

C.L.R. James

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The black Trinidadian historian and writer Cyril Lionel Robert James (1901-1989) was one of the twentieth century's most remarkable Caribbean thinkers. He is perhaps best remembered as the author of the classic history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins* (1938), which analysed the only successful mass slave revolt in human history, the transformation of colonized slave society of Saint-Domingue into the world's first independent black republic outside of Africa from 1791-1804. In his native Trinidad, James also analysed calypso and Carnival, helped pioneer the West Indian novel with *Minty Alley* (1936), campaigned for "West Indian self-government", wrote the first and still only biography of the pioneering leader of the Trinidad Workingmen's Association, *The Life of Captain Cipriani* (1932). In Britain, James perhaps most notably became a professional sports writer, writing for what is now the *Guardian*, and wrote the classic social history of West Indian cricket, *Beyond a Boundary* (1963). Yet James's life and work ranged far beyond the boundaries of the Caribbean, and indeed he spent most of his life outside the Caribbean itself, with long notable sojourns in first Britain from 1932-38 and then America from 1938-53, and spent the last decade of his life in the 1980s in Brixton in London, in a flat above the offices of the Race Today Collective.¹

Critically, James was also one of the twentieth century's most cultured anti-Stalinist revolutionary Marxist theorists.² As David Widgery once memorably put it, James combined "the historical eloquence of E.P. Thompson, the cricketing connoisseurship of John Arlott, the revolutionary ardour of Tony Cliff and the preciousness of John Berger, all mixed up with a wit and a way with paradox which is entirely West Indian" (Widgery 1989, 122). During the Great Depression of the early 1930s - the greatest crisis of capitalism in its history - James, politically radicalising as a young writer amidst mass unemployment and the rise of fascism, like many young literary intellectuals of his generation would move from liberal humanism to revolutionary socialism. Unlike many Marxists of his generation however, James did not join the international Communist movement but instead the tiny international Trotskyist movement. Soon after first joining up with organised Trotskyists in Britain in 1934, James wrote the pioneering study *World Revolution, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (1937), was elected onto the International Executive Committee of the Fourth International at its founding conference in 1938 and met Leon Trotsky himself in Coyoacán, Mexico in 1939 to discuss the strategy and tactics of black liberation. At first in and then emerging out of the official Trotskyist movement while in the United States, as his authorised biographer Paul Buhle once put it, James developed into "one of the few truly creative Marxists from the 1930s to the 1950s, perhaps alone in his masterful synthesis of world history, philosophy, government, mass life and popular culture" (Buhle 1986, 81).

James remained a lifelong Marxist and humanist, and in interviews towards the end of his life would assert that his "greatest contributions" had been "to clarify and extend the heritage of Marx and Lenin" and "to explain and expand the idea of what constitutes the new society" (James 1985, 164). When asked "what would you most like to be remembered for" in an interview in 1980, James himself was quite explicit and unequivocal.

¹ *Race Today* was edited by James's great-nephew Darcus Howe.

² For more on James's life and work, see for example Bogue 1997; Buhle, 1993; Høgsbjerg 2014; Rosengarten, 2008; Smith 2010; Worcester 1996.

The contributions I have made to the Marxist movement are the things that matter most to me. And those contributions have been political, in various ways; they have been literary: the book [on] *Moby Dick* [*Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* (1953)] is a study of the Marxist approach to literature. All of my studies on the Black question are [Marxist] in reality ... on the whole, I like to think of myself as a Marxist who has made serious contributions to Marxism in various fields. I want to be considered one of the important Marxists (Dance 1992, 119).

