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Our history

The Marxism of C.L.R. James

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Description:

Cyril Lionel Robert James (1901-1989) has begun to enjoy a revival among U.S. and European intellectuals which promises to spread his influence more widely in the present and future than was the case at any time during his life. He is best known for his magnificent history of the Haitian revolution, entitled Black Jacobins (first published in 1938 and reprinted often since then), but a growing number of people are becoming increasingly familiar with many other facets of his work.

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There has been a flood of works by and about James since his death. There are now two biographies one by "new left" historian Paul Buhle, and a more recent product of Kent Worchester's careful scholarship. A massive anthology of his writings, edited by Anna Grimshaw, was glowingly reviewed in the *New York Times*. A fascinating collection edited by Buhle and Paget Henry entitled *C.L.R. James's Caribbean* has now been followed by a re-issue of his sports classic *Beyond a Boundary*.

Grimshaw and Keith Hart have also made available a major work by James, rich in pioneering cultural analysis, entitled *American Civilization*. Professor Robert Hill of the University of California at Los Angeles is projecting the publication of the *Collected Works of C.L.R. James* over the coming years, according to a front-page story in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. An important collection of essays by various scholars, edited by Selwyn Cudjoe and William E. Cain, *C.L.R. James, His Intellectual Legacies*, has just appeared.

The Revolutionary Studies series of Humanities Press has recently republished his 1937 classic *World Revolution* (a history of the Communist International), has published a volume edited by Scott McLemee and myself, entitled *C.L.R. James and Revolutionary Marxism, Selected Writings 1939-1949*, and plans to bring out his wonderful 1960 lectures *Modern Politics* in the near future.

James is generally acknowledged to have been one of the most original Marxist thinkers to emerge from the Western hemisphere, yet essential aspects of his identity came from the other side of the Atlantic, from Europe and Africa. As he explained to one African-American scholar, "I am a Black European, that is my training and outlook."

He offered penetrating analyses on the interrelationships of class, race and gender, and his discussions of colonialism and anti-colonialism could be brilliant. But C.L.R. James also embraced the heritage of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, the working-class and socialist movements of Europe and North America, and the Bolshevism of Lenin and Trotsky which transformed Russia and promised to liberate the world from all oppression. At the same time, his writings on sports deserve special emphasis which is something that can be said of few Marxist theorists. James began his writing career by writing about baseball's distant cousin, cricket, first in the West Indies and later in England.

Paul Buhle, following James, tells us that such sports are a means of "expression for ordinary genius," adding that James regarded cricket as "a fully fledged art form equal to theatre, opera and dance. To this claim James added a populist amendment: 'What matters in cricket, as in all the finer arts, is not the finer points but what everyone with some knowledge of the elements can see and feel.' It embodied the elemental human movement which ... constituted the basis and the source of renewal for all arts." (One can imagine that these insights could also be applied to modern-day basketball, music videos on MTV, and much else.)

Such things James felt come from the same deeply creative sources as more conventional great art and also as genuinely revolutionary politics. The mass popular response to such things, similarly, has something in common with

the emotions and sensibilities associated with social revolutions, in which masses of people creatively transform reality.

James's Political Involvements

James moved to England in 1932 from the West Indian island of Trinidad. In England he quickly made contact with the British working-class movement, becoming part of the radical Independent Labor Party and of a small Trotskyist organization within it called the Marxist Group. He learned his Marxism within this context, and some of his most enduring contributions to Marxism were made while he was part of the Trotskyist movement in Britain and the United States. James also became involved in the Pan-Africanist movement, becoming associated with such figures as George Padmore, Paul Robeson, W.E.B. DuBois, Jomo Kenyatta, and Kwame Nkrumah.

In 1938 James helped to found the Fourth International, the world-wide organization of revolutionary socialists, and was elected to its International Executive Committee. In the same year he moved to the United States and became part of the Socialist Workers Party. Frank Lovell has offered this recollection:

"When C.L.R. James came to this country from Britain, where he was a leader of the Trotskyist movement, he was welcomed into the Socialist Workers Party and given leadership responsibilities. James was an impressive speaker with his British accent and his poise. He was a tall, handsome Black man... He spoke without notes, standing aside from the podium on the speakers platform. It was as if he were a great actor delivering a famous oration."

