



Munich Personal RePEc Archive

## **A Review of C.L.R. James and Marxism in the United States**

Conrad, Daren A.

The University of the West Indies

9 April 2013

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/46039/>

MPRA Paper No. 46039, posted 10 Apr 2013 14:45 UTC

## **A Review of C.L.R. James and Marxism in the United States**

*Daren A. Conrad, Ph.D.*<sup>\*</sup>

*Lecturer*

*University of the West Indies*

---

<sup>\*</sup> Special thanks to Drs. Rodney D. Green and James Campbell for their assistance in completing this paper.

*“Times would pass, old empires would fall and new ones take their place, the relations of countries and the relations of classes had to change, before I discovered that it is not utility of goods which matter, but movement; not where you are or what you have but where you have come from and where you are going and the rate at which you are getting there”.*

*- C.L.R. James (Beyond A Boundary)*

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the influence on the theoretical dimension of Marxism, advanced by Cyril Lionel Robert James, on the struggles in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s and to explore the influence that this intellectual had in the development of an understanding of Marxism in the U.S. during this period.

In order to do so, it is important to chronologically follow James's life. For the purpose of this paper, I will discuss some of the aspects of James's Marxism which will allow us to see how he shaped his thoughts as a Marxist and the extent to which he was able to put his theories into practice.

A fragment of James's autobiography serves as a useful illustration:

*I had been reading...But the people who had passion, human energy, anger, violence and generosity were the common people whom I saw around me. They shaped my political outlook and from that day to this day those are the people with who I am concerned the most. That's why I was able to understand Marx very easily, and particularly Lenin. When I went into Marxism I was already well prepared...Even in my days of fiction I had the instinct which enable me to grasp the fundamentals of Marxism so easily and then to work at Marxism having the basic elements of a Marxist view – my concern with the common people.<sup>1</sup>*

James's method was more or less empirical and his observations formed the basis for his exploration of ideas.

## ***Introduction***

Cyril Lionel Robert James was born in Trinidad and grew up in Tunapuna, a small town outside Port-of-Spain. His father was a schoolmaster and his mother was an avid reader who introduced James to Literature at a rather early age.

As a boy growing up in a small colonial island, 'James gained a sound understanding of European civilization and developed a keen interest in ancient Greece. He immersed himself in its history and literature, in its classical foundations, in its art and in its music; but at the same time he rebelled against formal schooling, the authority of Queens Royal College, the islands premier educational establishment and its British public school masters'. He was, 'a bright boy' - but he was to establish himself independently later on in life. From early on, James recognized that literature provided him with a vision of society and a glimpse of human forces that were at work in the universe. This motivated him to read extensively.

During the 1920s in Trinidad, James' livelihood was as a cricket reporter and as a schoolteacher at his alma mater. Interestingly enough, among his pupils was Eric Eustace Williams, the future Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. James became part of a literary circle and wrote a number of short stories and essays on history and philosophy for *Trinidad* (1929 – 1930) and *The Beacon* (1931 – 1933). He was particularly drawn to the vitality of backstreet life and the resourcefulness of its women. *La Divina Pastora* (1972) and *Triumph* (1929) established James's potential as a novelist and revealed his sense of imagination and his close observation of human life.

At the age of thirty-one (31), James sailed to England with the intention of becoming a novelist. He spent a great deal of his first year in England living in Nelson, Lancashire where he earned his living as a cricket reporter on the Manchester Guardian. Undoubtedly, this position increased his public profile, and provided him with an opportunity to publicize the case for West Indian independence. During this time, James also examined the question of colonialism by initially focusing on the life of Captain Cipriani and outlining conditions in Trinidad, the population, the social divisions and the form of government.

Within about six years, he had published the classic history of the Haitian revolution: *The Black Jacobins*; a Trotskyist history of the Comintern, *World Revolution, 1917-1936*; a translation of Boris Souvarine's biography of Stalin. He also helped to write the autobiography of Learie Constantine, a great West Indian cricketer.

James was well on the way to becoming the novelist that he had always dreamed of. But, he also embraced the heritage of the Enlightenment and the French revolution, the socialist movements of Europe, the working class of both Europe and North America and the Bolshevism of Lenin and Trotsky which transformed Russia and promised to liberate the world from all oppression.

