

INTRODUCTION

CHEDDI JAGAN WAS STUNNED.

It was a bright sunny day in early October 1953 in Georgetown, British Guiana, the only predominantly English-speaking nation in South America, not far from the Caribbean Sea. He had only recently come to power—or as much power as this man of South Asian origin could assume in a British colony. But now, as he recalled later, London had had quite enough of his months in office, as “the cruiser ‘Superb’ and the frigates ‘Bigbury Bay’ and ‘Burghead Bay’ were steaming from Bermuda. Troops were being flown from Jamaica. The aircraft carrier ‘Implacable’ was to bring further reinforcements from the United Kingdom towards the end of the week.” Thus, as he stood there in disbelief in his pajamas and slippers, police raided his home, taking away “papers, books and a recording machine,” while “downstairs, said Jagan, the police were digging up the floor of my garage.”¹

If there was any consolation, Jagan’s was not the only home ransacked, as “about 40 homes and offices” of other leaders of his People’s Progressive Party were invaded. To be on the safe side, the authorities with guns “at the ready” not only made a forced entry into his home at 97 Laluni Street but also his office—Jagan was a dentist trained at Northwestern University in Illinois—at 199 Charlotte Street. Streets were cordoned during these raids at the break of dawn.²

What prompted this extraordinary measure that led to the dislodging of the Jagan administration and his eventual incarceration? As Jagan saw it, his overthrow was of a piece with the June 1953 coup targeting Mohammad Mossadegh in Iran and the 1954 coup against Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala; “the three deposed governments had all been popularly elected at free and fair elections,”

he said. "In fact, the PPP, though dubbed 'Communist' won three consecutive elections in 1953, 1957 and 1961."³

Jagan was on target in pointing to the specter of communism as the ostensible basis for his being toppled. In the runup to his removal from power, the Executive Council in British Guiana, which included Jagan and London's representatives, debated intensely whether a travel ban that barred various reds and radicals from entering Georgetown should be continued. This ban included the Jamaican-born former leader of the National Maritime Union of the United States—Ferdinand Smith—who only recently had been expelled from that nation, not least because of his ties to communists⁴ and to various leaders of the Caribbean Labour Congress (CLC), which since its auspicious start in 1945 had been spearheading a dual agenda of organizing workers and pushing for independence from various European powers, particularly Great Britain. The ban was lifted in the face of fierce opposition from London's man, who "stressed the need for creating conditions which would dispel distrust and encourage the investment of capital and gave his opinion that the removal, at this time, of the ban against persons who were known to have connections with Moscow, could only have a prejudicial effect."⁵ Strikingly, other than the travel ban, the most contentious issue debated in the Executive Council prior to the ouster of Jagan's administration was Jagan's introduction of a bill to make it easier for labor unions to organize. As the minutes of this momentous meeting indicated, "Dr. Jagan then stated that it was his Party's declared intention to introduce legislation based on the American pattern to compel employers to recognize any trade union which commanded the support of the majority of the workers." This *démarche* came in the midst of a highly contentious strike by sugar workers.⁶

The United States, already the dominant power in the hemisphere, was dumbfounded by this turn of events. *TIME*, the magazine that was the centerpiece of the publishing empire of the influential Henry Luce, observed nervously that Jagan's electoral triumph months earlier was "the first time that the Reds reached power in the British Empire,"⁷ while the State Department was "bewildered" by Jagan's victory. "How could a party with leaders suspected of ties to Moscow be elected in a freely contested election in an English-speaking colony?"⁸

The ouster of the Jagan regime in 1953 also foreordained the 1961 collapse of federation in the British West Indies that sought to unite the far-flung colonies of the region. It had been organized a few years earlier but the overthrow of Jagan crippled the regional labor-left that had pushed the notion of federation in the first place. As Jagan later observed, when a federation of sorts was "born in 1958, it had not only a weak centre but a crown colony status. Britain retained powers of foreign affairs and defence [*sic*]," which suggested the scope of London's 1953 triumph. This was a turnabout from the early postwar era when the labor-left, as represented by Jagan, crusaded for sovereignty. "What precisely

went wrong?” asked Jagan plaintively in 1972. “The Cold War intervened and the West Indian leadership joined the bandwagon,” he answered.⁹

