

Beyond the Boundary of Leninism? C.L.R. James and 1956.

‘When one looks back over the last twenty years to those men who are most far sighted, who first began to tease out the muddle of ideology in our times, who were at the same time Marxist with a hard theoretical basis, and close students of society, humanists with a tremendous response to and understanding of human culture, Comrade James is one of the first one thinks of.’ So spoke Edward Thompson in 1967 at a National Conference on Workers Control and Industrial Democracy, after ‘Comrade James’ had introduced himself to the gathered assembly in a contribution from the floor.¹ Of course, Thompson could arguably have gone further and dated James’s contribution to ‘teasing out the muddle of ideology in our times’ back not just twenty years to 1947 but thirty years, from the publication in 1937 of James’s history of the ‘rise and fall of the Communist International’, *World Revolution, 1918-1936*, a pioneering critique of Stalin’s ideology of ‘Socialism in One Country’ and its consequences for the international working class movement.

Nevertheless, Thompson’s eloquent tribute is also a reminder that James, far from being ‘one of the first’ people to be thought of when orthodox Communism went into crisis during 1956, was actually one of the last people to be thought of as being someone who could actually have anything of relevance to say. Indeed, that James seems to have made next to no immediate impression on the generation of British radicals that emerged into prominence after 1956 is something that is particularly striking not only from his absence in the contemporary historiography of the first New Left in Britain, but also from the writings of the leading figures of that movement itself.² So Perry Anderson, for example, in his 1968 essay on the ‘Components of the National Culture’, in the *New Left Review*, discussed the impact of immigrant

¹ Tony Topham, (ed.), *Report of the 5th National Conference on Workers’ Control and Industrial Democracy held at Transport House, Coventry on June 10th and 11th, 1967*, Hull, 1967, p55. I would like to thank Ian Birchall, David Howell and John McIlroy for comments on this article in draft, though needless to say I take responsibility for its argument.

² There is no mention of James in, for example, Lin Chun’s *The British New Left*, Edinburgh, 1993, or Michael Kenny’s *The First New Left; British Intellectuals After Stalin*, London, 1995. One dissident voice with respect to the historiography of the first New Left is that of David Widgery, in his *The Left in Britain, 1956-68*, Middlesex, 1976, which mentions James in the same breath as Tony Cliff (of the Socialist Review Group, later the International Socialists) and Gerry Healy (of ‘The Club’, later the Socialist Labour League). See p46. However, one suspects, of course, that James might have been rather uncomfortable with being called one of the leading ‘theorists of British Trotskyism’.

intellectuals to Britain in the twentieth century. In a section titled ‘The White Emigration’, Anderson stressed the “‘White”, conservative emigration’ that saw thinkers such as Lewis Namier and Isaiah Berlin consciously chose Britain as a retreat from the turmoil of 1930s Europe, to be honoured and welcomed into the national life. Anderson notes that ‘this was not just a passive acknowledgement of merit. It was an active social pact, as can be seen from the opposite fate of the one great expatriate intellectual that Britain harboured for thirty years who was a revolutionary. The structural importance of emigration in the pattern of conventional British thought in confirmed by the symmetrical salience of a foreigner within its Marxist antithesis.’ Was Anderson referring here perhaps to James, an intellectual who had emigrated from Trinidad as an aspiring writer, and a ‘foreign’ revolutionary that Britain harboured for long periods in the 1930s, 1950s and 1960s? No, in Anderson’s Marxist ‘antithesis’ to ‘conventional British thought’, he singled out the Polish Marxist Isaac Deutscher, who had died the year before. ‘Isaac Deutscher, the greatest Marxist historian of his time, was the only major contributor to that international system of thought resident in Britain. A larger figure than his compatriot Namier, Deutscher was ignored by the academic world throughout his life, and never secured the smallest university post.’³

Now, whatever the merits of Anderson’s analysis of the conservative prejudices of the British academic establishment, his historical obliteration of CLR James here is quite breathtaking. In *The Black Jacobins*, his 1938 biography of the Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint L’Ouverture, James had produced a work of Marxist history arguably as ‘great’ as Deutscher’s *Trotsky* trilogy of 1954-63. And whatever one thinks of James’s mature Marxism, which developed during his fifteen years in the United States, the idea that he could not still be classed as a ‘major contributor to that international system of thought’ on his return to Britain in 1953 is surely a mistaken one. Like Deutscher, James was also more or less ‘ignored by the academic world throughout his life’, and in Britain at least ‘never secured the smallest university post’ despite trying to do so on his return to Britain.⁴ Instead, just as Deutscher found unlikely work for a period with *The Economist*, James again took up

³ Perry Anderson, ‘Components of the National Culture’, in Perry Anderson, *English Questions*, London, 1992, p65.