### ***The Beginning of a Marxist***

In 1933, James moved from Trinidad to London. This move marked the beginning of James's career as a leading figure in the Trotskyist movement. The industrial disputes that were going on at the time in Lancashire led James to join the Labor party in an attempt to unite with the workers in their struggles for better working conditions. James's ability to identify and unite

with these individuals can be attributed to his own experience with imperialism and racism while living in Trinidad – the British colony as well as his exposure to trade union militancy in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Nelson, Lancashire. James quickly became disillusioned with the moderation of the Labor party and joined the more militant Independent Labor Party (ILP) in 1934 where he came into contact with followers of Leon Trotsky, organized in the Marxist Group.<sup>†</sup> James went beyond the politics of the ILP and began to consider himself an anti-Stalinist Marxist. He felt that Stalin lacked leadership qualities for ruling a socialist state and attempted to validate his position on Stalinism. I will now briefly discuss James's views on Stalinism. It is important to note however, that only a minority political faction, of which James was a part, held these views on Stalinism. Hence, by establishing his beliefs about Stalinism, we can better understand some of the forces that began to shape James' own thinking as a Marxist.

In his book entitled *World Revolution*, James outlined Stalin's 'supreme unfitness to lead a socialist State'. According to James, Stalin's touch was one of corruption and his attempts to undermine leaders of the Tiflis organization were by means of vicious slander and intrigue which eventually led to his expulsion from the organization. When Lenin became incapacitated, Stalin began to stamp his corrupt image in the Bolshevik party. Stalin's national limitedness became evident when he wrote a letter concerning the struggle Lenin was waging against those who wished to put an end to the revolution and against Trotsky still striving for unity. "We have heard about the tempest in the tea-cup, the bloc of Lenin-Plekhanov on the one hand, and Trotsky-Martov-Bogdanov on the other. As far as I know the workers incline toward the former. In general, however, they mistrust the émigrés. Why should they bother themselves about them; as

---

<sup>†</sup> As an independent thinker, James wanted to be a part of a movement that would allow him to advocate his own views. He felt that the Independent Labor Party (ILP), being more militant, would provide him with the opportunity he was looking for.

far as we are concerned, everyone who has the interest of the movement at heart does his own work. The rest will follow of itself. That is, in my opinion, the best." The account given by James made it appear as if Stalin did not care about anyone else. Some felt that he had only gotten to where he was by siding with Lenin on every occasion and James was one of those individuals. Stalinism, a form of state power, manipulated and killed millions of people inside and outside of Russia. James was faced with this 'monster' and being the radical that he was, felt that it was necessary to break with Stalinism. 'Once you broke with Stalinism, the first avenue open to you was Trotskyism' and that was the course James took.

James' approval of Trotskyism emerged not only because this movement enabled one to criticize the weaknesses of Stalin and the Soviet Union without fear of losing their status as a Marxist, but it also provided an opportunity for people to escape the futility of what was being taught as Marxism. As a member of the Trotsky group, 'James read Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, which led him to undertake a serious study of the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky.'<sup>2</sup> Evidently, his life as a Marxist commenced when he assumed membership in a Trotskyite group which was known for attracting dedicated and intelligent members. He confirmed this in an interview with Al Richardson et al, published by the Socialist Platform, where he stated quite frankly: "I joined the Trotsky movement and learned Marxism in the Trotsky Movement."<sup>3</sup> He soon became a prominent member of the Marxist group and its foremost polemicist. The duration of his time as a Marxist occurred while the Soviet Union was in existence. 'His writings for the ILP journal *New Leader* became models of Marxist pamphleteering, linking diverse struggles to dialectical unity and his speeches were fiery denunciations of capitalism, imperialism and Stalinism.'<sup>4</sup> The fact that James joined the ILP can



be linked to his ability to identify with the workers in their struggles, coming out of his own experience with imperialism while in Trinidad.

Later on, James played a major role in the Fourth International<sup>‡</sup>, participated in an important 1936 conference of Trotskyists and was a delegate to the founding conference of the Fourth International in 1938 when he was elected to the organizations International Executive Committee. In that very year, the newly formed Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the United States invited James to visit the United States to address audiences on the political situation in Europe as the war approached.

### ***James in the United States – His Break with the Trotsky Movement***

When CLR James arrived in the United States in 1938 to contribute to the work of the newly formed SWP, Max Shachtman and James P. Cannon, veterans of American communism, led the organization. James quickly assumed leadership responsibilities in the SWP, in part due to his charisma, poise and his understanding of Marxism (as a Marxist historian) and remained in the United States for fifteen years. Clearly, James was on a mission to understand the American society by adopting an approach that would enable him to see America as a civilization. However, by 1940, debates on the nature of the Soviet Union would split the SWP and the Fourth International and James would leave the party with a faction led by Max Shachtman.