IN PART THIS IS A BOOK about the Caribbean Labour Congress, which, propelled in 1945 by a wave of labor unrest, sought to organize the working class—especially in the former British West Indies—as it pushed for independence for these postage-stamp-sized islands, in the form of a federation. This is also a book about how anticommunism proved notably useful in blunting the thrust of the CLC’s twin objectives.¹⁰ It ranges from the high tide of labor unrest in the 1930s, which paved the way for Jagan’s rise, to his overthrow in 1953—which was an early signal that meaningful independence and federation would not be allowed to emerge. In sum, this is a book about the impact of the early Cold War in shaping today’s former British West Indies, which is characterized by the continuing influence of labor (in Barbados, both the ruling and opposition parties are known as “Labour” parties), which has proven instrumental in insuring one of the most pervasive regional democracies in the developing world. In fact, the relatively small British West Indies exemplifies the relatively grand idea that a precondition for a thriving democracy is the organization and influence of what is the majority in most nations: labor. This book also sheds light on the origins of today’s CARICOM or Caribbean Community, which is a form of federation—and, again, a powerful voice for regional democracy, as exemplified by its principled response to the 2004 ouster of the democratically elected government in Haiti¹¹—but its loose bonds are not precisely what the labor-left had in mind.

Though these colonies were struggling for independence from London, this book reflects the dominant fact of the second half of the twentieth century: how a diminished London was replaced by a rising Washington in its Empire—and elsewhere. However, this reality was noticeably evident in the Caribbean. Why? The West Indies was the “third U.S. border.” These “islands form a semi-circular outer ring around the Panama Canal. It is through these islands and the Canal that much of U.S. imports flow.”¹² This region was the “outer defence [*sic*] ring covering the soft underbelly of the United States, as well as being the lynch pin for control of the Central Atlantic.” Washington’s strategic dilemma was exposed as the CLC was coming into existence, for during the war, the German navy waged a “Caribbean U-boat campaign” that “was the most cost-effective campaign fought by Germany anywhere during World War II,” inflicting considerable damage on the interests of both the United States and the United Kingdom.¹³

Consequently, after the war, as the CLC pushed for federation, Washington, from its colony in the Virgin Islands, sought to exert more influence in the region, pushing for “the creation of a Caribbean Commission Secretariat” with a “suitable staff.”¹⁴

Hence, despite the relatively small size of the jurisdiction encompassed by the CLC, this region was of enormous strategic significance to Washington, a

fact which became clear after the Cuban revolution of 1959. What was called the “Commonwealth Caribbean” consisted of “seventeen territorial units. Fifteen of these are islands or groups of islands. Two are mainland states. Together, these territories encompass a land mass of 105,325 square miles” and, as of 1971, “a population of five million people.” The region forms a “vital land-line between the two American continents,” and, concluded one analyst, this “link . . . gives to the area a preeminent economic and strategic value.”¹⁵

One problem for Washington was that the CLC—as the prominence in Jamaican labor ranks of Ferdinand Smith suggested—was welcoming of the radical left, and the influx of Caribbean nationals into the United States itself had created a progressive link from there to the former British West Indies. Thus, these Caribbean migrants raised thousands of dollars for the financially strapped CLC and constituted a domestic U.S. lobby on their behalf.¹⁶ Not least because of the economic misery that gripped the islands during the 1930s—which also propelled a wave of strikes—migrants from the British West Indies poured into Harlem particularly, where they organized the Jamaica Progressive League, the West Indies National Council, and other groups that took a decided interest in their old homeland.¹⁷

These migrants quickly became incorporated within a larger African American community that too was hardly indifferent to the Caribbean. As early as 1927, the journal of the NAACP “urge[d] the peoples of the West Indies to begin an earnest movement for the federation of these islands,” an unsurprising development given the Caribbean roots of its leader, W.E.B. Du Bois.¹⁸

By the same token, in December 1948, in a “confidential” message, U.S. diplomat Nelson R. Park reported nervously to the secretary of state about the Jamaican visit of Paul Robeson, the performer and activist known to be close to the U.S. Communist Party. He was “feted by official and civic organizations,” he said disconsolately, though he brightened when noting that Robeson was “under discreet surveillance” by the authorities. At times this surveillance was not difficult since at one concert “some fifty thousand persons” attended and there was blanket press coverage of his visit.¹⁹ Robeson had long held the Caribbean dear, stating words at one juncture that were not comforting to his opponents. “At this moment in world history,” he told Jamaicans, “nothing could be more important than the establishment of an independent Negro country to the south of us.” This was of monumental Pan-African significance, since such a nation could “help show the way to Negro peoples in Africa,” which was why “Negro Americans must join with their West Indian brothers.”²⁰

