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THE JAMES VERSIONS

C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies. SELWYN R. CUDJOE & WILLIAM E. CAIN (eds.). Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995. x + 476 pp. (Cloth US\$ 55.00, Paper US\$ 19.95)

C.L.R. James on the "Negro Question." SCOTT MCLEEMEE (ed.). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996. xxxvii + 154 pp. (Paper US\$ 16.95)

C.L.R. James: A Political Biography. KENT WORCESTER. Albany: State University of New York, 1996. xvi + 311 pp. (Paper US\$ 19.95)

"Why is there no socialism in the United States?," asked the German sociologist Werner Sombart (1906:43) in a famous essay at the beginning of the present century. Immigrants, it is true, had brought socialist notions with them in the middle of the past century, and had caused some anarchistic wavelets in the 1880s; there had been radical protest movements such as the Grangers, and a fledgling third party like the Populists; there were famous social critics and utopians like Henry George and Edward Bellamy, but – in striking contrast to other parts of the Hemisphere – a socialist movement of any political weight never came off the ground.

When, in 1938, the Trinidadian man of letters and political activist C.L.R. James arrived in the United States from Britain, Sombart's question, if he had known it, would not have worried him. A committed Trotskyist, he joined one of the tiny groups or "tendencies" of the same persuasion, which all were driven by a quasi-religious fervor that would be able, they believed, to eventually move the mountains standing in their way. Much of the abundant material that James wrote as an activist during his North American years demonstrates his unshakable faith in "that unfailing insight into the fundamental processes of historical development, so characteristic of our great predecessors" (James 1943, in McLemee p. 107). It is also replete, of course, with the familiar hermetically defined quasi-scholastic

categories ("petty bourgeoisie," "proletariat"), and it makes use of all rhetorical tricks of the believer's trade ("inevitably," "logically and historically headed for," "Marxism has demonstrated the only way," etc.).

Yet, the useful selection (with an excellent Introduction) by Scott McLemee of James's hitherto hardly accessible writings on the "Negro Question" also shows that in the fifteen years prior to his deportation from the United States in 1953 James did more than merely develop his own views on the tactical and strategic aspects of the "race" struggle and the theory that should lie at their basis. His travels and lecturing throughout the country also put him, the perceptive and intrigued outsider, in touch with everyday life, with concrete social problems and conditions which he described in vivid and convincing detail (see, for example, "With the Sharecroppers," "White Workers' Prejudices").

It had been Trotsky himself who asked James to go to the United States and help his comrades of the Socialist Workers Party with their "Negro work," and in 1939 James went to Mexico to see the great man himself. Trotsky – who a few years earlier was still wondering if the Southern blacks had not preserved a common African language, hidden from the whites (McLemee p. xix) – had long been insisting that his followers in the United States pay more attention to the black minority. He wanted James to serve as a guide in this matter, and in Mexico James gave him his views. He did not accept the Communists' "Black Belt" concept (made public by the Communist International in 1929) which offered an independent state to the blacks if, after the Revolution, they so wished. James, who was impressed by the massive response to Marcus Garvey but despised his goals (Back to Africa) and his populist ways of operating, wanted to build a new "Negro mass movement," not necessarily socialist, fighting for "the day-to-day demands of the Negro" (McLemee pp. 10-11). He later refined his thinking in this respect, arguing on the one hand that race consciousness "increases in direct ratio with the development of capitalism and the possibilities of liberation," while at the same time insisting that the Trotskyist party should recognize the "fundamentally progressive tendency" of the "[race] chauvinism of the oppressed" which can make great contributions to the struggle for socialism (McLemee pp. 86-87). He thus tried to bridge the gap between his unfailing confidence in the ultimate victory of "universality" – a favorite term of his – and his admirably early recognition that in everyday life and thought "race" is more than the epiphenomenon that orthodox theory – socialist as well as liberal – considers it to be.

During his American period (which, due to the war, was to last so much longer than the few months James had had in mind), he slowly moved away from the workers' state thesis of the Trotskyists, and toward a quasi-anarcho-syndicalist view that emphasized the self-activity of "the masses"

(which lay at the roots of the Trinidadian *Tapia* movement, started in the sixties by his young friend Lloyd Best).

Intriguing as some of his theorizing and pamphleteering was, the obscurity of much of it is the more depressing and risky because, as is generally the case with religious sectarian debates, our salvation is supposed to depend on it. As Kent Worcester points out in his carefully written and well-balanced political biography, the Trotskyist “tendency” to which James belonged was simultaneously a workshop on theory, a political faction, and a social network. With so many functions and such an exciting goal, the “membership came to expect great things from what was, in the final analysis, a small leftist clique,” full of “anger and frustration” (Worcester p. 85).

