

The Red and the Black: C.L.R. James and the historical idea of world revolution

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Abstract

This paper seeks to situate the idea and intellectual narrative of “world revolution” in its modern historical context, tracing it back to the age of democratic revolution in the late eighteenth century, and then developed by great revolutionary thinkers like Marx and Engels. It examines the possible limitations of Marx and Engels’s vision of world revolution with respect to the Third World as a result of their European intellectual formation in the tradition of the Enlightenment, and examines the charge of “Eurocentrism” advanced by post-colonialist theorists among others against classical Marxism. It then explores the inspiration of the Russian Revolution for those fighting racism and imperialism, and how black radicals brought their revolutionary narratives of black liberation into communist narratives for the first time in its aftermath. The essay then discusses C.L.R. James’s pioneering 1937 history of the Comintern, *World Revolution*, among other things a theoretical intervention into the debates raging among socialist black radicals during the 1930s, and critically examines the charge of “Eurocentrism” often levelled at *World Revolution*.

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The idea of “world revolution” is, historically speaking, a comparatively modern one, originating with that great “citizen of the world” Thomas Paine, who on November 4, 1791, in London gave a toast to “The Revolution of the World.”¹ Paine’s toast came fittingly amid perhaps one of the most remarkable moments of internationalism in the age of bourgeois-democratic revolution, when in the aftermath of the great French Revolution of 1789 - itself inspired by the American Revolution of 1776 - black enslaved people in the prized French Caribbean slave colony of Saint-Domingue began their own uprising in August 1791. This insurrection signalled the start of the Haitian Revolution, the only mass successful slave revolt in world history under the inspiring leadership of Toussaint Louverture. In 1804, the new society of Haiti became one of the very first postcolonial nations, the first independent black republic outside of Africa and a place where slavery was forever abolished.² Within just three years of the August 1791 insurrection the French National Convention – under the control of the Jacobins – voted on 4 February 1794 (16 Pluviôse an II) to abolish slavery across the French empire. The socialist tradition of internationalism might then be dated from the moment the first modern socialist, the French revolutionary Gracchus Babeuf, representing the embryonic working class emerging in France during the 1790s, hailed what he called “this benevolent decree which has broken the odious chains of our brothers the blacks”.³ Later the same year in Britain a mass meeting was organised by working class radicals in Sheffield in April 1794 which voted unanimously against the slave trade and for “a total Emancipation of the Negro Slaves”, for “wishing to be rid of the weight of oppression under which *we* groan, we are induced to compassionate those who groan also”.⁴

The London Corresponding Society had previously showed support for black abolitionists like Olaudah Equiano during the 1790s, and the Sheffield rally showed sections of the emerging modern working class in Britain taking their place at the very forefront of metropolitan abolitionism.

The young Karl Marx and Frederick Engels were alive during the next great moment of international revolution, when democratic revolution in France in 1830 once again inspired young radicals across Europe, and even the rulers of the British state felt threatened enough by the potential for revolution from below in this period to enact the Great Reform Act of 1832. In 1847, Marx and Engels would become members of the Communist League, an organization for which they famously penned their classic *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. The old motto of the Communist League was changed from “All Men are Brothers” to “Proletarians of all Countries, Unite!”⁵ *The Communist Manifesto* was published just before the outbreak of the next great wave of international democratic revolutions that broke out across Europe in 1848, a struggle into which Marx and Engels threw themselves before ultimately being forced into exile in Britain amid the state repression that accompanied the victory of counterrevolutionary forces. In 1850, generalizing from the historic experience of 1848 as a revolutionary process across Europe, particularly the June 1848 rising of workers in Paris, which so shocked and terrified once-revolutionary French middle-class radicals, Marx and Engels distilled an important new lesson regarding the necessity for independent working-class politics and political organization in the struggle for socialism and democracy.

This was exemplified in the formation of the International Working Men’s Association (IWMA) - the “First International” - in 1864, in which Marx himself played a critical role. At the close of his “inaugural address” to the IWMA, Marx praised recent concrete examples of workers’ internationalism, including “the heroic resistance” by “the working classes of England” to the “criminal folly” of their rulers, whose natural sympathies

inclined them toward intervening on the side of the slave-owning South during the American Civil War. Despite the fact that Lancashire cotton textile workers might have materially benefited in the short term from lining up behind the cotton textile “lords of capital” on this question, instead of supporting British imperialism they waged a tremendous mass agitation in the early 1860s in support of the North, which, according to Marx, “saved the rest of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic.” Marx stressed the importance of workers challenging the “criminal designs” of their own capitalist class “playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people’s blood and treasure.”⁶ Reiterating his opposition to racism and slavery in the United States, Marx famously noted in *Capital* (1867) that “Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded”.⁷

Yet though Marx and Engels were the greatest theorists in the nineteenth century of the idea of “world revolution”, there has long been a lively debate about the possible limitations of their vision with respect to the Third World, with the charge of “Eurocentrism” advanced by post-colonialist theorists among others. So Walter D. Mignolo has argued that Marx “misses the colonial mechanism of power underlying the system he critiques”.⁸ This essay will not engage with this debate with respect to Marx and Engels themselves, only to note the important and compelling work by scholars such as August Nimtz and Kevin B. Anderson outlining their devastating critiques of what Marx in 1853 writing on British rule in India called “the inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilisation” and support for various national liberation movements.⁹ After the British colonial regime’s brutal repression of the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865 led by Paul Bogle in Jamaica, Marx condemned “the Jamaican butcheries” which exposed “English hypocrisy”, remarking to Engels that “the Jamaican affair is typical of the meanness of ‘true Englishmen.’”¹⁰ Engels responded noting that “each

successive mail brings ever more startling news of the Jamaica infamies. The letters of English officers about their heroic exploits against unarmed Niggers are priceless. The spirit of the British army has at last emerged unblushingly. 'The soldiers enjoy it'. Even the *Manchester Guardian* has been compelled to come out against the officials in Jamaica..."¹¹