"At his first appearance he shared the platform with [the top leaders of the SWP, Max] Shachtman and [James P.] Cannon in the Irving Plaza meeting hall where Trotskyist meetings were often held. Shachtman was the first speaker and was not brief. James came on next and even though his talk was longer than Shachtman's, he completely captivated his audience and received a big ovation. Cannon was the last speaker. Although he was the national secretary of the party and had been announced for a major speech, Jim had no intention of standing on his dignity or trying to hold the audience so late at night in order to have his turn. He put aside his notes, congratulated James on his speaking ability and welcomed him to the Socialist Workers Party." [James P. Cannon As We Knew Him, ed. by Les Evans (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1976), pp. 138-139.]

James remained part of the Trotskyist movement until 1951, adopting the party name "J.R. Johnson." In 1940, when Shachtman and many others split from the SWP and set up the rival Workers Party, James initially lined up with the Shachtmanites. At the same time, along with an energetic theorist-in-the-making named Rae Spiegel, later known as Raya Dunayevskaya, who took the party name "Freddie Forest," James formed a very distinctive political current: the Johnson-Forest tendency.

The Johnson-Forest tendency, which never had more than a few dozen adherents, mapped out an ambitious project for U.S. revolutionaries: to develop an Americanized Marxism, and an Americanized Bolshevism, that would involve a dynamic interpenetration of the U.S. and international revolutionary traditions.

This was to include intellectual efforts that have had an impact on later scholars and social critics: the development of substantial analyses of U.S. history, studies of modern culture (including a serious attitude toward popular culture), historical and sociological labor studies, the development of Marxist economic analysis, and an awesome embrace of dialectical materialism which involved an immersion in the philosophical writings of Hegel. Among the contributions of the Johnson-Forest tendency was to produce the first English-language translation of Marx's important Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of the early 1840s.

Shachtman and those who were close to Shachtman had little use for the Johnson-Forest tendency, which attracted some of the more energetic young comrades and among other things- -sought to inspire them with the ambition to master the complexities of Marx's Capital and Hegel's Phenomenology of the Mind. As one veteran of Shachtmanites later recalled: "You would see these 17 year olds who could barely spell, and they were carrying Hegel." A one-time Shachtmanite youth leader agreed: "In the youth group, with Hegel, they would get up and start espousing Hegel, and it was utterly incoherent."

There were three other sins of the Johnson-Forest tendency that aggravated Shachtman and his co-thinkers: 1) the position that the African- American struggle, rather than being subsumed under the general struggle of the working class, had a powerful dynamic of its own and would be central to the socialist revolution in the U.S.; 2) the position that the American working class was far more radical, having a greater revolutionary character, than many of the Shachtmanites imagined; and 3) that the Socialist Workers Party of James P. Cannon was much better than Shachtman and others were willing to admit, and that the two groups should reunify.

This finally led to a split from the Workers Party in 1947, and the Johnson-Forest group returned to the SWP. While many SWPers were not inclined to accept much of the Johnson-Forest theoretical output, and especially rejected the Johnson-Forest notion that the Soviet Union was a "state-capitalist" society, the tendency's members were seen as serious and hardworking revolutionaries. The contributions that James had to make regarding the so-called "Negro Question" were also highly valued. And yet disappointed hopes regarding the failure of the U.S. working class to turn in a revolutionary direction, growing difficulties and frustrations brought on by the Cold War and McCarthy periods, and deepening political differences, caused James and his followers to leave the SWP within five years. In doing this, they also openly rejected Trotskyism and any commitments to building a Leninist-type party in the United States.

Shortly after this 1951 split, James who was not a U.S. citizen was arrested and thrown out of the country because of his revolutionary politics. In 1955, Raya Dunayevskaya and others split away to establish their own "Marxist-Humanist" News and Letters group; in 1962 the Johnsonites known by the name of their own paper Correspondence suffered another split led by James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs. James and his cothinkers regrouped around the name "Facing Reality" (the title of a major Johnsonite document). By the end of the 1960s, the remnants of the Facing Reality group (led by James's close associate Marty Glaberman) decided to dissolve.