Theorising Colonial Liberation

Born a black colonial subject in the West Indies, James would not only witness the decline and fall of the British Empire over the course of his long life, but as a leading anti-colonialist activist would make a critical contribution to the process. In Britain during the 1930s he would evolve into a militant Pan-Africanist, working alongside figures like George Padmore, his boyhood friend from Trinidad and a former leading organiser in the Communist International, the Jamaican Amy Ashwood Garvey, first wife of Marcus Garvey, and the Kenyan nationalist Jomo Kenyatta in helping form and lead new organisations like the International African Friends of Ethiopia and the International African Service Bureau. James edited publications like *Africa and the World* and *International African Opinion* and wrote the path-breaking *A History of Negro Revolt* (1938). Alongside his political campaigning, since arriving in Britain, James had also made time to research the Haitian Revolution – regularly visiting archives in Paris - and in 1934 he had turned his research into a remarkable anti-imperialist play focusing on Haiti’s revolutionary leader, *Toussaint Louverture: The story of the only successful slave revolt in history*. This was staged at London’s Westminster Theatre in 1936, with Paul Robeson starring in the title role. From James’s discussions as a socialist activist with working-class audiences, he quickly learnt that, as he put it in early 1936, “British Imperialism does not govern only the colonies in its own interests ... it governs the British people in its own interests also” (James 1992, 66). As a Marxist in the Pan-Africanist movement, James worked to try to bring the growing resistance against British colonial rule across the Africa and the Caribbean together with the power of the industrial working class in the imperial metropolis of Britain.

In his masterful history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, James revolutionized understanding of not only Atlantic slavery and abolition but also race and empire more generally.³ James stressed for the first time how race and class were intrinsically intertwined in colonial Saint-Domingue, and so class struggle was central to the tumultuous upheaval that was to be so critical to the abolition of the entire Atlantic slave trade. “The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental” (James 2001, 230). Indeed, “had the monarchists been white, the bourgeoisie brown, and the masses of France black, the French Revolution would have gone down in history as a race war. But although they were all white in France they fought just the same” (James 2001, 104) In a more sophisticated analysis of the relationship between capitalist accumulation and the barbarism of colonial slavery than what was soon to be advanced by his one-time student in Trinidad, Eric Williams, in *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), James noted that the plantations and the slave ships were fundamentally modern capitalist institutions in themselves, things that did not just enrich but had been themselves formed by “the French bourgeoisie” and “the British bourgeoisie.” He described the plantations as “huge sugar-factories” and the slaves as a

³ For more on *The Black Jacobins*, see Fordick and Høgsbjerg, eds. 2017.

proto-proletariat, indeed, “closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time,” and when they rose as “revolutionary laborers” and set fire to the plantations, he compared them to “the Luddite wreckers” (James 2001, 69, 71, 73)

Yet James’s critical stress on black agency - making the central plot of his “grand narrative” the dramatic transformation in consciousness and confidence of the Haitian masses - was combined with a masterful grasp of the totality of social relations in which they acted. His reading of the Marxist classics, above all Trotsky’s masterful *History of the Russian Revolution* (1930), saw James make a pioneering and outstanding application to the colonial Caribbean of the historical law of uneven but combined development of capitalism and the corresponding theory of permanent revolution. As Trotsky had noted in his *History*, the peculiarities resulting from the “backwardness” of Russian historical development had explained the “enigma” that “a backward country was the *first* to place the proletariat in power”:

Moreover, in Russia the proletariat did not arise gradually through the ages, carrying with itself the burden of the past as in England, but in leaps involving sharp changes of environment, ties, relations, and a sharp break with the past. It is just this fact—combined with the concentrated oppressions of czarism—that made the Russian workers hospitable to the boldest conclusions of revolutionary thought—just as the backward industries were hospitable to the last word in capitalist organization (Trotsky 1977, 19-20, 33).