⁴ Anna Grimshaw, *Popular Democracy and the Creative Imagination: The Writings of CLR James 1950-1963*, New York, 1991, p22. Available online from The CLR James Institute.

his pre-war profession, reporting the 1954 cricket season for the *Manchester Guardian*. Perhaps Anderson's omission of James could be defended on the grounds that was perhaps not really an 'expatriate' or a 'foreigner' given his birth and early life in a British Crown colony, and James's own resulting 'Britishness' as an imperial identity. Even still, the lack of interest in James that characterises Anderson's work is symptomatic of members of the first British New Left that emerged after 1956.⁵ Given what James and Deutscher had in common as intellectuals who had both been former leading members of the Trotskyist movement, indeed both had attended the founding conference of the Fourth International in 1938, the question of why James, who of course had actually met Leon Trotsky in 1939, was unable to find any significant audience for his ideas, let alone the intellectual influence of Deutscher, deserves some attention.⁶

This article is entitled 'Beyond the Boundary of Leninism?' and there is a question mark at the end for a reason. Firstly, we will look at how James tried to, in his own words, 'work through Leninism' during and after the Second World War in order to try to come to terms with the crisis that had overcome not just Marxism but the wider working class movement in a period dominated by Stalinism and Fascism.⁷ This 'working through' Leninism for James necessitated a break with the theory and practise of 'orthodox Trotskyism', a movement James had been committed to since becoming an organised revolutionary in 1934. Only after we have seen how that break was conceived as a conscious attempt to not only return to classical Marxism as understood by Marx and Lenin - but also to develop that tradition so it fitted with the new realities of the post war world, to as he put it, make 'our own leap from the heights of Leninism' - will we be able to understand how James related to the crisis and opportunities of 1956.⁸

⁵ Even Stuart Hall, who hailed from Jamaica, does not seem to have actually read C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins* until 1963, the year *Beyond a Boundary* also came out. See Stuart Hall, 'Breaking Bread with History: C.L.R. James and The Black Jacobins', *History Workshop Journal*, 46, 1998.

⁶ For James's views of the founding conference of the Fourth International as well as a discussion of Isaac Deutscher's *The Prophet Outcast; Trotsky 1929-1940*, see C L R James, 'Indomitable Rebel', *New Society*, 28 November 1963. For more on Deutscher, see Neil Davidson, 'The Prophet, His Biographer and the Watchtower', *International Socialism*, 104, 2004, and John McIlroy's 'Isaac Deutscher', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 15, 2004, pp933-937.

⁷ C L R James, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin*, London, 1980, p. 135. James's *Notes on Dialectics* was written in 1948.

⁸ James, *Notes on Dialectics*, p. 150.

I

In *Beyond a Boundary*, James's 1963 semi-autobiographical social history of cricket, he had this to say about his political evolution after arriving from Trinidad to encounter a Europe devastated by slump and fascism:

'Fiction-writing drained out of me and was replaced by politics. I became a Marxist, a Trotskyist. I published large books and small articles on these and other kindred subjects. I wrote and spoke. Like many others, I expected war, and during or after the war social revolution. In 1938 a lecture tour took me to the United States and I stayed there fifteen years. The war came. It did not bring soviets and proletarian power. Instead the bureaucratic-totalitarian monster grew stronger and spread. As early as 1941 I had begun to question the premises of Trotskyism. It took nearly a decade of incessant labour and collaboration to break with it and reorganise my Marxist ideas to cope with the post-war world. That was a matter of doctrine, of history, of economics and politics'.⁹

To do anything like justice to this 'reorganisation' of Marxism by James, or to use his Trotskyist pseudonym, 'J.R. Johnson' together with Raya Dunayevskaya or 'Freddie Forest' as she was known, together with Grace Lee Boggs and others in what became known as the 'Johnson-Forest Tendency' in 1940s America is impossible in the space of a brief article. All I want to do here is draw attention to the way in which James and his group in the Second World War and its aftermath drew inspiration from Lenin's attempts to come to terms with the disaster that had engulfed the working class movement during the First World War.

Firstly, just as the exiled Lenin in 1914 turned in despair to the library and a serious study of the Hegelian dialectics to produce his 'Philosophical Notebooks', so James, Dunayevskaya and Lee now spent hours engaged in serious study of the German philosopher. I will touch briefly on the significance of James's 1948 work *Notes on Dialectics*; subtitled '*Hegel, Marx, Lenin*' shortly. But one important side product of this search to find a philosophy of revolution was that they discovered a side to Marx that had been somewhat hidden previously. In 1944, Dunayevskaya translated some of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* from the

⁹ C L R James, *Beyond a Boundary*, London, 1969, p149.

Russian into English. The Johnson- Forest Tendency published these in 1947, the first English publication of these writings, hoping to spark discussion among Detroit car workers.¹⁰ When Edward Thompson and John Saville's *New Reasoner* in Britain a decade later declared 'socialist humanism' as the rallying cry for a New Left, James had already incorporated this into his Marxism a decade or so earlier. He and his collaborators had developed a more moral and ethical understanding of how the freedom of the individual might develop under communism, and how the worker is alienated as well as exploited under capitalism. As James wrote of Marx in 1946, in an article 'On Karl Marx and the 75th anniversary of the Paris Commune', 'no man had a more elevated conception of the destiny of the human race. This for him was the greatest crime of capitalism, that while, on the one hand, it created the possibility of a truly human existence for all mankind, by the very nature of the process of capitalist production, it degraded the individual worker to the level of being merely an appendage to a machine.'¹¹ It therefore followed, as James declared a year later, that Marxism was 'concerned first and foremost with the creative powers of the masses', and how they can be released to fulfill their full potential.¹²

Secondly, Lenin (influenced by Bukharin) had, in his 1916 pamphlet *Imperialism*, subtitled 'The Highest Stage of Capitalism', taken up Marx's analysis of the growing 'concentration and centralization of capital' and demonstrated the ways in which capital had now become fused with the state, creating a new world system. James and Dunayevskaya saw this tendency towards 'state capitalism' as now having developed to its logical end point in Stalin's Russia, with its massive state control over the means of production being merely the most extreme form of a tendency towards state control or 'nationalisation' that had or was taking place internationally under the pressures of the slump and now war. Moreover, an understanding of Stalinist Russia as state capitalist fitted with James and Dunayevskaya's central concern with the worker in the labour process, and their subsequent attempt to view society from the point of view of the worker positioned at the point of production. As

¹⁰ Martin Glaberman, (ed.), *Marxism for our times; C.L.R. James on revolutionary organisation*, USA, 1999, pxvi.