After the First International effectively succumbed to factionalism after the repression of the Paris Commune of 1871, the Second International was formed in Paris in July 1889 (the centenary of the outbreak of the French Revolution). Even though the late nineteenth century was a profoundly important moment of "globalisation", it was also the high age of European colonialism, and amidst the European powers "Scramble for Africa" it is evident that a "Eurocentric" mindset now came to the fore among at least some sections of the European socialist movement, though there was always a counter-veiling anti-imperialist tendency within the Second International as well.¹² Perhaps the most notable example of the contradictions of the Second International might be seen at the Stuttgart Congress of 1907, which saw a heated debate on the pros and cons of a "socialist" colonial policy. As John Riddell notes,

As the 884 congress delegates from 25 countries began their work, the International's principles were challenged from within. A majority of the congress's Commission on Colonialism asked the congress not to 'reject in principle every colonial policy' as colonization 'could be a force for civilization.'

Defenders of this resolution claimed that Europe needed colonial possessions for prosperity. When German Marxist Karl Kautsky proposed that 'backward peoples' be approached in a 'friendly manner', with an offer of tools and assistance, he was mocked by Netherlands delegate Hendrick Van Kol, speaking for the commission majority.

‘They will kill us or even eat us,’ Van Kol said. ‘Therefore we must go there with weapons in hand, even if Kautsky calls that imperialism.’

After heated debate, the congress rejected this racist position, resolving instead that ‘the civilizing mission that capitalist society claims to serve is no more than a veil for its lust for conquest and exploitation.’ But the close vote (127 to 108) showed that imperialism was, in Lenin’s words, ‘infecting the proletariat with colonial chauvinism.’¹³

Ten years on, the Russian Revolution of 1917 led by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, put “world revolution” back on the agenda, leading to the formation of the Third (Communist) International in 1919 to replace the Second International, which had so miserably all but collapsed with the outbreak of the First World War. Critically, the Russian Revolution struck powerful blows against racism and imperialism on both a practical and theoretical level – and in fact the likes of Lenin and Trotsky and many other leading Bolsheviks were actually remarkably sophisticated and profound “post-colonial” thinkers in many ways.

As Wilfred Domingo, a Jamaican socialist wrote in *The Messenger* in July 1919, “Socialism the Negro’s Hope”,

The foremost exponents of Socialism ... are characterised by the broadness of their vision towards all oppressed humanity. It was the Socialist Vandeveldt of Belgium, who protested against the Congo atrocities practiced upon Negroes; it was the late Keir Hardie and Philip Snowden of England, who condemned British rule in Egypt ... today it is the revolutionary Socialist, Lenin, who analysed the infamous League of Nations and exposed its true character; it is he as leader of the Communist Congress

at Moscow, who sent out the proclamation: “Slaves of the colonies in Africa and Asia! The hour of the proletarian dictatorship will be the hour of your release!”¹⁴

With Lenin’s theory of imperialism developed during the Great War and the founding of the Communist International in 1919 a clear break with any notion of “Eurocentrism” was now established, and as John Molyneux notes, national liberation movements in the colonies were now seen as of central strategic importance.¹⁵

The first Marxist to recognise the significance of Third World national liberation movements was Lenin. His analysis of imperialism demonstrated the ‘colonial and financial enslavement of the vast majority of the world’s population by an insignificant minority of the richest and advanced capitalist countries’ and showed that this enslavement would inevitably provoke a wave of revolts and wars of liberation. What Lenin envisaged was a world alliance between the proletarian revolution, principally in the west, and the national liberation movements, principally in the east, to crush imperialism in a pincer movement. He insisted therefore that it was of the utmost importance for Communists to support these nationalist movements, especially in struggles against their ‘own’ imperialism.¹⁶

Molyneux perhaps overstates the centrality of Lenin himself to this process, and of course a number of other people played a role in developing a non-Eurocentric strategy for the Comintern – including the young Ho Chi Minh, Hadj-Ali Abdelkader, Lamine Senghor, M.N. Roy as well as figures like Zinoviev.¹⁷ Leon 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.”¹⁸ As Timothy Brennan has suggested, the Russian Revolution “created a full-blown *culture* of anti-imperialism for the first time ... the organisational Marxism of the Third International” prompted “a reconsideration of the colonial question, and provided a novel, more radical, formulation of it ... cultural Bolshevism and the larger network of fellow travellers it spawned ... made possible the early twentieth-century sensitivities towards colonial oppression, distinct forms of peripheral cultural value, social theories of uneven and combined development, and many of the other preoccupations (often called by other names) that inform and substantiate what we today call postcolonial studies”.¹⁹ For Brennan, we should not be surprised at the organisation in 1920 of the First Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku, with the slogan “Workers of the world and oppressed peoples unite!” “the first non-Western congress with the explicit purpose of denouncing Western imperial expansion, and of uniting peoples of vastly different languages and religious affinities”, for the Russian Revolution itself, he insists, “to put it plainly, was an anticolonial revolution; its sponsorship of anticolonial rhetoric and practice was self-definitional”.²⁰