In the meantime, however, two of James's proteges in other countries Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana and Eric Williams in Trinidad assumed state power, and welcomed their mentor's support and assistance. To a limited extent in Ghana, and to a much greater extent in Trinidad, James contributed what he could especially important writings to advance the revolutionary struggle. In both cases, he was forced to break with the political course adopted by Nkrumah and Williams, each in their own way veering off from the revolutionary-democratic and socialist perspectives which he represented.

In the final decades of his life, James was able to see his influence grow in England, the United States, and in the Caribbean among activists who were attracted to these revolutionary perspectives.

James's Method and Contributions

It would be wrong to allow James to become as has been done by some over the years a cult figure. He is not some sort of earthly deity whose judgments must be worshipped, but a comrade from whom one can learn (sometimes even as one is challenging him and clarifying a disagreement). Rather than offering criticisms or noting contradictions in his ideas and work, I want to focus on certain of his strengths and insights that I believe can be beneficial for the revolutionary socialist movement. At the end of this presentation, however, I will touch on one

aspect of his thought which strikes me as somewhat problematical.

James's general approach to reality seems to me to be very dynamic and exciting. An essential aspect of his method is to make links between seemingly diverse realities, sometimes to take something that is commonly perceived as being marginal and to demonstrate that it is central, for example: the relation of the Haitian Revolution to the French Revolution and later to the fortunes of Napoleon Bonaparte; the relation of blacks to world history, Western civilization, and the class struggle; the relation of popular culture sports, movies, hit songs, dancing, pulp fiction, comic books, etc. to more "refined" culture, to social realities and to class consciousness. James focuses on these so-called "marginal" realities in a manner that profoundly alters (rather than displacing) the traditionally "central" categories.

The attentive reader will find that such a methodological approach generates innumerable fruitful challenges which help to move one's thinking forward on a variety of issues.

Among James's most substantial contributions was his assistance in making revolutionary Marxists aware of the centrality of "the Negro Question" to the class struggle and to any genuinely revolutionary perspective in the United States, and I want to give major attention to that. First of all, he insistently demonstrated that the history of blacks in the Americas was not simply a history of poor victims of oppression, but of a vibrant and conscious people that found innumerable ways to resist their oppression, assert their humanity, and periodically struggle for their own liberation.

But James went much further than this. On the basis of in-depth study and experience in black communities of the United States, creatively utilizing Lenin's views on oppressed nationalities, and in collaboration with Trotsky (with whom he had extensive discussions in Mexico), James developed a profound theoretical orientation to help guide the practical work of U.S. revolutionaries.

"The American Negroes, for centuries the most oppressed section of American society and the most discriminated against, are potentially the most revolutionary elements of the population," James explained in one resolution which he wrote in 1939. "They are designated by their whole historical past to be, under adequate leadership, the very vanguard of the proletarian revolution." He added that "the broad perspectives of [Trotsky's theory of] the permanent revolution will remain only a fiction" unless revolutionary socialists could find their way to the African-American masses.

The implications of this were that a consistent, uncompromising struggle for the democratic rights of African Americans (largely proletarianized) would necessarily challenge bourgeois power and capitalism, with a potential for growing over into a struggle for working-class power and socialism. Yet James did not leave things at that. A second resolution noted that African Americans might feel moved, on the basis of their own historic oppression, to advance the demand "for the establishment and administration of a Negro state." He explained that "in a revolutionary crisis, as they begin to shake off the state coercion and ideological domination of the American bourgeois society, their first step may well be to demand the control, both actual and symbolical, of their own destiny."

Rejecting schematic definitions having to do with whether blacks in the U.S. constituted "a nation," James pointed out that "the raising or support of the slogan by the masses of Negroes will be the best and only proof required." Under such circumstances, revolutionary socialists should support the demand, the realization of which could constitute, as James put it, a "step forward to the eventual integration of the American Negroes into the United Socialist States of America."