¹¹ See C L R James, 'They showed the way to Labour Emancipation; On Karl Marx and the 75th anniversary of the Paris Commune'. This is online at the Marxists Internet Archive.

¹² Anthony Bogues, *Caliban's Freedom; The Early Political Thought of C.L.R. James*, London, 1997, p70.

James asked in 1946, ‘where in modern society is there so perfect an example of alienated labour and its consequences as in Stalinist Russia?’ While Leon Trotsky in *The Revolution Betrayed* had argued that this alienation resulted from the creation of a bureaucracy that controlled the state and so the product of the worker in the sphere of consumption, James argued that it was the other way around, that it was ‘in the accumulation of Modern Industry where labour is alienated.’¹³

Now we ought to note here that this was a world away from virtually every other contemporary analysis of ‘the Russian Question’. So for example, Isaac Deutscher’s 1949 biography of *Stalin* described Stalin’s brutal programme of industrialisation as Soviet Russia’s ‘second revolution’. As Deutscher put it, Stalin “‘built socialism”’; and even his opponents, while denouncing his autocracy, admitted that most of his economic reforms were indeed essential for socialism.’¹⁴ Yet for James and Dunayevskaya, while the Stalinist bureaucracy might have called their ‘Five Year Plans’ to develop the forces of production ‘socialism’, in reality they were simply a new form of wage slavery. As James noted, ‘planning today, without the emancipation of labour, arises out of the contradictions of monopoly capitalism and, like all rationalization, is a more highly developed and refined form of exploitation, not lessening but increasing unbearably all antagonisms. How is it possible to plan socially when society is torn as it is by alienated labour and all the economic, political and social contradictions flowing from it?’¹⁵

Moreover, in order to try and look for the material economic roots for the political betrayal of the Second International in supporting the First World War, Lenin argued in *Imperialism* that a new labour aristocracy who had been bought off with the profits of Empire had emerged in the metropolitan countries as capitalism entered its new stage. Now, James and Dunayevskaya noted, in the epoch of state capitalism it was ‘not the labour aristocracy but the labour bureaucracy as such [that] becomes the main enemy.’¹⁶ This view had been reinforced for them after seeing the way in which the trade union leaders in America clamped down on wildcat strikes in the automobile

¹³ C L R James, ‘Trotsky’s “Revolution Betrayed”’ in *New Internationalist*, October 1946. Reprinted in *International Socialism*, 16, 1964, p26, 28.

¹⁴ Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin; A Political Biography*, London, 1967, p294., 360-1.

¹⁵ James, ‘Trotsky’s “Revolution Betrayed”’, p28.

¹⁶ Bogues, *Caliban’s Freedom*, p156.

industry in the aftermath of the war. Yet the perfect type of bureaucrat could be found in Russia. James concluded that ‘Stalinist bureaucracy is the American [labour] bureaucracy carried through to its ultimate and logical conclusion, both of them products of capitalist production in the epoch of state capitalism’¹⁷ In 1953 he described how ‘their primary aim is not world revolution. They wish to build factories and power stations, larger than all others which have been built. They aim to connect rivers, to remove mountains, to plant from the air, and to achieve these they will waste human and material resources on an unprecedented scale.’ Yet after the Second World War, ‘in every type of country, the most highly developed and the most backward, have arisen tens of thousands of educated men, organizers, administrators, intellectuals, labour leaders, nationalist leaders, who are ready to do in their own country exactly what the Communists are doing in Russia and look to Russia as their fatherland. This is the problem.’ James pointed to Mao’s revolution in China and noted ‘the madness spreads irresistibly.’¹⁸

What then was to be done, in the face of this spreading ‘bureaucratic totalitarian monster’? While so many ‘Western Marxists’ at that time felt either nothing could be done and moved into academia – or worse retreated into liberal anti-Communism and support for the US in the Cold War, James kept his focus on Marx’s key idea that the emancipation of the working class would be the conquest of the working class itself. As he put it in *Notes on Dialectics*: ‘Free activity of the proletariat...means not only the end of the communist parties. It means the end of capitalism. Only free activity, a disciplined spontaneity, can prevent bureaucracy.’¹⁹ Moreover, James argued, while Lenin’s Bolsheviks had played a tremendous role in the overthrow of Tsarist rule in backward Russia when the proletariat was tiny and inexperienced, under the new stage of global state capitalism the working class, at least in advanced capitalist countries, had been trained and disciplined by their years of experience of capitalism and collective struggle as to make such a party now unnecessary. As he put it, again in *Notes on Dialectics*, ‘Organisation, as we have known it, has served its purpose. It was a purpose reflecting the proletariat in

¹⁷ C L R James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee, *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, Chicago, 1986, p43.