Yet, contrary to the narrower, perhaps even monomaniacal interests of some of his activist-friends, James’s Trinidadian past as a budding novelist and playwright and his wide humanistic erudition helped him, in this same period, to move easily in other circles and make friends with artists like the singer Paul Robeson and the novelist Richard Wright – and not only because they, though communists rather than Trotskyists, shared much of his ideas about “the Negro question.” He further developed a keen interest in American history and popular culture, producing as one of its fruits a manuscript on American Civilization which remained unpublished until after his death (James 1993). It was his enjoyment – unusual at the time for a serious intellectual – of all forms of “mass culture” that gave him his keen and “modern” interest in the interplay of art and audience. All these interests and endeavors provided him with a liberating space outside the asphyxiating and increasingly poisonous air of his little Trotskyist grouping of which he later wrote that all his energies spent there had been “absolutely useless” (Worcester p. 113).

If we look at the limited impact of James’s publications during his American years, the question arises why (especially after his death in London in 1989), his reputation, notably in university circles and particularly in the United States, changed in a few years from marginality to ever warmer and more sustained attention, with the founding of a C.L.R. James Society and a C.L.R. James Institute, as well as a large and rapidly increasing number of conferences and publications on the man and his work.

In *C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, itself the impressive result of such a conference at Wellesley College in 1991, Selwyn Cudjoe and William Cain rank James with the likes of Toussaint Louverture, Dessalines, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois and Mahatma Gandhi, among others (p. 1). The book’s twenty-seven contributions, which range from personal memoirs to an analysis of the gender dynamics in James’s early and only novel *Minty Alley* (1936, but written in 1928) to a critical examination of philosophic divergences within James’s Trotskyist “tenden-

cy,” suggest in their totality an exhaustive coverage of the man’s life and works. This may easily lead to an eager reader’s exhaustion, especially as not all of these essays are easily digestible.

In an afterword to this same volume Paul Buhle, James’s first biographer and first anthologist, addresses the matter of James’s increasing popularity in some detail. Buhle’s *C.L.R. James Anthology* was published in 1970, one year after the U.S. ban against James had been lifted, when he had started lecturing there again. The book attracted some attention, Buhle writes, among a divided audience – “mostly white readers (New Leftists drawn to class or culture themes)” and “black readers (intellectuals of all generations, but mostly young people interested in a radical black writer with Pan-African connections).” But a wide audience James did not live to have. He did not “take,” writes Buhle, and “perhaps the idea of him was more attractive than his actual writing.” The “elusive quality” of James was fascinating to some, “but daunting to many others” (p. 441). “Dead, James could be summed up better than in life,” and Buhle himself had been “working rather frantically against that deadline, so to speak” to have his biography ready (p. 443). The eloquent teacher, the charming conversationalist, the brilliant theoretician could now be eulogized by friends and admirers.

Not everyone belonged without qualification to this latter category. The British (not “Caribbean”) intellectual Gordon K. Lewis who is seen by Buhle (p. 448, note 1) as generally mean-spirited in his treatment of James, wrote of James’s “egocentrism reaching almost paranoid dimensions” (1968:222), a qualification which interestingly contrasts with the “natural modesty” that the equally British Labourite Michael Foot ascribes, in the same volume, to his old friend and hero (p. 98).

James’s life and work could now be seen in the broader, even global, perspective of the ongoing black struggle over nearly our entire century, as well as of the apparently nearly finished history of “real existing socialism.” Memorial meetings, a BBC special, the founding of the Institute and the Society – it all came together now, even coinciding (now that the cold war was over) with new spaces for the intriguing particularities of black culture and African studies next to the older and rigid political radical orthodoxy, a postmodern edifice in which part of James’s ideas, republished and re-created, was to have its niche.

But, one should add, there was more to it than that. When James died there were, both in Britain and in North America, much larger contingents and constituencies of Anglophone West Indians than when he first arrived there. There were poets, novelists, academics of renown (Derek Walcott, V.S. Naipaul, George Lamming, Wilson Harris, Stuart Hall), and popular Trinidadian artists such as Mighty Sparrow with a wide following there,

who had respected and not seldom admired him. George Lamming once called him “the sharpest and most interesting mind that the British Caribbean has produced in three centuries of learning” (1984:47). They all felt indebted to this singular man and intellect who, born in 1901, had critically witnessed earlier and longer than they, what Walcott, in an impressive and cautious interview included in the Cudjoe and Cain volume, calls the simultaneous “sunrise of the Caribbean and the sunset of the British Empire” (p. 37), between which James did not make a distinction. And there were those like Edward Said who, intrigued by similar phenomena elsewhere, had quickly felt and expressed an affinity with James.