In 1939, one year after he arrived in the United States, James was part of the wing of the Trotsky movement that split away from the SWP. James assumed a prominent position in the newly formed Workers party (WP) led by Shachtman. The Workers party had taken control of

---

<sup>‡</sup> The Fourth International was the worldwide revolutionary socialist organization established by those who agreed with Trotsky's basic perspectives.

the SWP's theoretical magazine, *New International*, and James remained as one of the important contributors. However, within years, James became alienated from Shachtman's views and developed a more positive appreciation of the SWP. At the same time, Raya Dunayevskaya began developing her critique of state capitalism and they (both James and Dunayevskaya) began to apply it not only to capitalist society and Stalinist Russia, but also to the bureaucratic elements in the labor movement itself.

To provide a context for what was to follow, I will now take a closer look at some of the activities that were taking place in the political domain in the United States at that time. To begin with, there was a rise in industrial disputes. This was mainly due to the fact that industrialization and production had increased as a result of arms production, and, secondly, a new industrial labor force containing many blacks and women was required to replace the soldiers and to supplement the work force already there. Along with these factors there was a sharp rise in the level of automation in the factories, making factory work particularly alienating. For James and his friend Raya Dunayevskaya, it was also a chance to see the possibility of spontaneous action which gave credence to their position that it was the workers themselves and not parties who were the most important force in the revolutionary struggle. This view led to the following events:

‘James and Dunayevskaya set up a study group within the Workers Party, initially to work on the idea of State Capitalism.’<sup>5</sup> Dunayevskaya set to work analysing the Russian economy using all statistical sources and economic documents available to her. Along with a look at overall production in the USSR and in comparison to the world economy she analysed its internal workings in terms of production incentives, taxes and social classes. She concluded that although the economy was planned, it did show most of the characteristics of a capitalist

economy and these were not compatible with an economy in transition to a workers state. This was one step beyond theories of state capitalism put forward by other writers who focused only on the competition of the Russian economy with the rest of the capitalist world. About this time, a new member, Grace Lee, who had been involved in politics in Chicago, joined C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya. The three became leaders of what was to become the Johnson-Forest Tendency.

In 1948, C.L.R. James, Grace-Lee and Raya Dunayevskaya left the WP and returned to the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Once again, James played an important role by assisting the SWP in its black liberation work and contributing articles to the SPW's magazine, *Fourth International*. There, he provided insight to his co-thinkers while expressing his views on revolutionary Marxism and the role of the working-class in the context of socialism. James in the Johnson – Forest Tendency (JFT) asserted:

*“The struggle for socialism is the struggle for proletarian democracy. Proletarian democracy is not the crown of socialism. It is the 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 people, the socialist revolution is advanced. The proletariat mobilizes itself as a self-acting force through its own communities, unions, parties and other organizations”.*

The Johnson – Forest Tendency continued to advance this perspective, which eventually differentiated them from the SWP majority. This led to yet another split from the SWP. The newly formed group, led by James, took the name, Correspondence Publishing Committee (CPC), devoted to producing the monthly workers' newspaper, *Correspondence*, advocating the views of the Johnson – Forest Tendency.

The activities of James (the splits from the SWP, WP and SWP again), makes it a bit difficult to focus on the theoretical dimension of Marxism as James saw it. The following section of this paper though, is an attempt to outline the theoretical dimension of James's Marxism while he was in the United States during the period 1938 – 1953.

### ***The Marxism of James – A Theoretical Dimension***

James' Marxism was very flexible and was concerned not with how the economy worked but rather the effects of the economy on the proletariat and the state. Evidence has confirmed that James' progress as a Marxist theorist would be conditional on his actions beyond Leninism. He has however dispelled the notion that Leninism was related to Stalinism. Additionally, given Trotsky's reluctance to accept that the Soviet Union was not a worker's state; James failed to accept Trotsky's views as the final say.

C.L.R. James offered a critical assessment of several of the classic Marxist views as they applied to the United States. These areas included (1) the analysis of the current period (state capitalism as a later stage of imperialism, with important implications for labor organizations); (2) organizational structure of the revolutionary process; (3) the position of revolutionary organizations on black nationalist movements and black independent movements; and (4) the Marxian theory of history (understanding the notion of totality). James struggled for these views through a variety of organizational forms, including the Socialist Workers Party, the Workers

Party and the Johnson-Forest Tendency, never submitting to a disciplined party view on such issues as was typical of many revolutionary intellectuals.