Whether we wish to follow Brennan in declaring the Russian Revolution itself “an anticolonial revolution” or not, its influence on a generation of radical black colonial subjects of the British and French empires for example was manifest and undeniable – inspiring many to not only identify with revolutionary politics, but bring their own histories of struggle for black liberation into established Marxist narratives of revolutionary history in an unprecedented matter. For example, with respect to the Caribbean, the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804 – the only successful slave revolt in history that created one of the world’s first postcolonial nations and part of the world-historic age of “bourgeois-democratic” revolution - now begins to be registered in Communist literature and discourse in a way it had never been adequately before. Marx had mentioned “the insurgent Negroes of Haiti” briefly in passing as part of his relatively obscure critique of Max Stirner, in the third part of *The German*

Ideology (1845).²¹ Marx also noted that Polish troops were sent by Napoleon to try and crush the Haitian Revolution in 1802, writing that “threatened by the fire of artillery, they were embarked at Genoa and Livorno to find their graves in St. Domingo”, though he did not register how some Polish troops (and for that matter some German troops too) defected across to join the black army fighting for independence – earning the undying respect and gratitude of Dessalines in the process.²² Cyril V Briggs, a black Caribbean activist born in colonial Nevis became active in socialist politics in the United States, later recalling how “my interest in Communism was inspired by the national policy of the Russian Bolsheviks and the anti-imperialist orientation of the Soviet State birthed by the October Revolution”.²³ Briggs was part of the new African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) in the United States - an organisation of up to 8,000 members at its height – which coalesced in 1919 in particular in Harlem around a number of impressive Caribbean intellectuals inspired by the blows the Russian Revolution had struck against racism and imperialism, and critical of the failings of the Socialist Party of America to take race and black self-organisation seriously. Briggs and many ABB members later joined the Communist Party in the United States, and as Briggs now wrote in their publication *The Communist* in 1929, Toussaint Louverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution, “takes his place with the revolutionary heroes and martyrs of the world proletariat ... to the black and white revolutionary workers belong the tradition of Toussaint ‘L’Ouverture. We must see to it that his memory is not wrapped in spices in the vaults of the bourgeoisie but is kept green and fresh as a tradition of struggle and an inspiration for the present struggle against the master class”.²⁴

One high point in the conjuncture between black radicalism and Bolshevism came in 1922 at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, which was not just addressed by the Jamaican poet and socialist Claude McKay, but also passed a resolution on “the black question” on 30 November 1922. This hailed the rising black resistance to the attacks of their

exploiters and called for the organization of an international black movement in Africa and across the western hemisphere, for “the black question has become an essential part of the world revolution”.²⁵

The Red and the Black International

The time has come for Negro youth, students and workers ... to take a more definite and active interest in world problems ... we have seen our brothers massacred on foreign battlefields in defence of the very imperialist social order that today crushes them to earth ... let us join with the masses of the rising colonial peoples and militant class conscious workers to struggle for the establishment of a free and equitable world order. The New Negro has to realise that the salvation and emancipation of any oppressed group can only be achieved by those who in the face of great odds have the courage to raise the standard of revolt. For he who dares to be free, must himself strike the first blow.

These fiery words on the tasks of the “New Negro” amidst the Harlem Renaissance came from Malcolm Evan Meredith Nurse, a young black Trinidadian Communist now living in the United States and writing under the pseudonym “George Padmore” in 1928 for the *Negro Champion*, paper of the American Negro Labour Congress. As Leslie James has noted in her recent work *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below*, “George Padmore was one key political organiser in what I want to call an anti-colonial ideological laboratory that has become of increasing interest to scholars in the last decade”.²⁶ Padmore’s talents as an organiser and writer meant he was soon appointed head of the Red International of Labour

Union's International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers , and from 1929 to 1933 he was a leading agitator for colonial revolution, travelling widely and residing for periods in Moscow, Hamburg, Vienna, London and Paris. As well as editing the *Negro Worker* (where he also praised Toussaint Louverture in the context of the United States occupation of Haiti), Padmore wrote prolifically, and his booklet *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers* (1931) was particularly influential.

Minkah Makalani in his 2011 book *In the Cause of Freedom* aims to “encapsulate the intellectual and political complexities of interwar radical black internationalism ... how the motivations, agendas, and structures of radical black internationalism took form within black social movements and then created room in organised Marxism for the emergence of a black international. Black radicals recognised both the immense possibilities in international communism and its extreme limitations. Although contemporaneous movements such as Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and W.E.B. Du Bois's Pan-African Congresses held out similar possibilities for an international field of struggle, the Comintern offered a structure purportedly able to bring oppressed people in Asia, Africa, Europe and the United States into a single movement”.²⁷ Makalani then aims to show how early twentieth century black radicals with “their attention to race and their insistence on the centrality of anticolonial liberation to a socialist future” soon challenged the limitations of the “organised Marxism” they encountered “that continued to center on a modern Europe” with “a European proletariat bring liberation to Africa and Asia” and so soon showed their “willingness to move outside international communism and the white Left more generally”.²⁸