¹⁸ C L R James, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways; The story of Herman Melville and the world we live in*, London, 1985, p20-1.

¹⁹ James, *Notes on Dialectics*, p. 118.

bourgeois society. The *new* organisation, the *new* organism, will begin with spontaneity, i.e. free creative activity, as its necessity.²⁰ The classic example James pointed to was the birth of the Soviet, the workers' council in Russia which had taken Lenin's Bolsheviks by surprise when it appeared in the 1905 Revolution. As James put it, 'we have insisted upon the fact that the proletariat always breaks up the old organisation by impulse, a leap: remember that'.²¹ The exact form of what James called 'the new organism' that would emerge from 'disciplined spontaneity' would therefore necessarily be impossible to predict. As James put it, 'The proletariat will decide. The thing is to tell the proletariat to decide.'²² This then necessitated a break with orthodox Trotskyism, which put itself forward as part of the solution to the 'crisis of revolutionary leadership' of the official political organisations of the working class movement, rather than trying to overcome what James called the 'crisis of the self-mobilisation of the proletariat' as a whole.²³

Theoretically, in terms of originality at least, one has to stand back and marvel at the intellectual achievement of the Johnson-Forest Tendency in this period. The pressures of the Cold War, and of McCarthyism in the US were incredible at this time and among intellectuals in particular, there was a huge intellectual shift away from orthodox Communism at this time among epitomised in the 1951 collection of writings, *The God that Failed*. Reviewing that book, Deutscher accepted that 'the only honourable service the ex-communist intellectual can render' was to 'withdraw to the watchtower'. Once there, they should 'watch with detachment and alertness, this heaving chaos of a world, to be on the sharp lookout for what is going to emerge from it, and to interpret it *sine ira et studio* [without anger but with attention]'.²⁴ James's group were also on the 'sharp lookout' for something new to emerge from the 'heaving chaos' but the difference between them and the watchtower approach could not have been greater – they felt the gap between intellectuals and everyone else was already far too wide.

²⁰ James, *Notes on Dialectics*, p118.

²¹ James, *Notes on Dialectics*, p117.

²² James, *Notes on Dialectics*, p181.

²³ James, (et al), *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, p58-9.

²⁴ Quoted in Tony Cliff, *A World to win; Life of a Revolutionary*, London, 2000, p66-7.

II

However, in 1953, just as Stalin's death was followed by workers' risings in East Germany and slave camp riots in the gulags of Vorkuta, James was forced to leave America after losing his fight to avoid being deported for passport violations. This was a huge blow – as it meant leaving his four year old son Nobbie and his wife Constance – as well as his comrades, who were finally in the process of getting their new paper, *Correspondence*, up and running. Back in London, James was almost totally isolated. He was more or less forgotten as a political figure in Britain - his books were out of print – and all his writing in America had been done under pseudonyms in the tiny, small circulation journals of the Trotskyist movement. He met up again with two very good friends he had not seen since the 1930s, the anarchist bookseller Charlie Lahr and the Pan-Africanist George Padmore, but as he put it later, 'unfortunately there was not very much going on in Europe to keep us excited.'²⁵ Accordingly, his attention remained still very much focused with the American organization and his relationship to it, redrafting his 1950 manuscript on 'American Civilisation' and also writing frequent letters full of instructions.²⁶ Unfortunately, exercising his role as a leader became increasingly difficult from his position in exile – and the group also found itself under increasing pressure from the US Government. In 1954, the U.S. Post Office refused to grant second class mailing rights to *Correspondence* and placed the organization on the Attorney-General's subversive list. In early 1955, the political and personal tensions within the Correspondence group finally came to a head. Raya Dunayevkaya and her supporters, perhaps tired of James's advice from afar and of course independent thinkers in their own right, split away to form *News and Letters*.²⁷

²⁵ C L R James, 'Charlie Lahr', unpublished manuscript. Thanks to David Goodway for this reference.

²⁶ C L R James, *American Civilisation*, Oxford, 1993, p17.

²⁷ Glaberman, *Marxism for our times*, pxviii., xx. After the split Martin Glaberman notes Correspondence was 'substantially reduced in size from the original seventy five or so members' and the paper *Correspondence* 'was no longer a weekly or bi-weekly but became half tabloid size and published monthly or less frequently'. Also see the account of the split in Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change; An Autobiography*, Minneapolis, 1998, while Constance Webb, *Not Without Love; Memoirs*, London, 2003, brings home the pressures of McCarthyism on CLR James and the Correspondence group in this period.

The death of the 'Johnson-Forest Tendency' seems to have hit James hard, and it could only have added to the disappointment, depression and isolation he now felt in Britain. Ray Challinor, a member of the Socialist Review Group, met James at the October 1955 Labour conference at Margate, which the latter attended as an observer, and later described him to me as a 'battered hulk'.²⁸ In the same year, 1955, George Lamming, an up and coming novelist who had come to Britain from Barbados a few years earlier, was stopped on Charing Cross Road by someone who he thought at the time was 'a vagrant' but turned out to be James. Lamming remembers 'James at that time was not in very good physical condition. When he said "Lamming" and I said, "Yes," I was very excited and a little shocked when he told me who he was.' Lamming remembers 'I don't know what he was doing on Charing Cross Road. I didn't pursue that then, but later what I discovered was that Charing Cross had these pinball games where you go and pull whatever it is. But apparently he was very fascinated with this and he would quite often visit these pinball machine places where he played and betted.'²⁹