C.L.R. James was poised to make a unique theoretical contribution to the Marxist school of thought in the United States because he had arrived at a key moment and stood in a special place among those on the American scene. Marxism in the United States, when James arrived, was based on immigrant sensibility. The internal strength of the collective class belonged to those who brought with them a heritage and a set of beliefs and practices from outside of the United States, but, ‘the proletariat stood as the unifying element for these classes’.<sup>6</sup> However, they lacked the power to transform America since only a few held a commanding power in some industries and they were unable to vote. Thus, the proletariat had to compromise their movements’ internal dynamics with the possibilities imposed by the economic system and seek alliances with non-proletarian groups. This sequence of activities served to weaken the cohesiveness within the proletarian groups making it difficult for the proletariat to emancipate themselves. It was just about this time that James arrived in the United States. He provided a critical assessment of Marxism in the United States and elaborated on his own theories as a revolutionary Marxist that provided the impetus for the proletariat to actively engage themselves in their struggles.

At the same time, the depth of the crisis in the international socialist movement was revealed following the collapse of the Second International. Lenin, in exile, did not accept that ‘the crisis facing the international socialist movement was simply due to the betrayal of party leaders.’<sup>7</sup> This was at a time when Lenin was studying Hegel and mastering dialectics. He presented the view that capitalism had reached a new stage, imperialism, which also implied a new stage of the

working class. Lenin pointed out that the state power in Russia was in the hands of the working class and concretized this claim by noting that if the state owned all the means of production, then the only task remaining would be to organize the population into cooperative societies. He asserted that, 'The new stage of imperialism gave rise to a powerful elite working class, providing a social base for democracy within a capitalist society.'<sup>8</sup>

James would later accept this view postulated by Lenin. In studying the mode of labor in the United States, James wrote:

*A whole new layer of worker, the result of economic development, burst into revolt in the CIO. The CIO in its inception aimed at a revolution in production...*

*Because it was not and could not be carried through to a conclusion, the inevitable counterpart was the creation of a labor bureaucracy. The history of production since is the corruption of the bureaucracy and its transformation into an instrument of a capitalist production, the restoration to the bourgeoisie of what it had lost in 1936, the right to control production standards...*

*The bureaucracy must inevitably substitute the struggle over consumption, higher wages, pensions, education, etc., for a struggle in production. This is the basis of the welfare state, the attempt to appease workers with the fruit of their satisfaction in the work itself.<sup>9</sup>*

James felt that the United States labor bureaucracy was inherently similar to the Stalinists, which implied a new stage of the proletariat in industrial countries. Additionally, James echoed the thoughts of Marx that the proletariat had to be revolutionary or it was nothing. James then embarked on the development of his theory of proletarian organization appropriate to the new stage of the working class. Organization, as James saw it, consisted of three levels viz: political

and theoretical leadership; activists in the arenas in which they work and rank-and-file workers, youth and housewives. He believed that Marxists had the right and the duty to organize in this manner, present their views to a wider public, report on the day-to-day activities of the working class and to participate in revolutionary struggles. This view was contrary to the traditional communist organizational theory, which was essentially democratic centralist. Not only was this view complemented by an elaborate theory but it also supported the role of party discipline in ferreting out truth through struggles.

Modern Politics, a series of James' Lectures, provides yet another dimension of James's Marxism. In these lectures, James presented a comprehensive understanding of Marxism as he saw it. For the purpose of this paper however, I will briefly discuss some of these other aspects which include his views on the "revolutionary proletariat" and the Labor Theory of Value.

Firstly, in one of his lectures, James compared the middle class with the proletariat by saying:

*The teachers etc. can only make some noise but they can do nothing. In all struggles...it is the proletariat that is the master of the situation.'*<sup>10</sup>

This is no surprise since he always expressed his belief in the "revolutionary proletariat". In these lectures, he also expressed the view that domination of capital over men robbed them of a happy life. Secondly, James expounded on the Labor Theory of Value and suggested that it should be called the Value Theory of Labor instead. He elaborated by noting that neither the machines nor capital ever brought surpluses. Instead he argued that surpluses were generated as a result of labour.

