My 1982 inaugural address as president of the Caribbean Studies Association cost me the friendship of a number of my academic associates and left me with a reputation of being a “conservative,” perhaps even one of those despised “reactionaries.”¹ I understand even better now what Robert Nisbet said decades ago: in the social sciences, to be labeled a conservative is “more often to be damned than to be praised.”² This was a time when most Caribbean intellectuals were what Edward Shils called “radical progressives,” people who discard the received past in favor of the “here and now.” “Change,” said Shils, “has become coterminous with progress, innovation with improvement.”³ I quickly learned that one of the major impediments to the objective study of tradition and conservatism is precisely the fear of being “labeled” a reactionary.

But my theoretical argument on that occasion was not ideological. I was not confessing to being a conservative, much less asking my colleagues to become “conservatives” or, God forbid, “reactionaries.” I was arguing in favor of doing what most classical sociologists had done: study traditional (conservative) society in order to understand better how modernity was changing it and in turn, how tradition was affecting modernity. In other words, I was asking them to read their Edmund Burke along with their Karl Marx and their Alexis de Tocqueville along with their Vladimir Lenin. I was trying to convince them that Karl Mannheim (the father of the sociology of knowledge) was correct when he argued that patterns of conservative thought, far from becoming superfluous through modernization, tend to survive and adapt themselves to each state of social development and continue to have real social bases. As such, conservative thought is functional and useful as a guide to social action.⁴ Understanding this helps us understand that, as Robert Nisbet argues, there is a paradox in sociology which calls for as broad
and flexible a conceptual framework as possible. That paradox, he explains, results from the fact that while classical sociological theory is squarely in the “mainstream of modernism,” its essential concepts and implicit perspectives “place it much closer, generally speaking, to philosophical conservatism.”

Family, authority, tradition, the sacred, all components of Gemeinschaft or community, are primary conservative preoccupations and also the central concerns of the classics, Durkheim, Weber, Tönnies, and Simmel. They were all concerned in one fashion or another with analyzing what secular or liberal or modern trends were doing to communities everywhere. Whether we use the term liberal or modern, traditional or conservative, there can be no excuse for not studying that paradoxical ongoing interaction between the conservative and the modern in social change. If, as John Stuart Mill advises, the best way to understand the soundness of an argument is to present a counterargument, this book is my counterargument to decades of studies describing Caribbean societies as somehow radical and even revolutionary in ideological orientation.

This is made all the more necessary because of an evident incongruity in the reaction of so many of my colleagues: the fact that by 1982 it was already clear that so much of what was being discarded or ignored about the past had proven to work relatively well, and so many of the new social experiments were sputtering and in some cases even regressing. There was the case of Cuba, heroic and under siege by the United States for sure, but hardly a successful model that could or indeed should be replicated. There was Suriname under the thuggish regime of Desi Bouterse, Guyana regressing under the corrupt regime of Forbes Burnham, the Grenada revolution already showing the schisms so typical of Marxist-Leninist parties, and sadly there was the collapse of Michael Manley’s democratic socialist program in Jamaica. Above and beyond all this were the Caribbean people who—when given the freedom—were voting at the ballot box or voting with their feet heading north and telling multiple pollsters just how dissatisfied they were with many such “progressive” experiments.

In other words, much of the Caribbean was adopting a posture Michael Oakeshott termed “skeptical conservatism,” a peculiar mixture of political conservatism and radical individualism and skepticism. Oakeshott would have understood what was occurring in the region because he believed that one of the characteristics of the conservative disposition or temperament is an understanding that not all innovations are improvements and that to in-
novate without improving is indeed folly. To Oakeshott’s assertion that the innovations which will receive freely given support, and thus have a chance of succeeding, will be those which do the least harm to valued traditions. The skeptical conservative, he said, “will be suspicious of proposals for change in excess of what the situation calls for, or rulers who demand extraordinary powers in order to make great changes and whose utterances are tied to generalities like ‘the public good’ or ‘social justice.’”6 In 1982, and even more so three decades later, Oakeshott’s rationalism and clarity of thought ring true. This study aims to document the contemporary relevance and plausibility of his thinking by unraveling the conservative foundations of many Caribbean historians and thinkers regarding race, ideology, geopolitics, and social movements in the region.

Before plunging further into a theoretical discussion of the concept of modern-conservative societies, however, it is necessary to articulate and justify a geographical generalization I used then and use here which also came in for heavy criticism: my use of a geopolitical definition of the Greater Caribbean. This includes all the islands as well as the circum-Caribbean countries. How could I justify defining as the Caribbean an area so complex and then advance the very broad generalization that they share in one way or another a “modern-conservative” political culture?

First, it should be clear that I was not the first to define the region in that fashion. Several of the historians dealt with in chapters 1, 2, and 3 approach the region’s history from this perspective. In the purely academic area, Richard M. Morse used a similar geopolitical definition in a brilliant essay that should be better known, as did David Ronfeldt in a more policy-oriented but equally incisive treatise.7 That said, I was asked why I was ignoring the position of one of the foremost students of the region, Sidney Mintz. Mintz had argued in a highly influential essay, “The Caribbean as a Socio-Cultural Area,” that the Caribbean as a bloc of nations does not warrant being considered a “culture area,” if by “culture” we mean a common body of historical tradition. He prefers, he said, the concept of “societal area,” because its component societies “probably share many more social-structural features than they do cultural features.”8

Clearly, the debate between those emphasizing culture and those focusing on social structure will not be settled here. Students should be aware that that debate has a distinguished scholarly pedigree in Caribbean studies. The point is, rather, that as with any other geographical region (Africa, Latin
America, Asia), where each unit deserves to be studied individually, there is also value in an understanding of the broader continuities and similarities. Even Mintz’s concept of societal area suits our purposes well, since he speaks of a “special distinctiveness” of the Caribbean area, their “demonstrably parallel historical experiences during more than four centuries of powerful (though intermittent and whimsical) European influence.”9 It was Melville Herskovits who reminded us that the concept of culture area is a theoretical construct that does not denote a self-conscious grouping but is rather a way of focusing on the “broad lines of similarities and differences between cultures, not on the details seen by those who are too close to a culture. It has the sweep of the mural, not the delicacy of the miniature.”10 This book aims to demonstrate that in the Caribbean, these continuities and similarities result from a blending of modern and conservative features in the composition of major institutions as well as in social and behavioral dynamics.