However, if he was losing some of his roots in America, James had now slowly begun to reconnect in a more meaningful way with British society again, and the British working class movement. In late 1954, he had met Alan Christianson, an engineer, who had been involved in the British Trotskyist movement in Coventry, London and Liverpool since joining James's 'Marxist Group' in the 1930s. Christianson was extremely interested by James's *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, and in May 1955, now living just outside London, wrote two long letters applying James's perspective to his own experiences as a shop steward in Britain. As Christianson put it in one letter, 'Let us never lose sight of the fact that all shop stewards are socialists, consciously aiming to overthrow capitalism and establish workers' power, and strike convinced that the workers' committee of which he is a member, the elected shop stewards committee, is capable of doing it.'³⁰ James, who

²⁸ Ray Challinor, personal correspondence, 8/1/06.

²⁹ David Scott, 'The Sovereignty of the Imagination: An interview with George Lamming', *Small Axe*, Vol. 6, no. 2, 2002, p134-5. Ian Birchall has suggested to me that playing pinball might have been 'an attempt to keep in touch with an aspect of proletarian culture' rather than merely a sign of isolation and demoralisation. However, while there is much in this, it should not be forgotten that James seems to have become somewhat addicted to slot-machines and gambling while in America. See Constance Webb, *Not Without Love*, p238.

³⁰ 'A Marxist Group', *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, London, 1956, p49.

had little by the way of more reliable first hand information about the Shop Stewards movement, was thrilled by Christianson's letters, which gloried in the self-organisation and revolutionary creativity of rank-and-file industrial militants. James described one letter, 'The Revolutionary Communist Party and the shop stewards', as being 'as profound and brilliant description of British life as has appeared for years...millions of workers would recognise it at once.'³¹

However the milieu Christianson and James could try and relate to directly was miniscule. As Christianson had explained to James, with respect to the need to break from both orthodox Communism and orthodox Trotskyism, 'the worker militants' in Britain 'have shown only a few tentative signs of getting off the hook'. One of the 'tentative signs' Christianson had noted was Liverpool socialist Eric Heffer and Ken Tarbuck's Federation of Marxist Groups.³² This network had formed from a conference in Liverpool in July 1954, at which Harry McShane spoke, and in March 1955 the Federation had organized a meeting in London at which McShane again recounted his recent decision to leave the Communist Party. Later that year the Federation of Marxist Groups decided to become the Socialist Workers Federation, with a paper, *Revolt*, (later *Socialist Revolt*) edited by McShane in Glasgow. Heffer later estimated this organization, at its height, had up to five hundred supporters nationally.³³

As the Communist Party in Britain began to go into crisis in 1956 with the publication of Khrushchev's 'secret speech', the SWF naturally turned its attention towards trying to relate to disillusioned Communists.³⁴ McShane later regretted this

³¹ C L R James, Grace Lee, and Pierre Chaulieu, *Facing Reality*, Detroit, 1974, p71. See also *Revolutionary History*, vol. 6., 2/3, 1996, p162. Christianson's article 'The Revolutionary Communist Party and the shop stewards' is reprinted in full in this issue of *Revolutionary History*. Selma James remembers Christianson was 'very intelligent', but he was 'not a man to build an organisation'. Personal information, 14/10/04. John McIlroy has however made some convincing criticisms of the parts of Christianson's article that dealt with his experience in Liverpool RCP. See John McIlroy, "'The First Great Battle in the March to Socialism"; Dockers, Stalinists and Trotskyists in 1945', *Revolutionary History*, vol 6, No. 2/3, 1996, p. 137, n. 122.

³² *Revolutionary History*, vol. 6., 2/3 (1996), p. 171.

³³ Eric Heffer, *Never a Yes Man: The Life and Politics of an Adopted Liverpoolian*, London, 1991, p 80., 85. For a report of the meeting in March, see *Socialist Leader*, 19 March 1955.

³⁴ See the advert for a meeting 'Socialist Worker Federation Answers Harry Pollitt' in Liverpool, in *Socialist Leader*, 12 May 1956, and, in London, 'Is Stalinism Dead?' in *Socialist Leader*, 9 June 1956. This contrasts with earlier SWF meetings, for example on 'Industrial Unionism' advertised in *Socialist Leader*, 18 February 1956.

focus of the SWF and felt that ‘instead of concentrating on the Communist Party we should have gone to the workers who weren’t yet acquainted with Marxism and won them to our ideas’.³⁵ It seems many members of the SWF felt this at the time, and slowly drifted out of the group. One leading member of Liverpool SWF who seems to have left at this point was the Welsh veteran industrial militant IP Hughes, who had broken with the Communist Party in the 1930s. Hughes knew Christianson from their time in Liverpool R.C.P. after the Second World War, and seems to have been very impressed by James, even inviting him up to Liverpool. Eric Heffer later remembered how ‘it was “IP” who brought the legendary Marxist and cricket writer CLR James to meet me at my home in Avondale Road.’³⁶ James, Christianson and Hughes now felt confident enough to form a ‘Marxist Group’, a decision doubtless made easier by the arrival of Selma James – who married CLR in 1956 – from America in 1955.

