G. Lewis
C.L.R. James: a concurring dissent


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C. L. R. JAMES: A CONCURRING DISSENT


This volume continues the collected edition of the work of C. L. R. James put out by the London publishing house of Allison and Busby. The volumes, put together, constitute a memorial to James and his work which started with his emigration to England in the early 1930s and continued with his various residencies in Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean. His collected writings reveal him as a man for all seasons, for he has written with equal ease in half a dozen fields of journalistic and scholarly enquiry: Caribbean and African Third World politics, Marxist-Leninist political thought, Western philosophy, literary criticism, Pan-Africanism, Caribbean nationalism, cricket, and history — in fact an enormous range of interests. Most people would have been satisfied with a career concerned just with one of them. The reasons, perhaps, are easy to identify. In part, it is because James has also been throughout a political activist, never forgetting, like a true Marxist, that there must always be an alliance between the worker by hand and the worker by brain. In part, it is because, like so many others, his has not been a mind spoiled by a modern university education, so that his intellectual self has nothing about it of the habit of academic specialization in which the individual scholar concerns himself only with his own “field,” ignoring everything else that lies beyond. James is the humanist, trained as the all-rounder. It is always an exciting pleasure to read him, not least of all when one disagrees with him.
Those of us who have been practitioners in Caribbean studies owe him, as we also owe Eric Williams and Fernando Ortiz and Jean Price-Mars, a great debt. His early piece on Captain Cripiani started the long argument for West Indian independence. His 1938 essay, *The history of Negro revolt*, saw perceptively that Caribbean resistance to colonialism was a logical, coherent historical process, starting with the slave revolts and ending, at that time, with the Garveyite movement. The classic *Black Jacobins*, of the same year, documented the lesson that slavery emancipation was not simply, as Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* argued, the end-result of impersonal economic factors but, much more, the consequence of mass revolutionary instinct; although that work has long been superseded by the later French and Haitian scholarship on the St-Domingue rebellion. Not least of all, his *State Capitalism and World Revolution* volume of 1950 gathered together his general dialectical view on the world as a whole as it had developed between the Russian Revolution of 1917 and World War Two, especially important for those of us, as Europeans, who had also felt the tremendous impact of the great debate on revolution, war, imperialism, and Fascism that characterized the mental climate of that seminal period. Like every original thinker, James has married a long and rich personal experience with a coherent philosophy, for he knows that experience without philosophy is meaningless.

The collected items in this particular volume show him, again, at his best in the tradition, so English, of the essayist, at times analytical, at times polemical, always stimulating. Any more than the great practitioners of that literary form James does not hide his light under a bushel; as much as Addison or Charles Lamb or G. K. Chesterton or George Orwell he presents his prides and prejudices with a fierce independency of mind and spirit. He can write the effective short story, as his selections from his early Trinidadian writings show. He has a sense of people; his piece on a London street encounter with Paul Robeson is hilarious, all the more so since hilarity is not always his strong point. As an older man he is generous to young writers, as his 1950 piece on the young Norman Mailer and William Gardner Smith demonstrates. He is always good at literary criticism, especially Shakes-
perean, although the reader is tempted to say, here, that it is criticism in the conventional English sense, for it seems at times that James does not realize that Shakesperean criticism has advanced a lot since the time when Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch was writing some eighty years ago. His piece on the great sports figure of Learie Constantine is affectionate; although, again, the non-English reader will wonder why James, so Marxist, should possess such an admiring passion for cricket, which is, after all, the sport of the English gentleman class, although, as we know, things are different in the West Indies.

It is interesting to note that in his piece on the books of the English leftwing writer Raymond Williams he charges Williams with suffering from English insularity. Yet James himself has not been completely immune to that disease. That is evident enough, I suggest, from the two more specifically Caribbean pieces in this anthology: “The West Indian Middle Classes” and “The making of the Caribbean people.” The first place is almost a Fanonesque diatribe against the West Indian middle class which overlooks, first, the fact that the same class provided the leadership of the trade union and labor party movements after 1938, often at much personal sacrifice, and, second, the fact that the middle class record, especially of the student groups, in the Hispanic Antilles has been far more progressive than James’ sweeping denunciatory generalizations make credit for. The second piece, again, is almost wholly anglophone in reference, except when the author quotes extensively from his own book on St-Domingue, with no reference at all to the long thirty-years war between 1868 and 1898 of the Cuban revolutionary forces against Spain, without which, it goes without saying, no essay on the making of the Caribbean people can be complete. In sum, for all of his Marxism and anti-colonialism James, at bottom, psychologically, is the intractable anglophile, a London man, so to speak, almost as much as Vida Naipaul, so removed, ideologically, as they are one from the other. As Eric Williams has pointed out somewhere, the West Indian intelligentsia of the interwar 1919–1939 period can be divided between those who elected to stay at home with the anti-colonial struggle and those who elected to leave and join the international revolutionary circuit.
But James was not only on that circuit. It is vital to an understanding of his collected work that whether in Britain or the U.S. or even in the West Indies he was always on the fringe, rarely in the mainstream. He belonged to the minority sectarian groups: the Revolutionary Socialist League in Britain, the Socialist Workers Party in the U.S., the Trotskyite Fourth International, and even his own splinter group from the latter. Much of his writing, inevitably, bears the mark of ideological sectarianism arising out of all the splits and schisms characteristic of all sectarian debate and conflict. In much of that debate, of course, he was eminently right. He was among the first to see that the Soviet Union, under Stalin, had become the revolution betrayed. His long essay in this volume. "After Hitler, our turn," is a brilliant analysis of how the German Communist Party after 1929 allowed itself to be deluded by the policy line, dictated from Moscow, that the real enemy was not Hitler but the "socialist-fascist" socialists and social democrats, and that in the coming struggle for power they would play the role of Lenin, and Hitler the role of Kerensky: a fatal diagnosis stemming from the prevalent official thesis of the Communist parties of the time that every revolution should uncritically follow the patterns set by Russia in 1917. It was, as James says, a dreadful record of stupidity and crime, rooted in the oriental idolatry that Stalin demanded from all of the dependent communist movements.