Trotsky would always stress that “what characterises Bolshevism on the national question is that in its attitude towards oppressed nations, even the most backward, it considers them not only the object but also the subject of politics,” (Trotsky 1975, 180) and Trotsky had subjected the Chinese Revolution of 1925-27 to detailed analysis. Yet during the 1930s, as Michael Löwy has noted, the absence of “further major upheavals on an equivalent scale in the colonial world during Trotsky’s lifetime” probably explains why Trotsky himself “never felt the political exigency to produce a further theorization of permanent revolution in the colonial theatre” (Löwy 1981, 86). James’s greatest achievement in *The Black Jacobins* was to make just such a further theorisation, demonstrating that just as “the law of uneven but combined development” meant the enslaved laborers of Saint-Domingue, suffering under the “concentrated oppressions” of slavery, were soon to be “hospitable to the boldest conclusions of revolutionary thought” radiating from the Jacobins in revolutionary Paris, so the Marxist theory of permanent revolution illuminated not just anticolonial struggles in the age of socialist revolution but also the antislavery liberation struggle in the age of “bourgeois-democratic” revolution. The bold Haitian rebels were, James insisted, “revolutionaries through and through . . . own brothers of the Cordeliers in Paris and the Vyborg workers in Petrograd” (James 2001, 224).

Throughout his study of the Haitian Revolution, James ably demonstrated that it was not simply an inspiring struggle on a tiny island on the periphery of the world system, but was inextricably intertwined with the great French Revolution throughout, pushing the revolutionary process forward in the metropole and investing notions of human rights with new meanings and universal significance. In writing about the Haitian Revolution, he rewrote the history of the French Revolution as well, challenging much conventional thinking outside of the Caribbean – including within the classical Marxist tradition up to that point. In *The Black Jacobins*, James fused classical and Marxist scholarship to resurrect a vivid panorama of the Haitian Revolution, stressing that it was not simply the greatest event in the history of the West Indies but took its place alongside the English Civil War, the American War of Independence, and the French Revolution as one of the great world-historical revolutions in

its own right, a revolution that had forever transformed the world and laid the foundation for the continuing struggle for universal human rights.

The Black Jacobins established James as one of the most eloquent and critical anti-imperialist figures of the twentieth century. It is easier, James noted at one point in the book, “to find decency, gratitude, justice, and humanity in a cage of starving tigers than in the councils of imperialism” (James 2001, 229). James’s thrilling and dramatic demonstration of how “the transformation of slaves, trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organise themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day” represented “one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement”, was written to ideologically arm colonial liberation struggles (James 2001, xviii). At the close, James noted “imperialism vaunts its exploitation of the wealth of Africa for the benefit of civilization. In reality, from the very nature of its system of production for profit it strangles the real wealth of the continent – the creative capacity of the African people.” Yet “the blacks of Africa are more advanced, nearer ready than were the slaves of San Domingo ... the imperialists envisage an eternity of African exploitation: the African is backward, ignorant ... they dream dreams” (James 2001, 303-304).

James’s own lifelong anti-colonialism was also to be vindicated with the victories of national independence movements across Africa and the Caribbean after the Second World War, not least in Ghana under the leadership of Padmore’s protégé Kwame Nkrumah and Trinidad itself, with the rise to power of the People’s National Movement (PNM) led by Eric Williams. Yet, James now seemed to shift away from classical Leninist anti-imperialist strategy and tactics to accommodate to the new situation of decolonisation – decolonisation without socialist revolution admittedly being something Lenin had not foreseen as a possibility in his study *Imperialism*. In *World Revolution*, James had approvingly quoted Lenin when he “called for ‘determined war’ against the attempt of all those quasi-Communist revolutionists to cloak the liberation movement in the backward countries with a Communist garb” (James 1937, 234). Yet now amidst decolonisation, James refused to wage any such “determined war” and indeed showed a disastrous misjudgement of many autocratic leaders of “Pan-African Socialism”, cloaking the likes of Nkrumah in a communist garb, only then to have bitterly to break from those he had previously declared anti-capitalist revolutionaries on a par with Lenin.