George Padmore in a sense is one of the paradigmatic figures who made such a shift, and like many other leading black anticolonial activists in the Communist International like Garan Kouyaté from the French Sudan (now Mali) resigned his posts from the Communist International in 1933, and instead Padmore helped build independent Pan-Africanist

organisations like the International African Friends of Ethiopia and the International African Service Bureau in Britain, never again joining another socialist organisation though he retained much of his Marxist framework and worked closely with the what Makalani problematically calls the “white Left” in the form of the Independent Labour Party in Britain. However, the question of why so many black radicals were willing to make such a shift arguably had nothing to do with what Makalani calls an inherently “Eurocentric diffusionist strain of Marxism” deriving from Marx, Engels and Lenin.²⁹ Rather it was related to a very specific conjuncture – the turn of the Comintern towards the “Popular Front” after Hitler’s seizure of power in 1933 and the related side-lining of anti-colonialism by Communists in order to pressure the British and French Empires to make a military alliance with the Soviet Union, which included the abandonment of Ethiopia by the Soviet Union in 1935 when the new ruling Stalinist bureaucracy put their own national interests first and sold oil to help Fascist Italy’s war machine. All this posed the question point black – did “Bolshevism” mean loyalty to the current leadership of the Soviet Union and Communist International or fidelity to the classical Marxist and Leninist principles of anti-imperialism and internationalism?

Enter C.L.R. James

Now we come to the work *World Revolution, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (1937) by the black Trinidadian Trotskyist C.L.R. James – a boyhood friend and compatriot of George Padmore – which was written by James in part to help try and provide a clear explicit theoretical explanation of the evolution of the Communist International amidst this wider intellectual turmoil among black radicals. *World Revolution* was James’s first major work as a Marxist and the work which indeed made his name as an important Marxist theorist, though he would later achieve perhaps greater fame

for his masterful history of the Haitian Revolution which came out the following year, *The Black Jacobins* (1938).³⁰

James himself became a Marxist in the period after arriving from Trinidad to Britain in 1932 in the midst of the Great Depression, not least as he visited France for research in the winter of 1933 and spring of 1934 and saw an attempt by the far-right to take power in early 1934 in the aftermath of Hitler's victory the year before only blocked by a mass strike of workers in Paris. "I had not been in Europe two years before I came to the conclusion that European civilisation as it then existed was doomed", James later recalled of his early experience of a continent still scarred irrevocably by the horrors of the Great War, and then engulfed by the Great Depression and the rise of fascism.³¹

Critical to the peculiarities of James's turn to Marxism – in itself a turn common to many other intellectuals in this period of capitalist crisis - was his reading of Leon Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, which not only was a masterful account of the revolution itself but also brilliantly outlined the Marxist theory of permanent revolution which Trotsky himself had done so much to develop in opposition to the dominant evolutionist orthodoxy of the Second International, based initially on the experience of how the tiny working class in backward Tsarist Russia had created the world's first workers' council or "Soviet" during the 1905 Revolution.³² Though Trotsky's development of the theory had first been advanced in the aftermath of 1905 in *Results and Prospects* (1906), he made a further development of the theory writing in the aftermath of the defeated Chinese Revolution of 1925-27 in *The Permanent Revolution* (1930). Here Trotsky had condemned the new Stalinist "stages" model of revolution for countries apparently "immature" for socialism (first "democratic" then "socialist") as "lifeless," and exposed the older Second International orthodoxy of a division between "civilised" and "other" countries as irredeemably Eurocentric. As Trotsky put it,

the above-outlined sketch of the development of world revolution eliminates the question of countries that are “mature” or “immature” for socialism in the spirit of that pedantic, lifeless classification given by the present [1928] programme of the Comintern ... Backward countries may, under certain circumstances, arrive at the dictatorship of the proletariat sooner than advanced countries, but they will come later than the latter to socialism.³³

Now in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, as Neil Davidson notes, Trotsky transformed permanent revolution from a strategy “lacking a complete theoretical basis” into a fully developed theoretical model applicable globally and based not only on “the theory of uneven development” (which dated back to the Enlightenment) but also what he called “the law of combined development.”³⁴ As Trotsky put it,

the laws of history have nothing in common with a pedantic schematism. Unevenness, the most general law of the historic process, reveals itself most sharply and complexly in the destiny of the backward countries. Under the whip of external necessity their backward culture is compelled to make leaps. From the universal law of unevenness thus derives another law which, for the lack of a better name, we may call the law of *combined development* - by which we mean a drawing together of the different steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms. Without this law, to be taken of course in its whole material content, it is impossible to understand the history of Russia, and indeed of any country of the second, third or tenth cultural class.³⁵

In other words, were one wanting to better understand the history of a tiny Caribbean island like say Trinidad or Haiti, it was not enough to simply point to the obvious and talk about how their economic, political and cultural “backwardness” in comparison to say Britain or France illustrated the “unevenness” of development under capitalism. Colonialism had materially blocked the possibility of such countries enjoying what Trotsky had called “the privilege of historical backwardness” which had seen countries like Germany and Japan “skipping over intermediate steps” on the path to capitalist modernity. To understand “backward” societies in the colonial world, one had to look in concrete detail at how, to quote Davidson, “the archaic and the modern had melded or fused in all aspects of these social formations, from the organisation of arms production to the structure of religious observance, in entirely new and unstable ways”.³⁶