A significant reason why Washington was so concerned about developments in these microscopically small nations was their direct influence on a vital sector of the U.S. population: African Americans.²¹ Historian Winston James is correct in asserting that migrants from these nations arrived in the United States with a “long and distinguished tradition of resistance with few parallels in the New World.” The Father of Harlem Radicalism, Hubert Harrison, who hailed

from the Caribbean basin, was largely accurate when he asserted in 1927 that “almost every important development originating in Harlem—from the Negro Manhood Movement to political representation in public office, from collecting Negro books to speaking on the streets, from demanding federal control over lynching to agitation for Negroes on the police force—every one of these has either been fathered by West Indians or can count on them among its originators.” These migrants were a vector of influence for Bolshevism, influencing the Communist International on the so-called Negro Question, not least since West Indians were “simultaneously much more nationalistic, class conscious and international-minded than were American-born blacks.” Indeed, Harlem’s widespread influence and pre-eminence in Black America is inseparable from this profound impact of migrants from the Caribbean. This became clear during the early stages of the Harlem Renaissance when “eighty thousand copies of radical print [was] pouring out of a couple of Harlem blocks each month,” not to mention the journal of the NAACP, which had a circulation of 104,000. The presence of the *Challenge*, the *Negro World*, the *Emancipator*, the *Messenger*, and the *Crusader* were intimately tied to the presence of West Indians like Marcus Garvey, Claude McKay, and Cyril Briggs.²²

Given its strategic significance and its ability to influence an influential bloc of voters—African Americans—it was not surprising when the region was engulfed by a tidal wave of red-baiting that eventually capsized both the CLC and regimes friendly to it, such as Jagan’s. As hysteria rose accordingly in November 1948, the prominent Trinidadian politician Albert Gomes denounced what he saw as a red offensive in the Caribbean. “Unless we can rally democratic, anti-Communist sentiment in the [region],” he said, “we shall be rudely awakened one fine day to find that the Red termites whose headquarters are in Jamaica have gnawed their way into all the West Indian territories . . . they have a well-thought out plan for infiltrating into all the West Indian territories and have found a convenient vehicle in the Caribbean Labour Congress.” Their “aim,” he said, was to “destroy British rule in the West Indies and to establish a Communist West Indies in its stead.” This was possible since they had “henchmen in every West Indian territory.”²³

Gomes had a point in that the CLC had affiliates—or at least sympathizers—throughout the region, which was no small thing considering the diversity of the region. For though at times these colonies were spoken of as a monolith, there were distinct differences between them sufficient to flummox the most astute of organizers. The scholar Robert Alexander has opined that “the Jamaicans are a people who are colored and have no inferiority complex about it . . . when the Jamaicans go into Florida to work during the harvest time, they cause all kinds of ruckus. And the British Colonial Office would tell anyone who asked that the Jamaicans are the most unfriendly people in the Empire.”²⁴ Jamaica, a former Spanish possession before becoming part of the British Empire, was the most populous nation in the Commonwealth Caribbean, while

Trinidad—which was influenced profoundly by French Catholicism—was just off the coast of South America and second in population to Jamaica within the former British West Indies. It was, in turn, “the very opposite of Barbados”—whose ties to the Empire were encoded in its nickname “Little England”—in terms of “climate, soil, [and] population.” Trinidad contained “an area of 1,287,600 acres, of which about 60,000 only are under cultivation. Barbados, covering some 106,000 acres is cultivated from end to end like a garden. Trinidad, even under slavery, never had anything like an adequate labouring population. Barbados is so thickly inhabited that work or starvation is the labourer’s only choice . . . the only similarity between the two islands is that sugar forms the stable production of both.”²⁵ Barbados, said Trinidad’s George Padmore, was “the most patriotic of all the West Indies, and, incidentally, the poorest”—a dubious designation whose accuracy its neighbors could rightly challenge.²⁶ British Honduras—now Belize—is on the mainland of Central America and historically has faced aggressive territorial claims from neighboring Guatemala, while British Guiana (now Guyana) is on the mainland of South America and faces similar claims from neighboring Venezuela. Both British Guiana and Trinidad and Tobago have sizeable populations of South Asian origin, while Jamaica, Antigua, St. Kitts-Nevis, Barbados, St. Lucia, Grenada, Dominica, St. Vincent, etc. do not. Eric Williams, the Caribbean intellectual who became the leader of his homeland, Trinidad and Tobago, once commented that Trinidad and Tobago is “to Grenada and St. Vincent” as “Antigua is to Dominica and Montserrat,” that is, a big brother and a little brother, a dominant cultural influence and those it influenced.²⁷

