challenge” the “established precepts of the international and domestic status quo,” and attempt “to initiate change or relevant alternatives to the prevailing class structure within the established political system.” (xiii)

His central argument is that the “transformation of the Caribbean Left” in the Cold War era was “due largely to circumstances over which” it “had little control.” In particular the “entire Leftist project in the Caribbean has been seriously circumscribed by” the “relentless pressures towards ideological conformity” which characterized the international context. Even, “more fundamentally,” in his view has been the “limitations of the politically dominant middle classes which invariably lead the Left movements,” and which, when combined with the international context, brought about the “failure of the Left.” (xiv, 3) The author concludes that the twentieth century history of the Caribbean “has indeed demonstrated that, contrary to the more orthodox Marxist predictions, the capitalist system has not exhausted its potential for ascendancy, and that the socialist project adopted by the Left was consequently premature.” (xiv-xv)

As an alternative to this “orthodox marxist” analysis the author emphasizes the “relevance of Gramscian Marxist insights” to the understanding of the history and present circumstances of the Left in the Caribbean. (xv) This leads to his adoption and advocacy of a “modified political economy approach” which emphasizes the “overwhelming impact of international factors and events on national political and economic relationships and activities” and assumes a “flexible” and “interdependent” relationship in which the political and the economic are “interchangeably dominant depending upon the particular historical circumstances.” He emphasizes the importance of class, at the same time as “racial, political and ideological as much as economic factors” are said to “play significant roles in the definition and the determination or shaping of the behaviour patterns of the pertinent social classes in the region.” (5-6)

Although the Caribbean Left has historically be able to unite at certain times around specific regional issues, Mars emphasizes that it certainly never had a “single or common agenda.” (78, 82) And, he later laments the “endemic” disunity of Left political movements and organizations in the

Caribbean, advocating the unification of the Left in the post-Cold War Caribbean via “a coalition of various existing Left political organizations.” (167-168) This is followed by a call for “the Caribbean Left to develop a more adequate theory of race-class relations,” a project which has been hobbled in his view by “either their orthodox interpretation of Marxist theory, or their usually Utopian vision of socialism” as “an absolutely egalitarian and peaceful universe where class and racial differences are finally resolved.” (171)

Despite his emphasis on the need for “a more adequate theory of race-class relations” and greater analytical and political “flexibility,” Mars continues to treat questions of race, culture and nationalism, in almost as orthodox a fashion as the orthodox marxism he seeks to transcend. (72, 170-171) And although he draws attention to the cultural and historical particularity of the English-speaking Caribbean he continues to locate the region as part of wider and more or less undifferentiated Third World, concluding that the “viability of the Caribbean Left is rooted in the ever-increasing constituency of a largely dissatisfied population within Caribbean and Third World political system.” (174) Ultimately this book tells the history of the Caribbean Left and maps a new agenda for progressive political initiatives in a fashion which relies on an excessively homogenous conception of global capitalism and its impact on the region. Mars’s approach also assumes a greater basic unity of the Left than history and current circumstances might suggest and the notion of a “Third World” (a product of the Cold War) has also lost most, if not all, its political and descriptive relevance.

In contrast to Mars, it can be argued then that the viability of the Left in the Caribbean is not necessarily to be found in the general economic similarities between the region’s circumstances and a wider “Third World,” or in the establishment of a “coalition of various existing Left political organizations.” Although the mobilization and reorientation of the Left in the Caribbean (and elsewhere) involves finding common ground regionally and internationally, it also involves foregrounding the particular and varied experiences of global capitalism. While the international diffusion of capitalism has generated an overarching unity, it also involves ongoing fragmentation and differentiation in the context of complex local, regional (and global) relations of power. Local modes of political action and social empowerment, which mesh with the economic and cultural concerns of particular groups and movements, need to be central to any effort to reposition the Left in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Despite these criticisms this book still provides an important point of departure for anyone interested in the history and present predicament of the Left in the English-speaking Caribbean.

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