

GLOBAL CAPITALISM AND THE CARIBBEAN

Globalizing the Caribbean: Political Economy, Social Change, and the Transnational Capitalist Class. By Jeb Sprague. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019. Pp. 322. \$74.50 cloth.
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Using approaches of historical materialism and global capitalism, Sprague examines the social and economic transformation of the Caribbean in the new era of global capitalism, with the incorporation of the region into transnational chains of accumulation. The book helps reveals the role of transnational processes in increasing inequalities in the region, which is often marketed as a paradise, through a regime of labor exploitation.

In the imagination of many tourists, the Caribbean is perceived as a place that embodies exoticism and modernization, particularly with Western-like infrastructure. Through this book, Sprague shows that the reality of the region goes beyond these clichés and cannot be understood without understanding current and past development rooted in colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberalism entwined with capitalism. Through the seven chapters, Sprague demonstrates how the region, which has come to be known as the laboratory of capitalism, has gone through all the phases of capitalism and how it has been incorporated into transnational chains of accumulation.

The entry of the Caribbean into world capitalism has been violent, with the exploitation of African slave labor and the sexual abuse of the enslaved to perpetuate and reproduce the system that was accompanied by racialized and unequal class relations. As shown by Sprague, an understanding of capitalist slavery is significant to understanding the transition of the Caribbean toward international and transnational accumulation with the restructuring of labor exploitation. This transnational phase has been made possible by hegemonic consent (cultural, ideological, and political mechanisms) and the support of members of the transnational capitalist class (TCC), transnationally oriented elites, and state functionaries. Sprague helps understand how this late phase (29) has taken place in the Caribbean, through several case studies.

For example, an array of activities and global enterprises such as tourism, remittances sent home by migrants, export-processing zones (EPZs), and mining contribute to incorporating the Caribbean into transnational chains of accumulation, facilitated by local businesses and state apparatuses engaged in neoliberal enterprises. The positive impact of these different activities on development in the Caribbean is questionable, as they represent ways for a small number of capitalists and elites to accumulate capital and cater to their own social reproduction while incorporating working and popular classes into global chains of production, producing widespread inequality.

For instance, remittances sent by migrants from Haiti, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic that should benefit the national economy are appropriated by transnational capitalists through transnational corporations (TNCs) and local businesses linked with global capital accumulation. These transnational processes are not without consequences for local people, who are exploited, disregarded, and often marginalized by their own states in ways that deviate from national development. As Sprague argues, “while many state officials claim to be promoting so-called national economic development this is not capital’s priority, and surely not transnational capital’s priority” (252). Many movements from below in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, for example, have contested these projects, but they are relatively sporadic, as they need to move beyond national borders to find more support. Those movements from below are significant to understand the agency exercised by people from the Caribbean. Unfortunately, Sprague did not elaborate on them, leaving us think that the power of global capitalism has taken away the agency and experiences of Caribbean people.

Nevertheless, this book is a great contribution to Caribbean and Latin American studies and a good addition to work that has been done by, for example, Nina Glick Shiller et al. (since the 1990s) on transnational processes in the Caribbean. It echoes Sidney Mintz’s (1998) call for the Caribbean to be studied through a transnational perspective. The reader will find interesting insights into how transnational processes have contributed to shifting social and economic dynamics in the Caribbean.

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GLOBAL DRUG TRADE

The Age of Intoxication: Origins of the Global Drug Trade. By Benjamin Breen.
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Most books of history are stories of becoming. They wrestle with the difficult question of how we are to understand the creation of the new and its relation to what has come before. Breen’s book does so with elegance and artistry. Entirely concerned with comprehending novelty, experimentation, and transmutation, this meticulously crafted study takes readers to the Age of Reason to demonstrate that this could well be renamed as the title of the book. A skillful historian, Breen circumvents easy paths. Instead of merely documenting the “discovery” of plants, animals, or minerals with psychoactive properties, or tracing the networks of knowledge and trade that made possible their circulation among continents, the author offers an ambitious and complex analysis of changing epistemologies and shifting paradigms regarding intoxication, healing, spirituality, credibility, and erudition.