To a degree, Trinidad, St. Lucia, Grenada, and Dominica can be grouped together. Why? Though all were “only under French domination for a few years” more than two centuries ago, “a French patois, the Roman Catholic religion and many of the old French customs have vigorously survived”—including a “style of building construction”—to an extent.²⁸ St. Lucia was notably unique in that it “always looked to France” and “Martinique . . . for their intellectual life,” while maintaining a high level of economic concentration. In 1946, U.S. diplomat Charles Whitaker reported that “about three families . . . control most of the economic life of the island.”²⁹ In turn Grenada—which produced some of the most militant of Trinidad’s labor leaders—had a uniqueness all its own. The writer Alfie Roberts may have been thinking of the tumultuous 1951 Grenada strike and the turn to the left that culminated in a U.S. invasion in 1983 when he said that Grenada “seems to have something in its body politic that has pushed it, even politically, in a direction more advanced than some of the other islands.”³⁰ A “fashionable West Indian saying of the 17th and 18th centuries,” said a writer in St. Kitts, “was that the noblesse were to be found in St. Kitts, the bourgeois in Guadeloupe, soldiers in Martinique and peasants in Grenada.”³¹

The relatively small “white” communities varied from island to island too. As Margaret Locket recalled her native Antigua, “there were then three distinct

white societies . . . the Portuguese, the Arabs who had come mostly from Syria, and the rest mostly of British descent. These groups remained almost completely separate socially in the 1920s and early 1930s.” Unlike St. Kitts, “a far richer island with many absentee owners, the Antiguan planters were for the most part resident on their estates.”³² Barbados, which was the antipode to British Guiana’s vanguard radicalism, also—not coincidentally—contained one of the largest white communities in the region.

Richard Hart, a leading Jamaican lawyer and union leader, remarked in 1947 that in “St. Vincent, Grenada, Dominica and St. Lucia wage earners form a relatively small part of the population and trade unionism cannot be expected to present an appeal to the broadest masses in exactly the same way that it does in Trinidad, Barbados or Antigua.” In Antigua, Barbados, and St. Kitts, wage earners were in the majority. “But the overwhelming majority” of these were “sugar workers and it is notorious,” he opined, “that agricultural workers are more difficult to organize than urban industrial workers.” Meanwhile, in Jamaica, the heavyweight of the British West Indies, “the principal obstacle in the way of the growth of the democratic socialist workers’ organization” was “the existence of [a] strong active fascist movement.” Trinidad and British Guiana were plagued by rifts between workers of African and South Asian origin.³³

The Leeward Islands, with a population in the early 1950s of about 100,000, were treated as a cohesive unit, though the constituent islands were “widely scattered” and “intercommunication” was “not easy,” which facilitated uniqueness even in these small territories. At first glance, St. Kitts resembled Antigua except that “it is mountainous instead of flat” and its soil was “so much richer” and thus had “no peasant proprietors and the estates are owned by individual planters.” Nevis was characterized then by “sulphur baths, still in excellent repair,” and “Obeah,” a form of religion with African overtones, flourished. Tiny Anguilla had “never known prosperity” as its climate was quite dry and its soil “too stony.” While considering reasonably distant Tortola and St. Thomas of the Virgin Islands, these islands had a singularity all its own, with a closer resemblance to the Anglo-French condominium that prevailed in the New Hebrides than to its Caribbean neighbors.³⁴

That is, within the broader region there were distinct miniregions and cultures that complicated the push for federation.