In the summer of 1956, in response to the publication of Khrushchev’s ‘secret speech’ and the crushing of the workers’ uprising against Stalinism in Poznan, Poland, the group decided to republish the Johnson-Forest Tendency’s 1950 work, *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, with Christianson’s letters on the shop stewards committee’s attached as an appendix.³⁷ This was done ‘under the auspices of six Europeans representing three different countries’, Christianson, Hughes and James – still using the pseudonym ‘Johnson’ - from Britain, Cornelius Castoriadis – using the pseudonym ‘Pierre Chaulieu’ - and Theo Massen from *Socialisme Ou Barbarie* in France, and Cajo Brendel, a Dutch Council Communist, who was researching autonomous class struggles in England for a book. A new preface, intended primarily for a British audience, was written by ‘Johnson’.³⁸ In this introduction, James reiterated the importance of the theory of state capitalism, as it does not ‘isolate the Russian economy and the Russian workers from the rest of the world’ but instead brings ‘all phenomena into one integrated and growing body of

³⁵ Harry McShane and Joan Smith, *Harry McShane; No Mean Fighter*, London, 1978, p252.

³⁶ Eric Heffer, *Never a Yes Man*, p78.

³⁷ See Chris Harman, *Class Struggles in Eastern Europe 1945-83*, London, 1988, p97-8., and Widgery, *The Left in Britain*, p.450.

³⁸ See James, (et al.), *Facing Reality*, p.169., and also James, (et al.), *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, pxxxiv. ‘The signers of this preface do not endorse the details of the analysis or of the conclusions of the document but are agreed that Marxism today can only go forward on this basis’.

theory, shedding new light as new events unfold.’³⁹ What he found interesting in Khrushchev’s speech was less its recital of Stalin’s despotism – unlike Khrushchev James had opposed Stalin’s purges while they were going on - than how it highlighted that ‘the planners plan as they please but the Russian workers, by action on the job, according to their strength form factory to factory, make a wreck of the plans, and particularly in the decisive sphere of the planned productivity.’⁴⁰

It is essential to recognize something that has been somewhat overlooked about James’s 1956 Preface to *State Capitalism and World Revolution*. Nowhere in it are the sort of descriptions that James would make in his later 1958 work *Facing Reality* about how ‘the socialist society exists’ on the factory shop floor, and it just ‘has to get rid of what is stifling it, what is preventing it from expanding to the full, what is preventing it from tackling not only the immediate problem of production, but also the more general problems of society.’⁴¹ If I have not commented on James’s *Facing Reality* here in detail, it is in part because that book was published in America and it is highly doubtful that for the period of the first New Left as an organized movement that very many people read it in Britain at all – given James’s lack of supporters.⁴² Finally, by the time James returned to Britain from Trinidad in 1962 he had publicly retracted some of the more extravagant definitions of ‘socialism’ and ‘barbarism’ in *Facing Reality*.⁴³ James in this 1956 preface is more realistic about the reality of various class struggles and after discussing these, the furthest he goes is to argue that ‘The ultimate aim in Coventry, Berlin, Detroit and Poznan is not liberal free speech nor higher wages, “compensation” nor “consultation”, but the

³⁹ James (et al.), *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, p xxxii.

⁴⁰ James (et al.), *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, pxxxii.

⁴¹ James (et al), *Facing Reality*, p106-7.

⁴² See James’s 1960 letter to Eric Williams in C L R James, *Party Politics in the West Indies*, Trinidad, 1962, p. 69. On *Facing Reality*, ‘that book has now to be prepared for a British publisher, especially since the defeat of the Labour Party.’ One Correspondence group supporter who was in Britain during 1961 was the English anthropologist Kathleen Gough (1925-1990), who had joined while working in the U.S. See Kathleen Gough, *When the Saints Go Marching In: An Account of the Ban- the-Bomb Movement in Britain*, Detroit, 1961. After James’s return in 1962, the 1958 edition of *Facing Reality* was circulated in Britain.

⁴³ See C L R James, ‘Marxism and the Intellectuals’ in C L R James, *Spheres of Existence; Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, London, 1980, p118.

construction of a new society from the bottom up'.⁴⁴ He did not say that fragmented sectional struggles were *in themselves* the new society.

In the light of the first New Left's inability to form a successful socialist alternative to the Labour Party, it is worth noting James's argument that 'the Labour Party and unions, despite important historical variations, function in essence as Vanguard Parties' and so 'in the accepted Stalinist fashion' have no tolerance for 'dissident minorities.'⁴⁵ With their bureaucratic 'centralised machines', 'the great fact of the present organisations is that they suppress and crush what is always required for the building of a new society, the powers and energies of those who have to build it.' Yet fortunately, 'today the centre of power moves away from the Labour Party and the unions on to the shop floor.'⁴⁶ Some classic Leninists came to believe that a revolutionary socialist party in Britain could develop based upon the shop stewards, conceived as the most advanced section of the working class, organising themselves together not just industrially but also politically.⁴⁷ Yet James insisted that those whose project was to construct any such new 'vanguard party' in the here and now were making a serious mistake. As he put it: 'What type of new organisation do we propose? We do not propose any. It is sufficient to say that in historical terms, the new organisations will come as Lilburne's Levellers Party came, as the sections and popular societies of Paris in 1793, as the Commune in 1871 and the Soviets in 1905, with not a single soul having any concrete ideas about them until they appeared in all their power and glory.'⁴⁸ This was true in those countries under Stalinist control, and as James noted 'Democracy in Russia and the satellite states will herald its coming by the emergence into the open of these proletarian organisations which all the evidence goes to show are already clandestinely accepted by Russian factory managers.'⁴⁹

⁴⁴ James, (et al) *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, pxxxiv.