For James, Trotsky’s discussion of “the law of uneven and combined development” must have helped explain like nothing else the “amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms” that he noticed in colonial Trinidad, and reinforced his growing sense that if there was hope for the Caribbean, it lay with the working class. When faced with implicitly racist accusations about how black people in the Caribbean were somehow “primitive” and not yet “ready” for self-government, James would always instinctively reply with examples from his experience of how “Western” and “modern” the working people and their democratic politics and culture actually were. Now Trotsky’s *History* had allowed James to more fully make sense of his early life in what he would later call the “heterogenous jumble” of Trinidad, with its division between town and country, and between a more rural north and a more industrialised and developed south around the oil fields. Moreover, while James had grown up a “country bumpkin,” the Marxist theory of permanent revolution could help explain why a “modern” labour movement around the nationalist Trinidad Workingmen’s Association had grown so rapidly in just over a decade after the Great War, and pulled behind it radicalising

intellectuals like himself with its energy and resolve.³⁷ As James would later declare, “in analytical power and imaginative audacity” Trotsky’s development of the Marxist theory of permanent revolution was “one of the most astounding productions of the modern mind ... after Marx’s discoveries political thinkers were limited to the use of his method. It has never been better used.”³⁸

The other key book James read in 1932 that he later recalled help him become a Marxist was more unexpected than Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution* – it was *The Decline of the West* (originally published in two volumes in 1918 and 1922) by the German writer Oswald Spengler which had just appeared in English in one volume. As H. Stuart Hughes notes, Spengler’s work “marked the full formulation of a cyclical theory of historical change and a comparative approach to culture which had been gradually establishing themselves among the implicit presuppositions of early twentieth-century thought.”³⁹ Challenging many Eurocentric tenets from the perspective of world-history, Spengler offered “an analysis of the decline of that West-European Culture which is now spread over the entire globe.”⁴⁰ Spengler raged against “the machine” of Capitalism, but while he thought it “in danger of succumbing to a stronger power,” unlike Trotsky he did not see any hope lying in the international working class movement.⁴¹ Instead, Spengler pessimistically predicted the rise of a new breed of strong “Caesar-men” like the British imperialist Cecil Rhodes, “the first man of a new age” who “stands for the political style of a far-ranging, Western, Teutonic and especially German future.”⁴² Given the rising threat of fascism, the work’s prophetic theme and title alone assured it was popular with a wide range of Western intellectuals. James recalled he “did not accept the decline that Spengler preached” but he remembered being struck by Spengler’s “strong sense of historical movement” and discussion of “the relation between different historical periods and different classes,” noting *The Decline of the West* - like Trotsky’s *History* - did “illustrate pattern and development in different types of

society. It took me away from the individual and the battles and the concern with the kind of things that I had learned in conventional history.”⁴³

C.L.R. James and the theory of world revolution

Thanks mainly to Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*, and the anti-Stalinist Marxism he subsequently learnt in the Trotskyist movement which he joined in 1934 James was then shaped by a new non-Eurocentric global theory of world revolution developed by Trotsky’s writings on uneven and combined development and the theory of permanent revolution that he would he was not to be shaken or surprised by side-lining of anti-colonialism by the Communist International with the turn to the new-fangled Popular Front. More critically, in his 1938 works - *The Black Jacobins* – his monumental history of the Haitian Revolution – and his shorter pioneering study *A History of Negro Revolt* James was now able to make new applications of the Marxist theory of permanent revolution with respect to the colonial world.⁴⁴ After the Chinese Revolution of 1925-27 went down to defeat, as Michael Löwy has noted, the absence of “further major upheavals on an equivalent scale in the colonial world during Trotsky’s lifetime” in part explains why Trotsky himself “never felt the political exigency to produce a further theorization of permanent revolution in the colonial theatre” – though clearly Trotsky was also somewhat overwhelmed with other political tasks during the 1930s such as trying to combat the rise of Stalinism and fascism.⁴⁵ James in *The Black Jacobins* however was able to make such a new further theorization , and would later stress that the entire “theoretical basis” of the work was the Marxist theory of permanent revolution.

In a period of world-wide revolutionary change, such as that of 1789-1815 and our period which began with 1917, the revolutionary crisis lifts backward peoples over centuries and projects them into the very forefront of the advanced movement of the day.⁴⁶

As Trotsky had noted, the peculiarities resulting from the “backwardness” of Russian historical development explained the “enigma” that “a backward country was the *first* to place the proletariat in power” in 1917.

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.⁴⁷

In *The Black Jacobins*, James now demonstrated that just as “the law of uneven and combined development” under capitalism had meant the slaves 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 anti-colonial struggles in the age of socialist revolution, but also liberation struggles against colonial slavery in the age of “bourgeois-democratic” revolution.⁴⁸

Such an argument stressing the Marxist theory of permanent revolution however challenges much of the scholarly consensus about C.L.R. James and his contribution as a

Marxist. So Matthieu Renault, author of the first full biography of James in French, in a recent article “Decolonizing Revolution with C.L.R. James, Or, what is to be done with Eurocentrism?” in *Radical Philosophy*, correctly notes that “understanding James implies analyzing the *variations* he made on Marxist thought, ‘from within’, in order to incorporate the neglected histories and present battles black peoples were engaged in”. Renault goes onto note that

James did not intend, as postcolonial scholars would put it, to provincialize Marxism, but rather, in Frantz Fanon's terms in *The Wretched of the Earth*, to “stretch” it in order to *deprovincialize the non-European world*. He strove to redraw the *geography of struggles from emancipation*, or, to say it otherwise, to *decolonize revolution* as a concept and an object of historical inquiries.