Aside from playing a leading role in achieving a significant symbolic victory in the appointment of Frank Worrell as the first black captain of the West Indian cricket team, James’s return to Trinidad in 1958 to play his part in the movement towards independence was not a political success for him personally. As a supporter of Williams, James became secretary of the Federal Labour Party, the governing party of the embryonic West Indies Federation, and took on editing the PNM weekly paper *The Nation*. By 1960 however, as James detailed in his book *Party Politics in the West Indies* (1962) he had been forced to break with Williams as a result of the break-up of the West Indies Federation, and the latter’s agreement to the retention of a US naval base at Chaguaramas and more general abandonment of non-alignment in favour of support for America in the context of the Cold War. In 1960, James gave a lecture series in Trinidad, published under the title *Modern Politics* (1960), which seem to reveal a return to a more classical Marxist understanding of imperialism as a system after the dashing of his high hopes in Third World nationalist movements. “The passing of colonialism ... is a sign of the weakness of the capitalist bourgeois state ... nevertheless there is no question about it: the basic opposition to imperialism must come from the proletariat of the advanced countries” (James 1973, 90).

Theorising Black Liberation

In 1938, James left Britain to go on a speaking tour for the American Trotskyist movement, and ended up staying in America for the next fifteen years. In 1939, James spent a week with Leon Trotsky himself in **Coyoacán**, Mexico City in order to discuss how Marxists might convincingly answer “the Negro question,” the question posed by the massive systematic racism suffered by black people in America. Some of the specific campaigning ideas suggested at this meeting were indeed to be taken up in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s. James for example suggested that racial “discrimination in restaurants should be fought by a campaign. A number of Negroes in any are go into a restaurant all together, ordering for instance some coffee, and refuse to come out until they are served. It would be possible to sit there for a whole day in a very orderly manner and throw upon the police the necessity of removing these Negroes”. Trotsky agreed, adding that “Yes, and give it an even more militant character. There could be a picket line outside to attract attention and explain something of what is going on” (Breitman 1980, 40, 46). In 1948, James summarised his position, which built on Lenin’s writings on national and colonial liberation, in “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States”, a speech given at that years’ convention of the American Socialist Workers’ Party in support of the resolution “Negro liberation through revolutionary socialism” (of which James himself had been a central author):

We say, number one, that the Negro struggle, the independent Negro struggle, has a vitality and a validity of its own; that it has deep historic roots in the past of America and in present struggles; it has an organic political perspective, along which it is traveling, to one degree or another, and everything shows that at the present time it is traveling with great speed and vigor.

We say, number two, that this independent Negro movement is able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation, despite the fact that it is waged under the banner of democratic rights, and is not led necessarily either by the organized labor movement or the Marxist party.

We say, number three, and this is the most important, that it is able to exercise a powerful influence upon the revolutionary proletariat, that it has got a great contribution to make to the development of the proletariat in the United States, and that it is in itself a constituent part of the struggle for socialism (James 1996, 139).

James’s writings on black liberation in the United States would later influence important groups such as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit in the late 1960s. Though stressing black self-organisation, James never abandoned fighting for multi-racial working class unity, championing international socialism and workers’ power as the key to universal emancipation. In his “Eightieth Birthday Lectures”, organised by the Race Today Collective in 1981, James was challenged by a black nationalist for having “a blind spot about the racism of the white working class” in British society. James responded,

it would be very strange if there wasn’t some racism in the white working class because in any society the ideas that are dominant in the ruling class will find a reflection in the elements of those who work. But while you can accuse me of having a blind spot in regard to the racism of the white working class, I would say you have a much blinder spot in regard to the progressive, revolutionary element of the British working class...that is a much more powerful element (Busby and Howe eds. 1984, 61)

Theorising State Capitalism and World Revolution

After Trotsky's murder in 1940, James under the pseudonym "J.R. Johnson" alongside Raya Dunayevskaya ("Freddie Forest") and Grace Lee Boggs, formed the "Johnson-Forest Tendency" within American Trotskyism in order to attempt to deal with the profound crisis the movement was now thrown into. The tendency made a highly original attempt to, as James wrote in *Notes on Dialectics* (1948) make a "leap from the heights of Leninism" (James 1980, 150) through breaking with "orthodox Trotskyism" and returning to the writings of Hegel, Marx and Lenin in order to face up to the new realities after the Second World War world. James's refusal to treat Trotsky's writings of the late 1930s as sacrosanct but instead attempt theoretically to develop Marxist theory so it could make sense of new realities has been concisely, critically analysed elsewhere.⁴ The "Johnson-Forest Tendency" were among the very first Marxists to incorporate the humanism of Marx's 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* into their Marxism, publishing the first English translations from them in 1947. They also aimed to "Americanize" Marxism and Bolshevism, and James's wide-ranging writings on culture and society in this vein included *American Civilization* (1949-1950) and *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* (1953) – a fascinating study of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.