James added: "The advocacy of the right of self-determination does not mean advancing the slogan of self-determination. Self-determination for Negroes means that Negroes themselves must determine their own

future." It is worth noting that there are, in fact, two meanings attached to the term self-determination here. One meaning involves separation, setting up a politically-distinct nation which may or may not take place, depending on what blacks themselves wish to do. The other meaning involves the right of an oppressed people to define what they shall be and to determine their own future which, James insisted, must be a constant principle for revolutionary Marxists.

He also observed that "the awakening political consciousness of the Negro not unnaturally takes the form of independent action uncontrolled by whites. The Negroes have long felt, and more than ever feel today the urge to create their own organizations under their own leaders and thus assert, not only in theory but in action, their claim to complete equality with other American citizens. Such a desire is legitimate and must be vigorously supported even when it takes the form of a rather aggressive chauvinism." James's next point is of particular interest: "Black chauvinism in America today is merely the natural excess of the desire for equality and is essentially progressive while white American chauvinism, the expression of racial domination, is essentially reactionary."

This general orientation was so advanced for its time that the SWP proved incapable of fully assimilating it, and even today many socialists, even some who identify with Trotskyism, don't accept it. But in the 1960s James's position provided a basis for understanding the rising tide of militant struggles and nationalist consciousness in the Black community. While these new developments proved to be unexpected by and utterly confusing to many observers, Trotskyist analyst George Breitman was able to draw on the earlier perspectives to provide a revolutionary Marxist explanation. Especially important was Breitman's ability to highlight, document and help popularize the profoundly revolutionary meaning of the ideas and life of Malcolm X which would have been impossible without the kind of analysis pioneered by James a quarter of a century before.

As I have already indicated, James by no means confined himself to "the Negro Question." His approach to the world around him was comprehensive, multifaceted and penetrating. As a revolutionary interinternationalist, he concerned himself with revolutionary events in Europe, Asia, Latin America, Africa and also with the real struggles of working people and the oppressed in the United States, in which he saw genuinely revolutionary qualities. There is a profound continuity in how he viewed these struggles and the manner in which he defined socialism. This comes through in this passage from a 1947 document of the Johnson-Forest tendency entitled *The Invading Socialist Society*.

The struggle for socialism is the struggle for proletarian democracy. Proletarian democracy is not the crown of socialism. It is its basis. Proletarian democracy is not the result of socialism. Socialism is the result of proletarian democracy. To the degree that the proletariat mobilizes itself and the great masses of the people, the socialist revolution is advanced. The proletariat mobilizes itself as a self-acting force through its own committees, unions, parties and other organizations.

An essential aspect of James's approach is not that members of small revolutionary socialist groups need to persuade the working class to become such a "self-acting force." Rather, he insisted, the working-class already is such a force, carrying out innumerable forms of resistance and struggle in everyday life in their own workplaces and communities and personal lives which while not necessarily conforming to the blueprints and schemas of revolutionary socialist groups, and often not noticed by these groups effectively combat, undermine, subvert capitalist power, creating elements of a new democratic-collectivist society within the shell of the capitalist society around us.

In 1943 James expressed this outlook in a brilliant polemic against Sidney Hook (a pioneering post-Marxist whose 1943 volume *The Hero in History* is being echoed today in fashionable ex-leftist critiques of Marxism and Leninism). Here James wrote eloquently about the relationship between the working class and genuinely revolutionary socialist groups. Noting that one aspect of Lenin's strength was that he was an organic part of Russian culture, he went on to say:

"As to the outstanding role Lenin played inside his own party, even Marxist histories tend to give it a false significance. Lenin fought for the Bolshevik principles in 1903 and won. He was constantly winning, which means that he expressed ideas which stood the test of practice. The proletariat as a whole, at all critical moments, followed the Bolsheviks.

"More important than this, however, is the fact that the Russian proletariat taught and disciplined Lenin and the Bolsheviks not only indirectly but directly. Basically the organization of the party paralleled the organization of the productive power of the proletariat in revolution. In 1917, Lenin thought the struggle hopeless, and was thinking of giving it up. A few weeks later came the massacre of January, and the magnificent response of the Russian proletariat revived the faltering leader. The proletariat created the soviets [democratic workers' councils]. The Bolsheviks learned here to understand the vitality and creative power of the proletariat in revolution.... The great change in policy in April was only a manifestation of the essential policy of the Bolshevik Party, to express and organize the instinctive desires and aims of the proletariat....