All his life he carried with him at least two advantages of his Trinidadian origin. One was his education at home and at the famed Queen’s Royal College in Port of Spain. He was the child of an ambitious teacher/civil-servant father, and a book-loving mother who, “her pince-nez on her Caucasian nose,” as James later wrote, “would be reading till long after midnight” (cited by Grimshaw in Cudjoe & Cain p. 23). The young James eagerly absorbed what the school, exemplary in the great British tradition, had to offer in classics, cricket, and self-discipline. He went on to teach there himself, while also writing for periodicals and finishing *Minty Alley*.

The second advantage was that his particular, middle-class, Trinidadian environment, while of course not free from racist offense, left, as he later observed, no scar on his psyche (Worcester p. 12). When, in 1932, he left for England to further a writing career, he became one of the small number of young black intellectuals from different parts of the Empire, whom the larger British society (and certainly the radical circles in which they moved) saw as exotically interesting and treated as such. His publisher Frederic Warburg later described him as “noticeably good-looking ... Immensely amiable, he loved the fleshpots of capitalism, fine cooking, fine clothes, fine furniture, and beautiful women, without a trace of the guilty remorse to be expected from a seasoned warrior of the class war” (1959:214, cited in McLemee p. xii).

He developed, moreover, into an acclaimed cricket critic. The ease with which James moved around in England did not dim his radical views; almost nightly he would address public meetings with his anti-Stalinist rhetoric. Nor did his stay in Britain lessen his anti-colonialist fervor. Together with Kenyatta, Nkrumah, the Trinidadian George Padmore (whose birthplace was close to his) and others, he gave form to the Pan-African movement and its ideals of an independent Africa and a free West Indies.

He had, then, already matured into a person at ease with himself when, after arriving in the United States, he observed, and was for the first time subjected to, the harsher forms of discrimination (Worcester p. 57). This

made it possible for him to dissect the “race problem,” as he now encountered it there, in a remarkably cool and detached manner. Part of his intellectual energy in the coming years would be spent, as we have seen, on clarifying and codifying the relationship between the particularity (and hitherto often underestimated importance) of “race” and the universality of “class” in such a fashion that he could still call himself a Marxist. The existential entanglement of such a relationship was also familiar, of course, to his Jewish comrades in the United States who back in Europe had embraced Trotskyism (or other varieties of Marxism) without necessarily wishing to disclaim the social importance of their religious/cultural identity.

A girl from this group became his third wife. (The first had been a Trinidadian of “Spanish descent” (Worcester p. 25), and the second a Californian model and activist, Constance Webb, whom he had entranced with his letters on love and Trotskyism; one of his affairs in between had been with a married Dutchwoman – in his words, a “ravishing blond” [Worcester p. 51].) In his old age in London the anthropologist Anna Grimshaw took constant care of him, ordering his archives and actively promoting his intellectual legacy (see Grimshaw’s essay in the Cudjoe & Cain volume).

James had charm, wit, and joie-de-vivre, but he could also show a scholastic tenacity that was not always appreciated. When Trotsky had asked him to go to the United States, writes Worcester, he may “also have been hoping to remove an awkward sectarian from the troubled British Trotskyist movement” (p. 50). James, on the other hand, had hoped to be back in Britain in time for the cricket season, but the War prevented that. Once back in London, in a one-room apartment, he emphasized, without denying the fruits of his long North American sojourn, that “my education, the books I was brought up on, the sports, were all British. I feel at home here” (Worcester, p. 208). Is it due to a similar sentiment that the brief biography of James in a recent British anthology of West Indian writers (Wambu 1998:172) does not mention his North American years at all?

Nor did he miss the West Indies. He had never gone back there, not even when, in the 1930s, his adored mother lay dying. In 1958, it is true, he accepted an invitation to help prepare for the coming independence of what proved to be the short-lived West Indian Federation, and he briefly served as the editor of *The Nation*, the mouthpiece of the People’s National Movement, but his relations with its leader Eric Williams (a friend and once his pupil at Queens Royal College) were fraught with mutual political and personal irritation. Already in 1960 he was “expelled” from the party (as Williams put it – see Milette’s essay [p. 337] in Cudjoe & Cain; Cudjoe & Cain [p. 5] speak rather of “resignation”). James left Trinidad again for London in 1962, just before the official proclamation of independence.