But with all this variation, there were certain blanket verities within the former British West Indies. The peasantry and working class were subject to crass exploitation, which included a heavy dose of racism. Events in the more populous territories—Jamaica, Trinidad, and British Guiana—tended to shape trends and tendencies regionally. And Barbados, “Little England,” tended to have a conservative influence regionally. In some ways, this is not unlike the United States today where California, New York, Texas, and Florida tend to have an outsized influence on the nation, with the former two pulling the country to the left and the latter two to the right.

Still, the differences in the region were not unknown to outsiders. As the CLC was getting underway, the U.S. vice consul in Trinidad explained that “because of social and economic differences between the two islands, Barbados labor was ‘definitely preferred’ to Trinidad’s.” He claimed that “the Barbadian developed a reasonable amount of industriousness, was willing to work and exhibited a respectful attitude toward his employer, whereas the reverse was true of the Trinidadian.” Most feared of all were the Jamaicans, as a State Department official feared that a “‘large influx of Jamaican Negroes for employment would cause repercussions of a political nature’ in the United States,” because of their reputation for militancy, “but also because it was suspected that funds from [them] would be used to finance an extreme left wing party in the Caribbean.”³⁵ U.S. diplomat Henry Taylor argued in 1944 that “Grenadians will regard an inhabitant of St. Vincent as a resident of Boston would regard a Canadian. They would regard a St. Lucian or Dominican as a Bostonian would look upon a Mexican. There is very little concern in Grenada,” he thought, “for the welfare of other islands.”³⁶

At the same time, there was considerable movement and migration between and among the Caribbean nations—and to the United States. This meant that the dual notions of labor radicalism and sovereignty—which the CLC embodied—were difficult to quarantine. Clement Osbourne Payne, the “John the Baptist” of labor radicalism in a Barbados which had a justifiable reputation for conservatism, hailed from Trinidad. Indeed, his “arrival on Friday, March 26th, 1937 . . . was the beginning of the upsurge of radicalism” regionally.³⁷ Maurice Bishop, the Grenadian leader whose murder was a factor in a 1983 U.S. invasion of this spice island, “frequently stated that Brooklyn was Grenada’s largest constituency.” From 1888 to 1911 at least “one quarter of the forty thousand inhabitants of St. Vincent were reported to have emigrated . . . and between 1911 and 1921, out-migration was so heavy that Grenada actually experienced a reduction in population.” Part of the purpose of the CLC was to provide the protective cover of a union for workers as they moved around the region, which was good since in 1951 the colonial administrator of St. Vincent publicly proclaimed that “the employment of workers outside the colony assists the social and economic well-being of the people.” This helped to foment a pragmatic culture of migration. As one Vincentian put it, “‘if you go to a “swearing-in” [of] citizens, you see people from the other nations moved to tears. West Indians don’t have that feeling. Quite the contrary.’ Many West Indians think that U.S. citizenship will enable them to better represent the interests of their home countries.”³⁸

This also contributed to a progressive cosmopolitanism that made it easier for outsiders like Payne or Ferdinand Smith—along with their labor radicalism—to be welcomed. It facilitated the very notion of a pan-Caribbean labor federation, such as the CLC, and paved the way for various forms of federation. Thus, Barbados, which was said by its colonizers in 1944 to face the problem of “continuously increasing population,”³⁹ was “investigating the prospects of [mass]

emigration to Brazil and other South American countries” in 1947.⁴⁰ In a “private and confidential” report, the British Labour Party—patiently waiting to resume power—in early 1938 explored the “question of finding an outlet for the surplus population of some of the West Indian islands,” which was a “serious problem which ought to be faced immediately.” To cite one example, St. Lucia—“definitely the poorest of the Windward Islands” with “economic conditions” that were “very bad”—consisted “largely of steep hills and owing to unwise deforestation in the past, erosion” had taken hold and “the actual amount of cultivable land” was “decreasing in consequence.” Previously, “West Indians in search of employment were able to find it on the oilfields of Venezuela and on the estates of Cuba and San Domingo,” but now these lands had “refused to allow West Indians to enter their territories in search of employment.” In a labor-based version of beggar-thy-neighbor, “many of the West Indian islands” had “taken steps to prevent the natives of other islands coming to them in search of work.” On the other hand, British Guiana could withstand a “large increase of population.” British Honduras had a “very small population in a colony of which the area is three times as large as the areas of Barbados, Trinidad and the Windward Islands combined”—so why not move labor to where it was needed?⁴¹

If that did not occur, it would be akin to trying to keep a lid forced down on a pressure-filled steaming pot. Given such a state of affairs, it was only natural for West Indians to keep an alert eye on regional, hemispheric, and, indeed, global developments as their residence was not certain from year to year.