Another aspect of James's Marxism is the notion that totality merges with the theory of history and a dialectical method. In Western political thought, totality had its origins in Greek

thought. Aristotle pointed out that the state was before the individual alluding to the fact that the individual was part of the *politicos* or whole. In Marxist thought, the notion of totality as seen by Marx himself is made clear in the *German Ideology* where he wrote:

*Our conception of history depends on our ability to expound the real processes of production, starting out from the simple material production of life. To explain the whole mass of different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, etc., and trace their origins and growth, by which means of course, the whole thing can be shown in its totality.*

This concept of merging theory of history with a dialectical method was the same notion adopted by James. Thus, as James saw it, totality meant the total relations in society and their historical evolution. However, he takes it a step further, indicating that totality has three (3) features. Firstly, similar to Aristotle's view that the individual is part of the whole or community, James reasoned that self-actualization was only possible within the context of a relationship to the community. An individual can only reach greater heights if he was actively engaged in the struggles of the oppressed within his community. Secondly, 'James argued that the historical developments in society and the development of capitalism created a crisis, which was represented by labor and its alienation. The reconciliation of this alienation created the basis for the social emancipation of labor'.<sup>11</sup> Finally, he suggested that totality is an entire civilization and its trajectory. In other words, James's notion of totality gave him a broad historical sweep. He felt that in order to understand the present, one must first understand the history fully. Therefore, his political thought appeared to some as a 'critique of Western civilization'.<sup>12</sup>

Now we will address the issue of the Negro Question, which is an important aspect of the Marxism advanced by James in the United States. In 1940, the African American population was



approximately 13 million. Although the independent struggles of these individuals had diminished in the 1920s and 1930s due to innovation and courage, the racial oppression they experienced was neither eradicated nor marginalized. James arrived in the United States at a time when the African Americans were making progress in their activities. This was instrumental in shaping his thinking.

At this juncture it is imperative that we first discuss the Marxist tradition on Black Nationalism and socialism. Marxism's legacy to Black Nationalism had been however a contradictory one. At the core of Marx's schema was the conception that each historical stage was advancement over the preceding one and this was primarily due to the fact that his views had been extrapolated from the European experience.

James' efforts in raising the awareness of revolutionary Marxists about the importance of the "Negro Question" to the class struggle must be emphasized. He had a profound interest in the struggles of the proletariat and the oppressed in the United States. For James, it was necessary to clarify the misconception that the history of blacks in America was characterized simply by people who were poor and oppressed. Instead he sought to bring to light the fact that not only were these individuals vibrant but they were actively seeking ways to liberate themselves and to resist persecution.

James indicated that, "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. They are designated by their whole historical past to be, under adequate leadership, the very vanguard of the proletarian revolution."

To understand James's position on this issue of the Negro question, we now need to develop a better understanding of the context of the black struggle in the United States. In the

1920s, there was a huge migration of African Americans from the south to the north, taking jobs in car plants in Chicago and in steel plants in Pittsburgh. This migration increased the role of the black proletariat and doubled the size of the black population who were somewhat militants. Consequently, there was mounting discrimination by whites and a proliferation in lynching. Oppression laid the foundation for independent African organizations. Garvey was the leader of the largest African movement which was a force to be reckoned with during this period. This movement caught the attention of James since he felt that Marxism could not neglect the African struggle.

In response to Garvey's "Back to Africa" slogan, James was vocal about his belief that African Americans 'did not believe that they would return to Africa'.<sup>13</sup> James cited one of the problems as the absence of revolutionary politics and groups and that the nationalist movements would disappear once the Negro began to make advancement. Thus, James proposed that:

- a) Support should be made for the right for self-determination among Negroes
- b) The "Back to Africa" slogan should not be raised to cause further divide
- c) Investigations should be made into the movements, particularly the one led by Garvey.

This position that James proposed seemed to dismiss the views of Garvey. With James having established his position at this point, he was able to fully address the issue of the Negro struggle.

In his *Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem* James stated:

*The proletariat, as we know, must lead the struggles of all the oppressed and all those who are persecuted by capitalism. But this has been interpreted in the past — and by some very good socialists too — in the following sense: the independent struggles of the Negro people have not got much more than an episodic value and as a matter of fact,*

*can constitute a great danger not only to the Negroes themselves, but to the organized labor movement. The real leadership of the Negro struggle must rest in the hands of organized labor and of the Marxist party. Without that the Negro struggle is not only weak, but is likely to cause difficulties for the Negroes and dangers to organized labor. This, as I say, is the position held by many socialists in the past. Some great socialists in the United States have been associated with this attitude. We, on the other hand, say something entirely different.*

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

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

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

*In this way we challenge directly any attempt to subordinate or to push to the rear the social and political significance of the independent Negro struggle for democratic rights. That is our position. It was the position of Lenin thirty years ago. It was the*

*position of Trotsky, which he fought for during many years. It has been concretized by the general class struggle in the United States, and the tremendous struggles of the Negro people. It has been sharpened and refined by political controversy in our movement, and best of all it has had the benefit of three or four years of practical application in the Negro struggle and in the class struggle by the Socialist Workers' Party during the past few years.*

James figured that if this position had reached a stage where it could be presented as had been proposed, it would be much simpler to understand the Negro Question.