When, three years later, he put his feet again on Trinidadian soil, as a cricket reporter for a British daily, he was promptly put under house arrest as politically dangerous. That same year he returned once more, this time in an unfortunate and misjudged effort to oppose and dethrone the powerful Williams at the polls in 1966 with a Workers and Farmers Party led by himself and two (oil) trade union leaders-turned-politicians. In Tunapuna, his birthplace and home constituency, he obtained 2.8 percent of the popular vote, an outcome representative of the overall dismal result (Worcester p. 171). It was not the first time that James, who generally is described as restrained and balanced in his personal behavior, got carried away by strong emotions. His enthusiasm for causes (Africa) or persons (Nkrumah, Rodney, Williams) could bring him to high praise and expectations first, and then to caustic criticism, even disdain, when they did not conform to the rules that he had set. In Trinidad, his influence lingered on after his departure in 1966. In an interesting essay, James Milette suggests that some of James's close associates were behind the military insurrection of 1970 (in Cudjoe & Cain p. 345).

The two books through which James's name will live on for a wider public were not written in the country which, perhaps more than others, honors him now. *The Black Jacobins* (1938) was conceived before he ever left Trinidad (Worcester p. 30). *Beyond a Boundary* (1963) was certainly indebted to insights ripened in the United States. But both were written in the England where he could not help but feel at home. In London, *The Black Jacobins* had been preceded by James's play *Toussaint l'Ouverture*, which was performed there with his friend Paul Robeson in the title role (Worcester p. 35).

In the course of the years, thousands of Anglophone readers have learned all they will ever know about Haitian history from James's powerful and engaging book about the country's national revolution, with its bafflingly complex relations between "blacks" and "mulattoes," and with a hero whose only shortcoming appears to be a certain aloofness from "the masses." The story itself is gripping, and James imbues it with a contagious confidence in yet-to-come triumphs of "the masses" against their masters elsewhere. Indeed, in a separate volume, *A History of Negro Revolt* (1939), he focuses (rather sloppily, says Worcester [p. 40]) on black rebellions elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere and in Africa.

Was it, I should like to ask in passing, in an older British tradition that James (followed by all his *cognoscenti*) chose to baptize the French colony which was to become the Republic of Haiti with the operatic and italianate name of San Domingo rather than with its official name of Saint Domingue? It certainly helps to prolong the wrong notion that today the Haitian Republic is more than the Western third part of the island of

Hispaniola. But then, for quite a few of our authors, there is also the strong belief that “the Caribbean” is really not much more than the former British West Indies; Cudjoe and Cain allude, for example, to “[James’s] importance to the Marxist Left in Trinidad and Tobago (and by extension, the Caribbean)” (p. 15).

Beyond a Boundary, James’s classic biography-cum-treatise on cricket as art, societal metaphor, and civilizing agency, is perhaps his best claim to fame, durable for as long as there is an audience interested in the well-told story of the colonial upbringing of a gifted boy, as long as there is a public (in the former British Empire minus Canada) which appreciates the complexities of a game that is “aristocratic with so many revolutionary possibilities, [a] colonial symbol that undermines empire” and yet a good game in its own right, and (as Mark Kingwell argues in his splendid “Keeping a Straight Bat: Cricket, Civility, and Postcolonialism”) as long as this Victorian game does not “capitulate to the perverse imperatives of the marketplace” (Kingwell in Cudjoe & Cain pp. 382-83).

It is probably true that, as his publisher wrote, “excess was James’s crime, an excess of words whose relevance to the contemporary tragedy was less than he supposed” (Warburg p. 215), but much of what remains when the excess is disposed of is inspiring and needs preserving.

He was a man of many intriguing (quasi-)contradictions: his scholastic rigidity versus his playful speculation, his love for the Western classics versus the search for a proper “black” identity, his belief in the economy as a prime mover versus the notion of culture (and sports as part of it) as the great moulder of thought and behavior. He wanted to be a theoretician steeped in Marx, Hegel and, yes, Heidegger, but also the forceful, practical, and reliable man of revolutionary action. Finally, there was his ingrained anti-Britishness, at odds with his complete osmosis of Britishness. It must have made him into a fascinating personality, able to captivate a great variety of audiences, easily participating in debates of Trotskyist thinkers, of strategists of black movements, and of latter-day theorists of cultural studies, and always aware of counter-arguments which he often and inwardly may have been close to adopting himself. All this makes it somewhat easier to understand, perhaps, why his remarkable life and his best (plus some of his bad) writing are now being canonized so enthusiastically, even in the country without socialism.

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