West Indian wanderlust accelerated in the wake of the labor tumult of the 1930s, perhaps the most serious challenge to British hegemony in the region since the inception of colonialism. It occurred as London itself was under immense pressure from Berlin and Tokyo, thus providing West Indians with even more leverage. In fact, argued Jamaica’s People’s National Party, “the condition of the working classes in Jamaica which led to the disturbances of 1938 were regarded by the Royal Commission of the West Indies as so shocking that the British government decided not to publish the report lest it make useful enemy propaganda.”⁴² World War I and the onset of the Great Depression “shrank opportunity for mobility” and, as a result, may have contributed to labor unrest, and it was feared, quite properly by the colonial authorities, that another war could induce a similar result.⁴³ Mass migration away from the West Indies could ease the pressures, it was thought.

Thus, according to one account, “between 1943 and 1947, 116,124 agricultural and industrial workers recruited in the West Indies worked in the United States, earning approximately \$100,000,000 of which \$40,000,000 was remitted to the West Indian states.” This included about 14,500 workers from Jamaica, 3,000 from Barbados, and 500 from Belize.⁴⁴ This migration transformed the region as it occurred as Washington was beginning to challenge London’s pre-eminent role in the British West Indies, thus buoying challenges by the colonized to colonial rule. And as these nations surged to independence, they were

hardly prone to accept passively the kind of bestial Jim Crow they were compelled to endure in the United States, which meant the Colossus of the North too was transformed.

One of the reasons that Caribbean nationals were so footloose and so prone to migration was the staggeringly horrendous living conditions they had to endure. That this state of affairs also paved the way for labor radicalism is also true. During the 1930s, for example, blacks in Barbados—where those of African descent made up more than 90 percent of the population—faced “mountains of discrimination . . . when they walked into the ‘Mutual Building’” in downtown Bridgetown in the 1930s. “[W]hite officers refused to attend to them until all the white clients had [conducted] their business, even though they had arrived at the office before the whites.” This imposing edifice on Broad Street “symbolized economic and social apartheid”—but it was not particularly unique in a land that, evidently, took its sobriquet of “Little England” quite seriously.⁴⁵

This monstrous apartheid was hard to disentangle from the oppressive poverty that reigned in the region. George Padmore, who hailed from Trinidad, observed in the 1930s that “throughout all of the West Indies one is confronted with the shocking spectacle of whole populations living on the verge of starvation.” There were “thousands of pauperized, downtrodden natives, huddled together in company-owned barracks on the sugar plantations or scattered around the countryside in mud shacks.” There was mass “starvation and disease” that was “causing havoc in depopulating entire sections of the population.” There was “forced labor,” a throwback to the bad old days of slavery, remnants of which had yet to disappear. There was “all kinds of repressive legislation, such as vagrancy laws,” which were “enacted in order to enable the imperialist rulers to find a pretext to force the Negroes to work.” The colonized were “arrested on all kinds of framed-up charges, thrown into prison and there assigned to chain gangs and made to build roads and do other forms of public work.”⁴⁶

As late as 1970, a Jamaican journalist commented that residents of St. Vincent “were living in a way which, in terms of material and environmental conditions, could scarcely be far removed from the situation as it was under slavery.” Unlike, say, Barbados, it “lacked white sand beaches and certainly was not the most favoured of places [for] the development of a tourist industry.” There was “untreated water” in “use” and the “state of housing was rapidly [getting] worse.”⁴⁷

The Caribbean nations were routinely referred to as the “slums of the Empire,” while Padmore once said that the “West Indies could briefly be described as the sugar section of British imperialism.”⁴⁸ This was no accident. The scholar James Walvin observes that “the main engine which drove boatloads of Africans across the Atlantic was cane sugar. Of the 12 million Africans loaded into the potential hell of the slave ships, some 70% were destined to work in cane fields.”⁴⁹ Subsequently, in Barbados, “almost the entire working population was directly or indirectly dependent on the sugar industry for a living.”⁵⁰ In