The communist theory on the Negro Question had a somewhat ambiguous beginning. Lenin had asserted that the Negro struggle was part of a national struggle. American Communists had interpreted this literally: national struggle meant struggle for land. Trotsky and his American Organization had merely accepted this view but James however, began to move in a new direction. He offered to make moderate amendments to the program for self-determination.

In looking closer at the historical development of the Negro question, we see that the earlier Marxist movements in the United States to some extent had failed to grasp the fact that the Negro question was part of the national struggle. The socialist movement under Debs considered any special appeal to the Negro people as contrary to the spirit of socialism. Randolph appealed to Negroes to become socialists but proved incapable of dealing with the 'powerful nationalistic current of Garveyism that was prevalent at the time.'<sup>14</sup> In the past, the Communist Party was unable to understand either the significance of the Negro question in the U.S. or the method of work required. It was only through the drastic intervention of the

Communist International, that the Communist Party began a serious approach to the Negro question. The Communist Party in the United States then began to play a crucial role in the fight against racism. The party echoed the sentiments that the development of the caste oppression was a form of capitalist class oppression, thereby linking labor exploitation to racial oppression. The turn to the Negro question was on the whole sound and effective, but it was seriously handicapped by the adoption of a policy of advocating self-determination for the Black Belt. In 1935 with the new turn of the Communist International toward social patriotism, the work of the Communist Party among Negroes began a process of rapid deterioration. This was quite unfortunate. The Trotskyist movement from its foundation in 1928 to 1938 took even less interest in the Negro question than the Communist Party and once more it was only under the insistence of the international organization that the American Marxist movement took action on the Negro question.

James however would rekindle interest in the struggle of the Negroes. He sought to understand the historical context of the Negro question beginning with the Imperialists and Civil wars to put his views into perspective. He revealed that the Negroes did not believe that the wars were a struggle for democracy; neither did they believe that the bourgeois served the needs of the people. Further, grievances were not solved by voting and discussion.

By putting these events into a Marxist perspective based on oriental experiences, James made the Negro question more concrete. James also alluded to the development of capitalism itself as having given the independent Negro movement a fundamental and sharp relation with the proletariat. State capitalism created Negro proletarians and placed them as proletarians in what were once the most oppressed and exploited masses. However, in auto, steel, and coal these

proletarians became the vanguard of the workers' struggle and brought a substantial number of Negroes to positions of primacy in the struggle against capitalism.

All of the aforementioned elements coalesced into an independent Marxism as presented by C.L.R. James. Beginning with the theory of state capitalism as a new stage of capital, James and the Tendency charted new frontiers of thought. James equated socialism with democracy and noted that the struggle for socialism was the struggle for proletarian democracy since proletarian democracy formed the basis for socialism. The proletariat wielded the power since the labor factor was what added value to commodities. With the addition of labor, raw materials could be converted to valuable products and sold at high prices while the laborers were paid low wages. This meant that the capitalists were the ones who benefited at the expense of the laborers. James, recognizing this, felt that if the laborers were properly organized, they could intervene with terrific force upon the general society.

Now that we have looked at James's critical assessment of classic Marxist views on capitalism, organizational levels, the position of revolutionary organizations and the notion of totality, we can proceed to analyze how his thinking impacted on developments in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s - (bearing in mind that James returned to the U.S. around 1968 marking the beginning of his second sojourn). It is important to note that James remained true to the essential aspects of Marxism presented in this section of the paper and relied on these principles to grapple with new realities and fresh insights and to address the question of racism and anti-racist, nationalist and other struggles.

### *The Role of James's Marxism in Other Movements in the United States – 1960s & 1970s*

During the 1960s and 1970s two streams came together; the civil rights and Black power movements combined with the ghetto rebellions formed one stream, while the anti-war movement formed the other, both of which challenged the ruling class. During this period 'there was a spontaneous wave of non-violent militancy. With this spontaneous wave, there was the emergence of the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC) and other like organizations which were mobilizing themselves across America.'<sup>15</sup> The SNCC which had emerged out of the sit-ins at Jim Crow lunch counters in the early 1960s had embarked on a program of gathering white student support for civil rights struggles. The SNCC also took pride in organizing the poorest elements of the South to attack mainstream liberalism.

This new wave swept across the United States. Additionally, 'three developments served to speed up the process of radicalization of the New Left in the late 1960s. They were the Indochino War, Black Power and youth culture.'<sup>16</sup> The SNCC and Black Panther Party had adopted a revolutionary Black Nationalism and militancy. There was a renewed struggle of the oppressed. These newly formed groups had a minority faction that took leadership from the Progressive Labor Party. The New Left was willing to accept black leaders and organizations, provide support to the Vietnamese resistance movement and identify middle-class youths as an oppressed group. Interestingly, it was around this time that James returned to the United States.