"The proletariat repeatedly led the Bolsheviks and gave Lenin courage and wisdom. Between 1890 and 1921 the interrelation between leader, party, class and nation was indivisible. The transformation of Bolshevism into totalitarianism is adequately dealt with in the literature of Trotskyism. The analysis is embodied in history, and the lessons are plain. With the proletariat or against it, that is the future of every modern nation. The secret of Lenin's greatness is that he saw this so clearly, and he saw this so clearly because this choice was the inescapable product of the whole past of Russia...."

We have here a vision of revolutionary organizations being organically connected with the history and culture of their own countries, and especially with their own working classes, the insight that a revolutionary organization must be able to learn from the working class if it hopes to be able to have anything to teach the working class, that it must follow the workers in order to be able lead, that the relationship between the revolutionary group and the working class must be profoundly interactive.

A Challenge to Revolutionary Marxists

Here I want to turn to a problematical aspect of James's thought, which hopefully will provide a challenging conclusion to this presentation. James never altered his analysis of and admiration for Lenin and the Bolshevik party. But by the early 1950s he discarded the conception of building a revolutionary vanguard party in the United States because he felt this conception as understood by most U.S. Leninists got in the way of cultivating the necessary interactive relationship between revolutionary Marxists and the actually-existing, self-acting working class.

He came to the conclusion that Trotsky and other revolutionary Marxists had been wrong about believing that, after a working-class revolution, a transitional period between capitalism and socialism would be necessary. He felt that before the working class made its revolution it would already have created spontaneously, or semi-spontaneously, through its own activity democratic, collectivist, socialist relations through its resistance to capitalist oppression.

Even if the working class did not put a "socialist" label on its own consciousness, activities, and relationships, these were developing in a socialist direction within the very framework of capitalist society, through the class struggle which as noted in the Communist Manifesto is "now hidden, now open." The transition to socialism, he felt, is taking place now in the consciousness and struggles of working people in their workplaces and in their communities, and the transition will be completed (not begun) by a working-class revolution.

I believe that there are elements of truth in all of this, but that James took it too far. Socialism is not inevitable. There

are countervailing tendencies anti-socialist, anti-democratic, anti-humanist tendencies in our society, in our culture, and within the working class.

The genuinely revolutionary and socialist tendencies that James points to are there in the consciousness, the struggles, and the everyday life of those who are part of the working class. But these can become triumphant only to the extent that they become conscious, are organized and mobilized—and there are no guarantees that this will happen on its own. Elements within the working class, including people like ourselves, will need to work hard to help make it happen.

To be effective in this, we will need to organize ourselves, we will need to learn how to work collectively and carry out coherent activities that contribute to the growth of a working-class socialist movement, creating organizational structures that can facilitate all of this. This means that, contrary to what James argued in the 1950s and afterward, we will be moving to create a U.S. variant of the Bolshevik-Leninist party.

As we do that, however, we will be well served if we critically draw from the rich contributions offered to us by our comrade C.L.R. James. There is much that recommends him to us his great intellectual breadth, which is reflected in the quality of his Marxism, combining a serious concern with philosophy, history, economics, culture, and practical political work. There is also his capacity to see things which aren't quite "there" yet, but which are in the process of coming into being.

Related to this is his capacity to identify fruitful connections between seemingly disparate phenomena, and his consequent ability to take what is "peripheral" and show that it is, in fact, central to an adequate understanding of politics and society. In addition, there is the deep humanism which is essential to revolutionary Marxism but which James makes very much his own, which opens to us a crucial insight: socialism is not something that is simply thought up by brilliant intellectuals it is an integral part of the reality around us. Essential elements of it can be found in the thinking, the perceptions, the values, the desires, the everyday life- activities, the many ongoing struggles of the human beings who are part of the working-class majority.

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