Jamaica, said Padmore, there was a “government of sugar for sugar by sugar.” Something similar could be said about British Guiana and Trinidad and Tobago and the other major colonies of the region. Still, the banana moguls could well object to this characterization of sugar hegemony, since in Jamaica this fruit “accounted for 55% of the values of domestic exports” in 1937, “while sugar accounted for 18%.”⁵¹ In St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Dominica, bananas constituted the “primary export industry throughout most of the second half of the twentieth century, accounting for as much as 80 percent of . . . total exports from the 1960s onwards,” and slightly less before then. This “industry also had important linkages to the transportation, domestic marketing, employment, regional trade and other agricultural sectors. It was so integrated into the life of the country that it was virtually impossible for anyone in St. Lucia to remain untouched by it.”⁵²

Subsequently, tourism surged in importance in the region, while in British Guiana and Jamaica, bauxite zoomed in importance, which accentuated the role of Kaiser, ALCOA, and Reynolds Aluminum; as late as 1950, Trinidad was the leading crude oil producer in the Empire.⁵³ ALCOA began trying to control bauxite in British Guiana as early as 1914, which “in time” brought “British interests . . . into open conflict with ALCOA and the U.S.A.”⁵⁴ By 1942 Reynolds of the United States was eagerly seeking to get its hands on Jamaican bauxite, which it linked to Washington’s wartime needs and long-term strategic goals—which, again, was not pleasing to London.⁵⁵

The unvarnished dominance of capital—often foreign capital—combined with a crisis of everyday living that was of major ideological consequence. As the Cold War was launched in the aftermath of World War II, Caribbean nationals were being instructed that they had to align with the forces of “freedom” and reject the myrmidons of “totalitarianism,” as exemplified by the CLC. But when a labor leader in tiny and depressed Dominica was fed this line by H. V. Tewson, general secretary of Britain’s Trade Union Congress, he resisted. “Conditions of Dominica today [are] worse than ever before,” it was said in late 1951. “[T]oday when you tell the man in the street that there will soon be war,” the “answer they give is ‘whether they are going to fight to strengthen the capitalist exploitation.’ Our working population is about 20,000 but it is only about 7,000 who are employed. . . . We in Dominica today,” he reported, “are just like the people of England in 1833. Hundreds of acres of land are wasted land; people are crying in want of land to make gardens”—and many more were barely hanging on.⁵⁶

This Cold War in the hemisphere was headed by Washington, though the U.S. presence became a roiling factor even before the post-1945 onset of this conflict. When the U.S. flag rose in Antigua on the first day of spring 1941, Washington moved “from the wings to center stage in Antiguan life.” This U.S. base—one among a number that arose with the onset of war—“immediately became an enormous labor market,” and for the “first time since the early 1700s,

the planters no longer controlled access to work, and therefore to livelihood, for the mass of the population.” This had a contradictory impact. The undermining of planter hegemony gave a palpable boost to labor organizing and to the idea that the majority should rule. After all, those within the majority were overwhelmingly part of the laboring classes and were overwhelmingly absent from the ruling elite. But then there was the “introduction of American style racism” on this tiny island. Euro-Americans “brought to Antigua a consciousness of race and a level of racial discrimination and hostility, that was far greater than any that Antiguans”—or, for that matter, Trinidadians and the others subjected to U.S. praxis—“had known, at least since slavery ended—it was so strong and so different that many people [asserted] that it was the Americans who had *introduced* racism to Antigua” (emphasis in original). For it was they who “introduced Jim Crow practices at the base and separate buses took whites and nonwhites to and from town.” They “brought with them racially based violence, verbal and physical; filthy language, drunken driving, fist fights, brawls and shooting incidents”—“all became commonplace.” They were “trigger happy and prone to pulling out knives and guns.”⁵⁷ This conservative and racist militancy helped generate a correspondingly antiracist and progressive militancy that helped drive labor organizing—and, ultimately, independence.

Yet emblematic of the pervasive exploitation faced by West Indians was that many welcomed the arrival of a sizeable U.S. presence as a counterweight to British colonialism, with the latter viewed as cash-strapped and penurious and the former as cash-rich and wealthy.

