introduction

social living

Do you know?
Social living is the best
– Burning Spear

Even at his most garrulous, Winston Rodney, Jamaican Rastafarian artiste and leader of Burning Spear, is best described as terse. Rodney has mastered what might be termed a “drumming lyric” in which his lead vocal substitutes for the Rastafarian repeater, or cutting drum. There is a steady and hypnotic background rhythm – the heartbeat, as it were – which is suddenly interrupted by a brief, staccato outburst of improvisation; then the heartbeat resumes, to be followed by outburst, heartbeat and outburst once again. The rapid, ephemeral intervention of the voice (repeater) contains a profound message, but it is veiled, coded, brief – indeed, terse. Ultimately, it is up to the listener, caught up in the trance-like moment of the performance, to fill in the blank spaces between the words. So it is with Burning Spear’s 1978 hit single “Social Living”. The late 1970s was a time when notions of radical change were rife. Democratic socialism dominated, but Marxism of various stripes, while never gaining broad-based
popular support, competed for visibility alongside it and a variety of other “isms”, all rooted in the notion that change was necessary – indeed, inevitable. There was more than a whiff of civil war in the air and, as Bob Marley sang “Rasta don’t work for no CIA”,2 rumours of subversion circulated through the city. It was in this heady atmosphere of new ideas, new policies and the foreshadowing of their collapse that Rodden (Spear) gave voice to the notion of “social living” as “the best”. What did he mean? The word play on socialism is obvious, but is he simply alliterating, or is he trying to tweak out a subtle difference between ism and living while retaining the common element of social? He, of course, answers none of these questions, leaving us, his anxious audience, with only a terse chant and a bare proposal for further investigation.

Envisioning Caribbean Futures is an attempt to open up the space sketched by Burning Spear and to explore the horizons for different approaches to social living in Jamaica and the Caribbean in the twenty-first century. It is perhaps easier to begin with what this study is not. First, though it draws on the economics literature, it is decisively not an economics text with a series of well-drawn macro- and micro-analyses, summarizing the past and pointing to the future. Second, despite its reliance on contemporary historical narratives, it is not an exhaustive history of post–Cold War Jamaican politics, detailing institutional development, the cut and thrust of the debates and the intervention of various personalities. Third, though it contends with some of the leading Caribbean social and political theorists, it is not a philosophical treatise, seeking to comprehend recent Caribbean philosophical practice. And fourth, though it suggests possible avenues for the future, it is not a manifesto for a particular movement, nor is it tied, ultimately, to any partisan perspective.

What this book seeks to do first is respond to the paralysing assertion made more than two decades ago by Margaret Thatcher and consolidated in the neo-liberal revolution, that “there is no alternative”.3 Second, it is in sympathy with the new social movements that have evolved in the past decade which assert boldly that “another world is possible”,4 and it attempts to open the door through which glimpses of that other world might be viewed. Third, it is a methodological exercise to address two serious failings in contemporary Caribbean social research. On the one hand,
there is a failure on the part of many philosophically inclined thinkers to engage with the seemingly dirty details of political economy. On the other, there is an equally serious failure on the part of political economists to engage with contemporary theory and philosophy. Very simply, in order to understand the complexity of social life, which by its nature knows no disciplinary boundaries, social analysts must consciously strive to be interdisciplinary. Fourth, the book tries to avoid the unreflective approach of much contemporary critical analysis by beginning with the elaboration of a theoretical frame within which to suggest proposals. In much contemporary social and political research, the author’s theoretical perspective is either entirely ignored under the guise of objectivity or subsumed, frustratingly, within the body of the analysis itself. Finally, it seeks to move beyond a statement of general principles to propose specific alternatives. In doing this, my aim is to stimulate a conversation that looks beyond the horizon of policy confines, yet is not so far removed as to appear hopelessly utopian. In such a conversation, if the final consensus were to conclude that my propositions were all wrong, the exercise, provided it stimulated the proposal of new alternative futures, would still be wildly successful.

The study is divided into three long chapters and a much shorter conclusion. Chapter 1, “Explorations in New Caribbean Thought”, recognizes that beyond the classical generation of anti-colonial and immediate post-colonial thinkers there is a new cohort that is attempting to grapple with the political and intellectual implications of a post–Cold War world. The attempt here is to engage critically and respectfully with a selection of these newer contributors to Caribbean thought. Through a process of agreement and disagreement, I arrive at an approach defined as “Caribbean subaltern” that informs the direction of the rest of the study. Chapter 2, “Jamaica in a Time of Neo–Liberal Infatuation”, traces the evolution of Jamaican political economy over the past three decades. The chapter seeks to move between the local and the global to capture as accurately as possible what is described as a time of “advanced hegemonic dissolution”. I conclude with the proposal for a new Jamaican social consensus, which is developed in detail in the final chapter. Chapter 3, “Imagining the Future”, attempts, through a series of broad proposals and positionings, to sketch the outline of a possible near future for Jamaica, located within a more popular
Caribbean union. The conclusion, “Solidarity”, reintroduces some outstanding political questions in order to propose the social and political foundations on which new futures might be constructed.

*Envisioning Caribbean Futures* has been a project long in gestation. I have been playing with some of the ideas elaborated here for more than a decade, during which they have undergone many changes. The study itself began as a far more elaborate idea, exploring possible futures for the Caribbean using many more countries as case studies. However, it has turned out to be a single study largely focused on Jamaica. The density and richness of the Jamaican experience, with its long and arduous engagement with various models of structural adjustment and the intermittent though powerful popular response, has made the island a virtual laboratory for social and political investigation. It has demanded a greater degree of attention than I imagined, even as I have sought to locate its specific trajectory as intertwined with a broader global movement. Therefore, while the comparative work is a project for the future, I hope that this study will nonetheless have regional resonance. If nothing else, *Envisioning Caribbean Futures* might act as a catalyst for further imaginings, focusing on Trinidad, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Grenada and all the myriad spaces of the wider Caribbean; and these other imaginings might, in similar spirit, move a little beyond the hard, cold facts and assert, like the counter-globalization activists, that “another world is possible” or, like the indomitable Burning Spear, that “social living is the best”.
Notes


3. At the Conservative Party Women’s Conference in 1980, Thatcher said: “We have to get our production and earnings in balance. There’s no easy popularity in what we are proposing, but it is fundamentally sound. Yet I believe people accept there is no real alternative.” Margaret Thatcher, speech at Conservative Party Women’s Conference, 21 May 1980, quoted in The Oxford Dictionary of Political Quotations, ed. Antony Jay (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 361.


5. These were certainly not the failings of earlier generations of Caribbean thinkers, who moved seamlessly within and between disciplines, as, for instance, in Lloyd Best’s “Independent Thought and Caribbean Freedom”, New World Quarterly 3, no. 4 (1967): 13–35, and C.L.R. James’s Beyond a Boundary (London: Stanley Paul, 1986).