It should be registered briefly however that their development of the theory of state capitalism – outlined in works like *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (1950) - to understand the Stalinist regimes enabled the "Johnson-Forest Tendency", like the French group "Socialisme Ou Barbarie" around Cornelius Castoriadis and the Socialist Review Group around Tony Cliff in Britain to preserve an orientation around Marx's central theoretical insight that the emancipation of the working class would be the conquest of the working class itself. As James and his co-thinkers put it in 1950, Stalinist Russia represented a "desperate attempt under the guise of 'socialism' and 'planned economy' to reorganise the means of production without releasing the proletariat from wage slavery" (James, Dunayevskaya and Boggs 1986, 7).⁵ While both Stalinists and "orthodox Trotskyists" held on to the notion that state ownership of the means of production meant the Stalinist regimes were "socialist", those Marxists like James who held to a theory of state capitalism were free to champion the struggles of workers under Stalinist tyranny fighting back against "their" states. The "Johnson-Forest Tendency" analysed more global and systematic tendencies towards "state capitalism" and bureaucracy in the West as well during the mid-twentieth century in works like *The American Worker* (1947) and *The Invading Socialist Society* (1947), and so helped to restore to Marxism the importance of viewing society "from below", from the standpoint of the working class at the point of production.

The "Johnson Forest Tendency" (again like the Socialist Review Group and "Socialisme ou Barbarie") also made a theoretical break from the ultimately elitist Stalinist and "orthodox Trotskyist" theory of the revolutionary party. This tended to arrogantly declare itself the solution to the "crisis of revolutionary leadership" and then dismiss as "backward" the vast majority of the working class for not suddenly rallying to its banner. Yet, unlike Cliff's Socialist Review Group, the "Johnson-Forest Tendency" (and for that matter "Socialisme ou Barbarie") also steadily abandoned the rich Leninist and Bolshevik legacy of ideas on revolutionary organisation. Though maintaining the need for some sort of revolutionary organisation, the group now celebrated what James called "free creative activity" and "disciplined spontaneity" (James 1980, 118), the self-activity of the working

⁴ For more discussions of James's mature Marxism, see for example Callinicos, 1990; Le Blanc, 2000; Høgsbjerg, 2006.

⁵ For more on James's theory of state capitalism, see Phelps, 2006.

class itself, autonomous of official political parties and trade union bureaucracies, as if these struggles in themselves could overcome what the leaders of the Johnson-Forest Tendency called the “crisis of the self-mobilisation of the proletariat” (James, Dunayevskaya and Boggs 1986, 58-59).⁶

In 1937, James had pointed out that “the pathetic faith the average worker has in the leaders of the organisations he has created is one of the chief supports of the capitalist system” (James 1937, 171). Yet, despite the fact that the post-war economic boom meant the grip of reformism over the Western working class movement grew stronger than ever as the system was able to deliver meaningful “reforms”, James - inspired by first the rise of the CIO union in America and the Shop Stewards Movement in England and then the rebirth of Workers’ Councils in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 - now wrote instead as if reformist ideas and organisations were dead or dying. James nonetheless lived to see the eruption of Solidarity in Poland in 1980-81, and, just before his passing, the opening scenes of the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe. Such upheavals for James served not only as a vindication of his revolutionary democratic perspective of “socialism from below”, but also a reminder of an elementary, essential truth – one James did so much to powerfully elucidate in all his work – that liberation from oppression and exploitation can only come from below, from the mass movements and class struggles of the oppressed and exploited themselves.

⁶ For more discussion of this, and a spirited defence of James’s theory of the party, see Glaberman, ed. 1999.

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