⁴⁵ James (et al.), *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, p xxxiii.

⁴⁶ James (et al.), *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, pxxx.

⁴⁷ See 'Nothing so Romantic', a 1968 interview with Tony Cliff, in Widgery, *The Left in Britain*, p. 442.

⁴⁸ James (et al.), *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, pxxxiii. James thought the most likely place for the breakthrough of new social forms of organisation would be America. 'Precisely because America lags behind in traditional workers organisations the mass of the American people are far advanced in their conception of the plant (and the office) as the centre of the life of the community.' See pxxxiv.

⁴⁹ James (et al.), *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, pxxxii.

III

After the group sent *State Capitalism and World Revolution* off to the printers, the Hungarian Revolution erupted. For the tiny number of Marxists who held to some sort of theory of State Capitalism, this was an electrifying development and seemed a complete vindication of their ideas. Tony Cliff, also in Britain, has described how ‘during the first week of the Hungarian Revolution, I could hardly close my eyes. I stayed up practically throughout the night, every night, listening to the radio’.⁵⁰ On the cover of *State Capitalism and World Revolution* were the lines: ‘Hungary is merely the beginning. All political parties, including Stalinists and Trotskyists, and intellectuals of the right and left, for years preached and acted on the theory that the modern totalitarian state by its combination of terror and indoctrination could mould any population to its will. Now the revolution in Hungary has blasted all these cowardly and defeatist illusions, and the most indoctrinated and the most terrorized have accomplished the greatest proletarian revolution in history.’⁵¹ James excitedly wrote to his *Correspondence* comrades in America. ‘I don’t think you all realise what the Hungarian Revolution means. *Since 1917 nothing has so shaken the world.* Europe is on fire with it. So is Asia. It may hit the US with full force later – I don’t know. But everybody *knows* that 1945-1956 is finished, and they *feel* that perhaps probably, the future is with the revolution after all. Go to meet it.’⁵²

But here we come to the crux of the matter – how were they as Marxists exactly supposed to go and ‘meet’ the revolution? It was precisely this question - ‘What is to be done?’ - that Lenin had devoted his life’s work to trying to answer, yet as the Hungarian Revolution erupted, James seemed to be more than content simply with celebrating it as a vindication of Marxist theory. ‘As I write, an irrational but overwhelming feeling comes over me that I wish Lenin was alive today. Not to do anything, but to see it – just to see how the proletariat is now the only class that has programme, policy and will; while the others pass resolutions and stand impotent,

⁵⁰ Cliff, *A World to win*, p64.

⁵¹ James, (et al), *Facing Reality*, p170.

⁵² Kent Worcester, *C.L.R. James; A Political Biography*, New York, 1996, p139.

cowardly and utterly degraded.’⁵³ Since breaking with what he called the ‘Vanguard Party’, James had had some general ideas of course about this question. As he had put it in *Notes on Dialectics*, ‘the task’ for Marxists was now ‘to call for, to teach, to illustrate, to develop spontaneity – the free creative activity of the proletariat’.⁵⁴ However, the *Correspondence* group in America had tried various ideas but generally had so far been unsuccessful in developing an effective way of translating revolutionary theory into practice – and indeed the split with Dunayevskaya had been essentially over her frustration with the lack of progress in growing as a group themselves. Now in Britain, James now seems to have had the same problem and for whatever reason, personal, political, or a mixture of both, by February 1957 his ‘Marxist Group’ had collapsed as Christianson and Hughes left.⁵⁵

Moreover, that James devoted his full attention to the ‘new’ arguably meant he missed vitally important opportunities to relate to those people only just beginning to break from the ‘old’. As James told his supporters in a letter in January 1957, ‘I am not arguing with the CP or with Social Democrats or with anybody. The Hungarian workers have made the main arguments for us already...We have to aim at creating a new audience...anything else is playing into the hands of those who do not know that 1957 is 50 years beyond 1956.’⁵⁶ James was averse in general to the need to challenge the Communist Parties over Hungary, insisting that not only had those organizations been ‘politically dead’ since about 1933 but they were now ‘rotten’.⁵⁷ In particular, James later noted, the British Communist Party was ‘small and negligible’ compared to some of the other European Communist Parties and so he did not feel a need to relate to those of its members leaving in disgust at Stalinist imperialism in Hungary.⁵⁸ The contrast with the James of twenty years before who

⁵³ C L R James, ‘Letters on Politics’, in Anna Grimshaw, (ed.), *The C.L.R. James Reader*, Oxford, 1992, p264.

⁵⁴ Bogue, *Caliban’s Freedom*, p160.

⁵⁵ See *Revolutionary History*, Vol. 6, no. 2/3, 1996, p 162.

⁵⁶ C L R James, ‘Three Letters: 2; C L R James to Cornelius Castoriadis and Friends’ in Selwyn R Cudjoe, and William E Cain, (eds.), *C.L.R. James; His Intellectual Legacies*, USA, 1995, p301.

⁵⁷ C L R James, ‘Letters on Politics’, in Grimshaw, (ed.), *The C.L.R. James Reader*, p268.