For Renault, such a theoretical move as “decolonising revolution” was apparently necessary for James, and he claims that James’s achievement was “to radically rethink the relations between socialist ‘world revolution’ and the liberation of ‘oppressed nations’; the convergences and divergences, past and present, between struggles for emancipation ‘at the center’ and anticolonial/antiracist revolts ‘at the margins’”. The idea that socialist “world revolution” was somehow separated from the question of national liberation leads Renault to talk of “James’s Eurocentric notion of world revolution”, even though he notes it was at the same time “being offset by a decentered, or better polycentric, conception of struggles for emancipation”. As Renault puts it,

James, unlike other non-European Marxist socialists, such as M.N. Roy from India

and Mirsaid Sultan Galiev from Tatarstan (Russia), never felt the need to challenge the ‘orthodox’ assumption following which the socialist revolution will first take place in the West, before expanding to the rest of the world. It is manifest in his 1937 book *World Revolution: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International*, where he deals with the colonial world in a marginal way only, to the extent that the exploitation of its natural and human resources is a major factor in the conflict between capitalist powers in Europe. The ‘old continent’ remains the source and the center of revolutionary initiative: ‘We may well see, especially after the universal ruin and destruction of the coming war, a revolutionary movement which, beginning in one of the great European cities, in the course of a few short months, will sweep the imperialist bourgeoisie out of power, not only in every country in Europe, but in India, China, Egypt and South Africa’.⁴⁹

It is worth unpicking this argument a little, for in a sense Renault is correct in that James was an “orthodox” Marxist in the sense that he didn’t think that socialist revolutions would be possible in countries that lacked a certain level of industrial development and so lacked an organised working class movement of any significant size. For example, in early 1936 amidst Mussolini’s war on Ethiopia (then called Abyssinia), James insisted on facing up to the harsh material reality of life in Ethiopia under its feudal emperor Haile Selassie without any romanticism and he challenged the Independent Labour Party leadership’s slogan of “Workers’ control in each nation”. James found this slogan not only abstract but “an historical absurdity” in the context of Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular.

It is difficult to write with restraint of this slogan, which disgraces the Party in the eyes of every intelligent Socialist. Where are the workers in Abyssinia who are to take

control? Hundreds of thousands of slaves and serfs, scattered over a huge country, thousands of small peasants and some chiefs, men living in a condition similar, except for a few modern developments, to England when William the Conqueror landed here. What is to be said of leaders who call upon the workers of an industrialized country like Italy with great cities, millions of workmen organised in factories and with the political experience of centuries behind them, to do the same as these backward Abyssinian peasants and slaves?⁵⁰

It was perhaps James's awareness of the comparative backwardness of Africa as a whole that was still in his mind when first introduced by Brockway to the publisher Frederic Warburg of Secker and Warburg in the summer of 1936. As James remembered, Warburg wanted "to publish some books about the Left".

Warburg...sends to tell me that he wants to see me...I am invited to go to the country with him and his wife...they take me down to play cricket. He says, 'James, I want you to write a book about African Socialism.' I tell him, 'No, that is not the book for me.'"⁵¹

Yet if socialist revolution in such countries was impossible, as a Leninist and Trotskyist, James would never draw any Eurocentric distinction between a process of "world revolution" in advanced capitalist countries separate from revolutionary struggles for national liberation – and indeed, as we have already noted, Trotsky in 1930 stated that "Backward countries may, under certain circumstances, arrive at the dictatorship of the proletariat sooner than advanced countries, but they will come later than the latter to socialism".⁵² As for Renault's charge that *World Revolution* as a book is somehow "Eurocentric", it is unfair to state that James did not deal "with the colonial word in a marginal way only" and focus

simply on “the exploitation of its natural and human resources”. James’s substantial chapter on the Chinese Revolution of 1925-27 not only spelt out general lessons for colonial liberation struggles but in particular spelt out how by early 1923 “the Chinese proletariat” was “mature for revolution”. James did not only see Europe “the ‘old continent’” as “the source and the center of revolutionary initiative” in *World Revolution*, for he noted how Lenin in his last article “spoke with supreme confidence of the coming revolution in the East ... China he knew would unloose India ... the Russian Revolution had given all these millions a concrete example, more potent than a hundred years of propaganda”.⁵³ James went on to write that “a Soviet China linked to a Soviet Russia, supported by the far-flung Third International would alter the whole relationship of the capitalist and revolutionary forces in the Far East ... would unloose movements in India, Burma, and even Egypt and the Near East which would set the whole structure of Capitalism rocking”.⁵⁴

James’s over-optimistic perspective in 1937 for the coming revolution beginning in Europe itself as a result of the coming inter-imperialist war was not the result of an ingrained “Eurocentrism” but based historically on a reading of how the First World War had ended through a wave of revolutions beginning in Tsarist Russia - the weakest link in the imperialist chain – and so though it is true James does predict such a revolt erupting “in one of the great European cities”, the fact he does suggest it will spread *within months* not only across Europe but outside Europe to the colonial world, not least India, Egypt and South Africa shows his sense of the revolutionary potentialities across the colonial world. Indeed, in *World Revolution*, James with great prophetic power given the events in India and China just a decade or so later, writes of the British Empire that:

The last war brought the partial freedom of Ireland, a loosening of the chains of Egypt, and an upheaval in India which has at last seriously crippled the merciless

exploitation of centuries. How long could Britain's grip on India survive another war? A mere threat of war in the autumn of 1935, and Egypt and Palestine flared in revolt. In China and the Far East, where Britain has so much at stake, Capitalism is more unstable than anywhere else in the world.⁵⁵