Of course, the colonized were largely deprived of the right to vote and generally had no say in the selection of the Windsors of London as their sovereign. “I lived through a period in St. Vincent and the Grenadines,” said the activist intellectual Alfie Roberts, and “up to 1951 you were only able to vote if you had access to property and a certain monetary income.”⁵⁸

Perhaps not accidentally, 1951 was the key year for many in the Caribbean, for it was then that London, as a way to blunt the thrust toward sovereignty and workers’ rights spearheaded by the CLC, began to make critical concessions. Certainly this was the view of Richard Hart, the radical Jamaican lawyer who in many ways was the sparkplug of the organization. As he saw it, beyond its contribution to labor and sovereignty, the CLC had other benefits, for when it convened for the first time in Barbados in 1945 “this was the first time that popular organizations in Jamaica had established contact of any kind with popular organizations of the eastern Caribbean islands and British Guiana.” The walls between these small nations had benefited London; breaking them down—which the CLC pioneered—benefited independence. There were gaps in the organizing scheme, however. “Trinidad was well represented” but the “messianic movement of Uriah Butler, already dissolving into confusion, was excluded,” as was the Barbados party led by W. A. Crawford, and “no one had been invited from the French and American colonies.” At the CLC council in

Antigua in 1947, Hart officially became the chief executive of the organization, and the ranks were broadened as Crawford came on board; representatives of the French colonies and Puerto Rico were invited “but did not respond. No representatives came from Suriname . . . it is probable that the letters to Puerto Rico were intercepted by American authorities,” thought Hart. “A reply was received from the Communist Party of Martinique but they were not then interested in participation as their policy was then one of ‘assimilation’ with France. The Socialist Party in Martinique did not even apply. No reply was received from Guadeloupe and here again interference with the mail” was “suspected.”

Despite these setbacks, the very organization of the CLC was a step forward for the region. “The first official conference on federation of the [British West Indies] and British Guiana [was] convened by the Secretary of State for the Colonies”—said London’s man—and “was held in Jamaica shortly after the CLC 1947 Congress.” This was the beginning of London’s successful crusade to “wean” the region “away from the CLC line and [obtain] . . . approval for a federal constitution which differed materially from the CLC’s proposals.” By 1948, one of the CLC’s founding fathers, Grantley Adams of Barbados, turned to the right and renounced his former alliance with the left, which was a wicked blow to the organization’s fortunes. CLC persevered, however, but by the time of the toppling of Jagan in 1953, the organization’s initial promise had dimmed significantly.⁵⁹

Yet Jagan eventually did come to power, albeit after the collapse of the Soviet Union when the possibility of realizing his most radical dreams had diminished. The relatively tiny nations in the Caribbean basin found it difficult to stand up to the major powers, notably London and Washington. Still, the legacy left by the CLC was nearly unique on a global scale in that there are few regions on this planet where leaders of labor played such a huge role. Though trained as a dentist, Jagan was a union leader, as were the founding fathers of virtually all of the nations within the former British West Indies. Even those who were to the right of the CLC in the aftermath of the bitter split in its ranks—such as Norman Manley of Jamaica, who sided with Adams—were Social Democrats. Then there were the unrequited radicals like Richard Hart and Ferdinand Smith, both of Jamaica, who never renounced their core left-wing beliefs. This was nothing new in that the earliest black members of the U.S. Communist Party were disproportionately from the Caribbean basin. The cosmopolitanism induced in part by a culture of migration, combined with the harsh conditions in the region, all contributed to a culture that created tropical radicals—radicals like Cheddi Jagan, who was deposed unceremoniously in 1953.

The scholar Constance Sutton is largely correct in asserting that “more than in most world regions, labour and the control over labour has shaped the contours of Caribbean societies.” It “has been the defining element and main player in Caribbean struggles for freedom and equality.”⁶⁰ It remains true that “just as the black church provided black political leadership in the United States, so did

the trade union movement provide political leadership in the Commonwealth Caribbean.”⁶¹ The British West Indies, consequently, was a transmission belt for labor radicalism to Harlem—as exemplified by the life of Ferdinand Smith—and to the United States as a whole.

These labor radicals in turn became the primary victims when the Cold War took hold in the Hot Zone that was the British West Indies. Nevertheless, the bold radicalism of the region meant that Washington had to devote considerable time and attention to this region—particularly in the runup to Jagan’s ouster in 1953—which could have been directed elsewhere. Thus, despite its relatively small size, the British West Indies did not play a tiny role as the Cold War was launched.