James returned to the United States in the late 1960s via the West Indian "link" where he was introduced to a youthful Black intellectual cadre. During this second sojourn, James spent more than a decade teaching in various universities and speaking widely on contemporary

events. As his speeches on *Black Power* (1969, 1970) and *Black Studies* (1969) revealed, it was difficult to approach the political explosion of America's blacks without a thorough understanding of their dynamic connection with other movements worldwide. James, through his lectures at campuses, writings and speeches sought to provide this perspective by sharing his understanding of the history in relation to the "Negro struggle", pointing out that the "Negro struggle" had to be advocated by Marxist movements. Thus, the responsibility of the Marxist movement was therefore, to understand that such independent struggles "were a contributory factor to the socialist revolution". This period represented, what I would call, the peak of thought on the Negro Question which had been in existence for over half a century. This resulted in the emergence of New Left groups in the fight against racism.

The Marxism advanced by James as discussed in the section of this paper entitled "The Marxism of James – A Theoretical Dimension", formed the basis for these New Left groups that emerged in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to the SNCC, other groups such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, The League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the Panthers were all formed to engage in "black struggles". The organizations represented constituencies and were not subordinated to a vanguard of any kind.

James aided these groups in further organizing themselves based on his political activities when he was with the Johnson – Forest Tendency. Referring to 'Jamesian theory' on the question of organization recall that the three levels in an organization are: -

- (1) Political and theoretical leadership
- (2) Activists
- (3) Rank-and-file workers, youth and housewives



With this in mind, James, having already developed his theoretical framework for Marxism in his first American sojourn, provided some theoretical guidance for the New Left, which began to develop in the United States in the 60s. In Volume 5. No. 6 1971 of Radical America, James highlighted the requisites for Marxists and Marxist groups. These were:

- 1). The national states must be destroyed by breaking up all the bourgeois institutions and replacing them with socialist institutions. The French revolution of 1968 showed that the masses of the population were ready to take over society and form new institutions. The decay of the French bourgeois institutions was proved by the tremendous outbursts of the great body of the nation, a revolutionary outburst like one never seen before. It rendered to bourgeois powerless. They were paralyzed by the decay and rottenness of the capitalistic regime and the power and range of the revolt against it.
- 2). The safety of any revolution is the ability of the organizations leading the revolution to fight against enormous pressures and address the question of food, finance and possibly military intervention.
- 3). The socialist movement makes the revolution. There should be no period of transition.

These requisites outlined by James were based on his belief in the “revolutionary proletariat” and his understanding of the historical aspect of Marxism. Thus, James embarked on a campaign to properly educate the New Left on Marxism, which would be the basis for their success.

As part of his campaign to educate the New Left, James started writing for the underground press. His understanding of the race/class question (as I discussed earlier on in this paper) allowed him to provide the much needed insight and intellectual guidance for the New Left. In November 1971 James stated:

*Black people have the right to struggle against oppression. They don't have to be stimulated by the communist party; they needn't be socialist; they needn't be subject to any of these doctrines, but to struggle against oppression is their absolute right; it is their duty; and that right and that duty is established and urged upon them by Marxism.*<sup>17</sup>

It is clear that the Marxism that was being advanced here, was the same Marxism that James had developed in his first American sojourn. During his first visit James wrote in an article in the *Correspondence*:

*The real essence of the struggle is a better way of life, a new society, the emergence of the individual as a human being.*

This expressed James's view and that of his Johnson-Forest Tendency, but, more importantly, it is a view similar to that of the groups that arose in the 1960s (which were influenced by some of James's Marxian methodology).

The position of the independent black struggle was advanced within the context of Marxism and the black liberation struggle in the 1950s. James held the position that the black struggle would influence other social movements. He continually advanced his theory of "full political autonomy of women, blacks and young people". Central to James's theme throughout his life was the self-organization of the ordinary people.

Criticism of James' thought however, focused on the fact that his concentrations were on self-activity of ordinary people, making his position on organization seem spontaneous rather

than organized. Alex Callinicos in particular, in his study of Trotskyism, associated James with other socialist thinkers who operated with the perspective of ‘socialism from below’ concluding that James’s analysis of the emerging socialist society ‘was merely based on spontaneous revolts thereby reflecting James’s Hegelian confidence in a historical process aimed at subverting the existing order using the most unlikely of instruments’<sup>18</sup>. But to James, the organization of the proletariat, the ordinary man, was the only way to participate in class struggles. It is important to note that James functioned as an intellectual providing a theoretical framework for groups that emerged to actively engage themselves in a struggle, which harmonized with his theory on organization.