⁵⁸ James (et al.), *Facing Reality*, p 156. It is worth remembering that the ‘small and negligible’ British Communist Party was still bigger than the whole Trotskyist movement in America and Western Europe put together. In London, in the early 1950s there was a West Indian branch of the Communist Party of

used to go out of his way to bravely challenge the lies of the British Communist Party whenever it held meetings justifying the Moscow Trials, is striking. However, that James did not now have any concrete alternative strategic and tactical suggestions for those disillusioned with either social democracy or Stalinism but directing them towards the shop stewards movement would hardly have helped his cause. Here again one might make a comparison with Isaac Deutscher, who as the biographer of Trotsky pulled huge audiences when he spoke at this time, but also at least had some concrete ideas about what Communists critical of Moscow might do. Eric Hobsbawm – incidentally one of the few members of the British Communist Party to have read James’s work *Black Jacobins*, even recommending it in his 1962 book *The Age of Revolution*, – in his autobiography describes meeting Deutscher for the first time at the peak of the communist crisis of 1956-7. Deutscher apparently told Hobsbawm: “Whatever you do, don’t leave the Communist Party. I let myself be expelled in 1932 and have regretted it ever since.”⁵⁹

Overall, the question of whether James went beyond the boundaries of Leninism or not has to be left open, though it is clear that he was unable to practically make the ‘great leap forward’ that he had envisaged in 1948. Yet that he tried to build an independent ‘Marxist Group’ means that attempts to claim him *in this period* for say, syndicalism⁶⁰, Council-Communism⁶¹, or perhaps ‘autonomism’ are unlikely to

about fifty members, and the C.P.G.B. had even set up a ‘Caribbean Labour Congress’. Prominent here was Claudia Jones (1915-64), who had been born in Port of Spain, Trinidad. In 1923, she had gone to America and like Padmore there become a Communist. In 1955, two years after James, she had been deported to Britain, and in late 1958 had set up the *West Indian Gazette* and in the face of racist attacks on West Indians in London, founded the Notting Hill Carnival. James’s relationship with these militants is unknown, to this author at least. See Bill Schwarz, (ed.), *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*, Manchester, 2003, p27.

⁵⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times; A Twentieth Century Life*, London, 2002, p 202. See also Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848*, London, 1988, p389.

⁶⁰ James’s relationship to syndicalism arguably needs to be further investigated. In the 1930s, James’s Marxist Group included Ben Elsbury, an early syndicalist, while IP Hughes had been involved in the Shop Stewards movement since the end of the First World War. See Ray Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism*, London, 1977, p196.

⁶¹ James’s *Facing Reality* is the clearest expression of his close relationship to Council Communism. For example, see James (et al.), *Facing Reality*, p172., where he argued that it would be ‘impossible’ for journals like the *Universities and Left Review* ‘to make real progress so long as they do not align themselves positively with the forces of the new society which are embodied in the phrase: Workers Councils in every department of the national activity and a Government of Workers Councils.’ For more on Council Communism, including a discussion of Cajo Brendel, see Marcel van der Linden, ‘On Council Communism’, *Historical Materialism*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2004.

be completely satisfactory. That CLR James failed to relate to the first New Left can in large part be explained by his absence from Britain from 1957 until 1962, at a time when the movement around the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was at its height. Yet 1956 had been more than just a vindication of James's theory of state capitalism, it had also seen the emergence of the civil rights movement in the United States, as well as the anti-colonial movements that represented, in Aime Cesaire's phrase, 'le grand soufflé d'unité' – 'the great breath of unity passing over all black countries.'⁶² Had James not returned to Trinidad to work for independence, but remained in London, it is possible that his distinctive politics of 'socialism-from-below' would have found the new audience they arguably deserved.⁶³

Nonetheless, 1956 was significant in James's political development. The Hungarian Revolution confirmed for him the Marxist notion of the working class as a central agent of social change. As he wrote in 1957, events in Hungary were proof that the 'revolutionary spirit...burns in Europe still in millions of ordinary people. If it did not, civilisation would be at an end, destroyed not by the hydrogen bomb explosions from without, but by the congealing from within.'⁶⁴ In the 1930s, James saw Europe 'congealing from within' in the form of Fascism, and that threat remains with us today. Moreover, with Bush and Blair on the war path, nor can we unfortunately write off the possibility of civilisation being destroyed by 'bomb explosions from without.' However, if one just looked at the growth of barbarism in the world then one would fall into despair and passivity. Instead, we should be inspired by the global mass movements against war and capitalism, that are surely testament enough today, as Hungary was in 1956, to the fact 'the revolutionary spirit' burns still. Those movements in turn might take some inspiration from CLR James.

⁶² Gregson Davis, *Aime Cesaire*, Cambridge, 1997, p98.

⁶³ It is perhaps interesting here to note the political evolution of Harry McShane, who was later successfully recruited by *News and Letters* thousands of miles away in the United States, after the collapse of the SWF in 1957. As he put it, 'they were an American group who kept writing to me about their ideas. Earlier, Eric Heffer would have nothing to do with them, and I was very wary because I thought they were trying to turn Marx into some kind of bourgeois democratic thinker. Finally I read a book called *Marxism and Freedom* [1958] written by one of their leading members, Raya Dunayevskaya, and I realised that what she was saying was of exceptional importance.' See Harry McShane, *No Mean Fighter*, p253.

⁶⁴ C L R James, *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution*, London, 1977, p120.