An ideologically driven predisposition to erase a past no longer in favor might be psychologically pleasing but does not change the persistence of certain conservative foundations in social change. This then is the challenge of this book—how to present a single empirically valid coherent image of a region as complex as the Greater Caribbean and how to demonstrate that there is indeed a shared political culture in which conservative and traditional and modern traits coexist. Clearly these concepts have to be operationalized and conceptualized much more thoroughly.

Like all concepts or heuristic devices in the social sciences, the concept of modern-conservative societies which guides the discussions in this book is used to explain complex social structures and processes. We are not talking about uniformly traditional societies: those relatively static, passive, and acquiescent societies generally resistant to change.11 Modern-conservative societies are not only capable of social change; they are often prone to dramatic calls for and engagement in radical, even violent, social movements for change. The empirical questions are: what triggers such desires for change, and what tend to be their initial manifest goals? The working hypothesis of this book is that the most common trigger is of a conservative nature: a grinding sense of moral indignation brought about by perceptions of widespread discrimination, corruption, and abuse of power. This is especially the case when economic conditions deteriorate leading to perceptions of relative deprivation. This approach to understanding social and political dynamics in the modern-conservative society derives largely from the thinking
of two men generally regarded as paragons of true conservatism: Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville. True conservatism is not to be confused with the pseudo-philosophies undergirding many of the right-wing movements in the United States and Europe for the past few decades.

Any student of modern (or liberal) conservative leadership has to begin by revisiting the position of the undisputed “father” of modern British and American conservatism, Edmund Burke (1730–97). Burke, says the dean of U.S. conservative thinkers, Russell Kirk, is not only still relevant but continues to be “the touchstone” of American conservative political thought. Keep in mind that this Irish-English political philosopher and statesman’s vehement opposition to the French Revolution led even such luminaries as Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine to consider him a “reactionary.” Remember also that Karl Marx once described him as “that celebrated sophist and sycophant” who had sold out to the American colonial rebels. But Burke was not easily pigeonholed, as we will see throughout this book, but especially in chapter 2 where the Fabian thinker Gordon K. Lewis repeatedly praised his humane stances.

The point is that Burke was no ideologue; he could, and did, distinguish between one “revolution” and another and between different stages or circumstances of a revolutionary process. Even in that great counterrevolutionary tract, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), Burke refused to be ideologically fixed and dogmatic, asserting that he could not stand forward and give praise or blame to anything which related to human actions and human concerns “on a simple view of the object.” “Circumstances,” he maintained, “give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing colour and distinguishing effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind.” That is the basis on which he judged that the American rebels were no threat to Britain, while the French in their Jacobin stage were.

To apply Burke to the present situation in Cuba, for instance, one must ask whether his position vis-à-vis the early “Jacobin” Cuba, which was executing opponents after summary trials and openly exporting revolution to other countries, would be the same toward a Cuba in a different phase, a more Gironde-like Cuba that is exporting doctors, teachers, and athletic coaches. The answer has to be that Burke’s attitude and the policies advocated would probably have recognized the differences between the two phases. The basis of this conclusion is the well-established fact that Burke in his assessment
of circumstances understood the importance of nationalism in social movements. In fact, he can legitimately be called the father of the anthropological interpretation of nationalism. He spoke of the national spirit and character of a people who had to be understood and respected, and because of that, specific policies had to be designed in accordance with the “unique dispositions” of that people. Burke had a profound respect for the right of any society to dispose of its own future, so much so that when the Genoese sold Corsica to the French, he lamented that a nation had been disposed of “without its consent, like the trees on an estate.” Along with his insistence on what is today called sovereign consent, Burke opposed (except in the case of Jacobin France) the use of force and coercion. These were seldom a solution to governance since, as Burke insisted, a country is not governed if it has to be repeatedly reconquered. This held especially in the relations between the strong and the weak, which was the case of England’s relationships with Ireland, India, and the American colonies and in colonialism generally. Surely his original minority status as an Irish Roman Catholic had something to do with his advocacy for the weak, which, for instance, explains his passionate defense of the Jews of St. Eustatius, who were brutally mistreated by Adm. George Rodney in 1781. On a more general level, it was his profound understanding that colonial situations in themselves tend to engender rebellions. This led him to argue that if the powerful colonial power could not make the rebellious colonists accept the forms and modes it wished to impose on them, it was incumbent on the colonial power to change its policies. This is so, said Burke, because “if such a [colonial] government as this is universally discontented, no troops under Heaven [will] bring them to obedience.”

The fundamental lesson is that Burke was especially adamant that policymakers understand the character of the colonists and the spirit that drove them. Referring to the American rebels, he repeatedly warned that coercion would make them recalcitrant, not submissive. This sociological reality had direct relevance to policy: the “Mother Country’s” policies toward the American rebelliousness could go in one of three directions:

1. It could seek to do what Burke felt impossible: change the nature of the American character and spirit.
2. It could do what Burke believed irrational and unjust: label the American spirit “criminal” and persecute and prosecute it, that is, bring it to heel.