### ***Conclusion***

James’s views, deriving from Leninist methodology, proved prescient in significant ways. During the period 1938 – 1953, James was able to fully define Marxism as he saw it and was also able to put it into practice via his active roles within various organizations, including; but not limited to those founded by him. The basic tenet of James Marxism was that the proletariat had to be revolutionary or it was nothing and that the proletariat had to mobilize themselves through organizations, with a sound theoretical framework.

When the Black struggles re-emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, in the form of independent black organizations, these groups exhibited James’s style in mobilizing individuals to seek a better way of life by having an organization to represent a particular constituency. This made it easy for James to continue to expand on his Marxist views in the United States.

James was an outstanding intellectual, with a guiding influence over whatever documents were published by the group or groups he belonged to. 'All of his groups shared a certain heterodox quality, a frank mixture of personality and politics'.<sup>19</sup> It is clear that James outlined the nature of contemporary struggles for the proletariat. Additionally, his activities in the Johnson – Forest Tendency served to elaborate his position on how a Marxist organization should function. But, he also argued that this kind of organization is fundamentally different from the proletarian organization developed by the proletariat itself. He went on to redefine the proletarian organization as those created by the mass of self-activity of the proletariat at a given point in history.

The work and theories put forward by C.L.R. James raised fundamental issues of Western society about the nature and limitations of equality, freedom and democracy. However, in concluding, I feel compelled to point out that James viewed things from a theoretical height and he had a clear appreciation of how much his own vantage owed to the collaborative work of the parties and groups to which he belonged.

C.L.R. James spent his last years in Brixton, south London. He lived simply and quietly in a small room filled with books, music and art. His television set was usually switched on and it stood in the center of the floor. James recreated a whole world within that cramped space. It was here, too, that he received visitors, those people who sought him out for his practical political advice, for the developed historical perspective and range of his analysis; but, above all, for the vitality and humanity of his vision.

## End Notes

---

- <sup>1</sup> Anna Grimshaw, *C.L.R. James Reader* (Cambridge USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992) p. 1.
- <sup>2</sup> *C.L.R. James and British Trotskyism: An Interview* (London: Socialist Platform, 1987), p. 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Scott McLemee and Paul Le Blanc (eds), *C.L.R. James and Revolutionary Marxism* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1994), p. 3.
- <sup>4</sup> “Kenneth Surin”, in Grant Farred, *Rethinking CLR James* (Cambridge USA: Blackwell Publishers), 1996 p. 195.
- <sup>5</sup> Scott McLemee and Paul Le Blanc (eds), *C.L.R. James and Revolutionary Marxism* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1994), p. 87.
- <sup>6</sup> Scott McLemee and Paul Le Blanc (eds), *C.L.R. James and Revolutionary Marxism* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1994), p. 59.
- <sup>7</sup> Martin Glaberman, ‘The Marxism of James’, in Selwyn Cudjoe and William Cain (eds), *C.L.R. James – His Intellectual Legacies* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 306.
- <sup>8</sup> Martin Glaberman, ‘The Marxism of James’, in Selwyn Cudjoe and William Cain (eds), *C.L.R. James – His Intellectual Legacies* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 307.
- <sup>9</sup> Martin Glaberman, ‘The Marxism of James’, in Selwyn Cudjoe and William Cain (eds), *C.L.R. James – His Intellectual Legacies* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 306.
- <sup>10</sup> Anson Sancho, *CLR The Man and His Work* (A Carifesta Publication), p. 11.
- <sup>11</sup> Anthony Bogues, *Caliban’s Freedom* (New York: Brown University) 1997, p. 166.
- <sup>12</sup> Anthony Bogues, *Caliban’s Freedom* (New York: Brown University) 1997, p. 166.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p 25.
- <sup>14</sup> Anna Grimshaw, *C.L.R. James Reader* (Cambridge USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992).

- 
- <sup>15</sup> Frank Ackerman, 'Inflation, Recession and Crisis', in *Radical America*, Vol. 4, no. 4, May 1972, p. 33.
- <sup>16</sup> James Kaplan, in *Radical America*, vol. 6, no. 4, July/August 1972, p. 17.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Alex Callinicos, *Trotskyism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1990 p. 65 – 66.
- <sup>19</sup> Anthony Bogues, *Caliban's Freedom* (New York: Brown University) 1997, p. 168.