But this same volume shows that James himself was not innocent of his own ideological mistakes. His essay on Black Power correctly reminds us that this was no sudden eruption but a historic process that had its roots in the work of Du Bois and Garvey; yet at the same time it has a eulogy of Stokeley Carmichael that is almost embarrassing in its fulsomeness and, worse, almost embraces the cult of personality which has so bedevilled the black American struggle. There are times when the reader is not quite sure exactly where James stands on the vexed question of the proper balance between the twin lodestars of Race and Class in the revolutionary struggle; but his assertion in 1962 that "it is from the American working class that we can as Marxists expect the greatest advance in socialist action and socialist ideas" (page 120) cannot but sound like rosy optimism to anyone who knows...
anything firsthand about the white working-class strongholds of South Boston or the west Chicago suburbs. Or, yet again, there are problems with James’ reading of the whole Marxist-Leninist revolutionary literature. It is his main thesis, in the piece on “After Hitler, our turn,” that Stalinism betrayed the original Leninist doctrine. Yet it is equally arguable that Leninism was itself a betrayal of the original Marxist doctrine, insofar as the Leninist idea of a separate communist party, a vanguard cadre, had no place in the thought of either Marx or Engels; and it was Rosa Luxembourg, not Lenin, who remained loyal to the early democratic system in her famous quarrel with Lenin and her criticism of the “ultra-centralism” of the Leninist ideas on party organization. Interestingly, James in this volume makes only one brief reference to Rosa Luxembourg, and only to note the fact of her murder. All of the internecine fratricidal struggle, the ideological factionalism, the splits and internal power struggles that James deplores are as much traceable to the Leninist concept of the disciplined communist party as the custodian of the revolution, as against all others, as they are traceable to the Stalinist gloss on the Leninist texts.

It is, indeed, the danger of the Leninist concept of the party that it leads, easily, to a concurrent concept of the party leader. It thus generates the hero-cult, as with Lenin himself, Mao-Tse-Tung, Fidel Castro, and others. In similar fashion, a sort of James cult has grown up in the Third World movements, acclaiming him as the guru who knows the secrets. His disciples speak of him almost as if he were divinity itself. Yet surely, like all of us, he has his limitations. His Leninist concept of the party as chosen vanguard is dangerous since it is at bottom anti-democratic. When he writes on Pan-Africanism or the Caribbean as a single nation he seems to be over-romantic in his expectations. He can see meaning in things — such as the novels of Wilson Harris — where others only see an almost completely unreadable author who loses himself in the upper stratosphere of myth and metaphysics. The editors of this volume tell us, again, that in 1939 he agitated among American blacks to oppose the world war (page iv). One wonders what James thinks would have happened had the Axis powers won that war; on any showing, it would have meant that the
blacks of the New World would have followed the Jews of the Old World into a second Holocaust: after the Jews, the blacks. His dislike of what he calls "bourgeois intellectuals" can lead him at times into a dangerous anti-intellectualism, as in his sweeping statement that the analysis of work is "a practical problem for practical people, who are not given to writing books" (page 126) a truly astonishing observation when one remembers all of the working-class people in the progressive movements all over who have written their own books, going back at least to the English Chartist worker-authors of the early Victorian period. There are times, indeed, when it seems to the reader that James is sometimes capable of playing to the gallery, of affecting a contempt for the socialists of the chair: an attitude, perhaps, that comes almost naturally to a self-educated revolutionary more at home in the art of the public platform than in the art of the academic classroom.

And yet it is not merely a matter of content. It is also a matter of manner. For all of his intellectual gifts it takes a great deal of patience to read James. His literary style is peculiar, to say the least. He rambles. He lectures. He pontificates. He parades all of his learning, even when it is irrelevant to the topic at hand. He is given to large prophetic utterances, almost as if he were some Mosaic leader announcing the truth to his people. He cannot resist intruding his own person in whatever narrative or analysis he is undertaking. There is almost a schizophrenic personality at work here: on the one hand, he is the Marxist theoretician, analyzing in scientific terms the general revolutionary process; on the other hand he is the bourgeois individualistic savant, immersed, as much as Eric Williams, in his own inward hunger. All of this, finally, is couched in a truly Johnsonian ponderosity of style; it seems at times to the reader that James is like nothing so much as a battleship attempting to turn around in a duckpond.

Human nature being what it is, it is only too easy to understand how the literary or the personality cult develops. One would have the true humility of the saint, like St. Francis of Assisi, to resist it. But the habit of the cult corrupts both the hero-figure who is idealized and the applauding crowd who join in the chorus. It is the duty of the sceptic to resist the temptation to join in; one is reminded of the spirited refusal of the American critic Edmund
Wilson, in his essay, "A dissenting opinion on Kafka," to accept that overrated writer as either a great artist or a moral guide. One could write a similar essay on the Bloomsbury cult or the George Orwell cult. For the best part of his long life James has splendidly served the world progressive cause, both black and white, in a variety of ways: as union organizer, as party propagandist, as adviser to Third World governments, and not least of all as shaper of systemic thought. It is right and proper that we should admire. But we do not have to worship.

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