In noting how a revolutionary upheaval in an imperial metropole could trigger revolutions in the colonial periphery, James also of course had in his mind the way the eruption of the French Revolution of 1789 created turmoil across its colonial periphery, giving the enslaved of Saint-Domingue their opportunity to strike in 1791, and James's *World Revolution* has to be seen not in isolation but as part of a trilogy of works by James - alongside *The Black Jacobins* and *A History of Negro Revolt*, where his creative Marxist theorising on the interplay of black and colonial liberation struggles and socialist revolution arguably came to full fruition. It is also critical to place James's theoretical writings during the 1930s alongside his wider anti-capitalist and anticolonial political activism in this period, and his efforts to bring the growing resistance against British colonial rule together with the power of the industrial working class in the imperial metropolis of Britain itself in order to try to hasten the final fall of an Empire already in decline.⁵⁶ As James put it in a speech in 1938, "The British Empire is the greatest instrument of tyranny and oppression known to History, and its overthrow would be a great step forward in human progress. Side by side with the struggle for colonial independence must go the struggle for socialism in Britain ... Either socialism, with material progress, peace, and fraternal relations between peoples, or empire-increasing racial hatred and imperialist wars."⁵⁷ In our era today, eighty years on, where the American Empire is now undergoing a process of dangerous decline, opening up once again the possibility of "empire-increasing racial hatred and imperialist wars", James's words here

about the choice ahead for humanity being between socialism or barbarism retain all of their relevance.

Footnotes

¹ Quoted in Peter Linebaugh, "Introduction" to Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man and Common Sense* (London: Verso, 2009), xxv.

² The classic Marxist account of the Haitian Revolution remains C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Penguin, 2001).

³ Ian H. Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 136.

⁴ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: A History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 211.

⁵ Monty Johnstone, "Internationalism," in Tom Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 232.

⁶ Karl Marx, "Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association," in David Fernbach (ed.), *The First International and After: Political Writings of Karl Marx*, vol. 3 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 81.

⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 414.

⁸ Walter Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of decoloniality," *Cultural Studies*, 21:2, (March 2007), quoted in Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 8. As Makalani judges, "Marx, Engels, and Lenin were unwilling or unable to address racial oppression and racial ideologies (or coloniality)" and so contributed "to a Eurocentric diffusionist strain of Marxism". Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*, 14.

⁹ See August Nimtz, "The Eurocentric Marx and Engels and other related myths" in Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (eds), *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.65-80, and Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago, 2010), 23.

¹⁰ Marx to Engels, 20 November 1865 in Marx and Engels, *On Colonialism* (Moscow, Progress, 1976), 322

¹¹ Engels to Marx, 1 December 1865 in Marx and Engels, *On Colonialism*, 323.

¹² For example, during the Victorian period, Mike Davis notes that the "feisty little Marxist party, the Social Democratic Federation, was the only British political organisation which never wavered in its attention to India's famine victims ... Typical of the SDF's courageous anti-imperialism was the response of one Scottish branch to the otherwise delirious celebration of the British victory in South Africa in 1902: 'While on all sides of the street the harlot, Capitalism, was decked in a horrible array of all possible colours, there was projected from the windows of the SDF a transparency of five feet, giving the statistics of deaths in war, deaths in concentration camps, the number of paupers, the number of unemployed in Britain, the famine deaths in India, and the famine deaths, emigration and evictions in Ireland.'" Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001), 165.

¹³ John Riddell, "1907: The birth of socialism's great divide" (2007), <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2007/08/20/1907-the-birth-of-socialism%E2%80%99s-great-divide/>

¹⁴ Quoted in Cathy Bergin, *African American Anti-Colonial Thought, 1917-1937* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 30.

¹⁵ John Molyneux, *Lenin for Today* (London: Bookmarks, 2017), 75

¹⁶ John Molyneux, *What is the real Marxist tradition?* (London: Bookmarks, 1985), 54. As Molyneux adds, "At the same time Lenin realised that this strategy carried with it the danger of blurring the Marxist distinction 'between the interests of the oppressed classes, of working and exploited people and the general concept of national interests as a whole, which implies the interests of the ruling class'. Lenin's theses on this question at the Second Congress of the Comintern, therefore, stressed the following: '... the need for a determined struggle against attempts to give a communist colouring to bourgeois-democratic liberation trends in the backward countries ... The Communist International must enter into a temporary alliance with bourgeois democracy in the colonial and backward countries, but should not merge with it, and should under all circumstances uphold the independence of the proletarian movement even if it is in its most embryonic form.' See Molyneux, *What is the real Marxist tradition?* 54-55; See also Lenin, *On the National and Colonial Questions* (Peking: Foreign

Language Press, 1975), and *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International* (London: Ink Links 1980), 80.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Ian Birchall for emphasising this point to me.

¹⁸ Leon Trotsky, *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 180.

¹⁹ Timothy Brennan, “Postcolonial studies between the European wars: an intellectual history”, in Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (eds), *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 188, 190-91.

²⁰ Brennan, “Postcolonial studies between the European wars”, 192-194. Molyneux, *Lenin for Today*, 76.

²¹ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, Chapter III, Part IV, (1845), online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch03h.htm>

²² Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*, 69. On the Polish and German troops defection during Haiti’s war of independence, see C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Penguin, 2001), 258.

²³ Quoted in Bergin, *African American Anti-Colonial Thought*, 10.

²⁴ Cyril Briggs, “Negro Revolutionary Hero – Toussaint L’Ouverture”, *The Communist*, 8, no. 5 (May 1929)

²⁵ John Riddell (ed): *Towards the United Front. Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 950.

²⁶ Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War and the End of Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3, 74.

²⁷ Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*, 7.

²⁸ Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*, 8.

²⁹ Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom*, 14.

³⁰ For more on *World Revolution*, see Christian Høgsbjerg, “Introduction” to C.L.R. James, *World Revolution, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). I also discussed *World Revolution* at length in this journal back in 2013. See Christian Høgsbjerg, “‘A Kind of Bible of Trotskyism’: Reflections on C.L.R. James’s *World Revolution*”, *C.L.R. James Journal*, 19, 2-3 (2013), 243-275.

³¹ C.L.R. James, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (London: Allison & Busby, 1985), 162.

³² There is a sizeable existing literature on Trotsky and the Marxist theory of permanent revolution. See Leon Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects* (New York, 1972), and also Duncan Hallas, *Trotsky’s Marxism and Other Essays* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2003), 21-36; John Molyneux, *Leon Trotsky’s Theory of Revolution* (Brighton: Harvester 1981); the first part of Michael Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution* (London: N.L.B., 1981), and Bill Dunn and Hugo Radice (eds.), *100 Years of Permanent Revolution: Results and Prospects* (London: Pluto, 2006).

³³ Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects* [1930], 279. See also Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development*, 85.

³⁴ Davidson, “From Uneven to Combined Development,” in Dunn, Bill, and Radice, Hugo (eds.), *100 Years of Permanent Revolution: Results and Prospects* (London: Pluto, 2006), 21.

³⁵ Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pluto, 1977), 27-28.

³⁶ Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, p. 27; Davidson, “From Uneven to Combined Development,” 22-23.

³⁷ C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Hutchinson, 1969), 31, 34. The early chapters of *Beyond a Boundary* might be read as a demonstration of how “the law of uneven and combined development” shaped an individual life and indeed James’s descriptions of growing up in Trinidad seem to have echoes of Trotsky’s descriptions of his own childhood growing up in what is now the Ukraine in *My Life*.

³⁸ C.L.R. James, “Trotsky’s Place in History,” in Scott McLemee and Paul Le Blanc (eds.), *C.L.R. James and Revolutionary Marxism: Selected writings of C.L.R. James, 1939-49* (New Jersey: Humanity Books, 1994), 94.

³⁹ H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930* (Brighton: Knopf, 1979), 375.

⁴⁰ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 50.

⁴¹ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, (London: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 477-480, 506.

⁴² Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, 37. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, 432.

⁴³ Robert A. Hill, “Literary Executor’s Afterword,” in C.L.R. James, *American Civilization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 297; M.A.R.H.O. (ed.), *Visions of History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 270. In 1940, James “hoped that the fog of mysticism does not obscure for Marxists the colossal learning, capacity of synthesis, and insight of Spengler’s book.” See James, “Trotsky’s Place in History,” 109.

⁴⁴ For more on James’s *History of Negro Revolt*, see Christian Høgsbjerg, “The Black International as Social Movement Wave: C.L.R. James’s *History of Pan-African Revolt*”, in Colin Barker, Laurence Cox, John Krinsky and Alf Nilsen (eds.) *Marxism and Social Movements* (Leiden: Brill, 2013, and Chicago: Haymarket, 2014).

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- ⁴⁵ Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development*, 86.
- ⁴⁶ C.L.R. James, *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution*, (London: Allison & Busby, 1977), 66.
- ⁴⁷ Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, 19-20, 33.
- ⁴⁸ For more on *The Black Jacobins*, see Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg (eds.), *The Black Jacobins Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).
- ⁴⁹ Matthieu Renault, “Decolonizing revolution with C.L.R. James or, What is to be done with Eurocentrism?”, *Radical Philosophy*, 199 (Sept/Oct 2016). See also Matthieu Renault, *C.L.R. James: La Vie Révolutionnaire d’un ‘Platon Noir’* (Paris: La Découverte, 2015). For my wider defence of James against the charge of “Eurocentrism” as a Marxist and Pan-Africanist in this period, see Christian Høgsbjerg, “‘The most striking West Indian creation between the wars’: C.L.R. James, the International African Service Bureau and Militant Pan-Africanism in Imperial Britain”, in Shane Pantin and Jerome Teelucksingh (eds.) *Ideology, Regionalism and Society in Caribbean History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
- ⁵⁰ See James’s contribution to “Italy and Abyssinia: Should British Workers Take Sides?”, *Controversy*, Special Supplement No. 1, (1936).
- ⁵¹ See James, ‘Lectures on *The Black Jacobins*’, *Small Axe* 8 (2000) 70-71.
- ⁵² Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects* [1930], 279. See also Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development*, 85.
- ⁵³ C.L.R. James, *World Revolution, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 248-49.
- ⁵⁴ James, *World Revolution*, 255.
- ⁵⁵ James, *World Revolution*, 66. As it happened, during the Second World War armed resistance movements throughout German-occupied Europe aimed not simply to overthrow fascism, but to ensure that the pre-war conditions that had bred it would be abolished forever. By 1945 the threat of revolution loomed again, in Italy, Greece and Indochina, though sadly the legacy of Stalinism among other factors blocked any major revolutionary confrontation developing.
- ⁵⁶ I have written more extensively about this in Christian Høgsbjerg, *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
- ⁵⁷ James, “Twilight of the British Empire.” Summary of Speech at Irving Plaza, Wednesday November 30, 1938. Issued by Educational Committee, Socialist Workers’ Party, New York Local, Fourth International. Wayne State University, Walter P. Reuther Library, Dwyer Collection, Box 5, Folder 18.