

“That Dreadful Country”: C.L.R. James’s early thoughts on American civilisation

Abstract

If C.L.R. James could later reflect in *Beyond a Boundary* that before arriving in Britain, ‘about Britain, I was a strange compound of knowledge and ignorance’, then the same was fundamentally true about his relationship to American society before his arrival there in 1938. This article will begin with discussion of the attraction of America for black West Indians including George Padmore in the era of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as the young James’s own love of jazz and American literature. The complexities of the young James’s ‘anti-Americanism’ will be also explored, before we will explore how James’s turn to both Marxism and Pan-Africanism after 1934 led to a new appreciation of both the power of the American working class and also a new understanding of how a revolutionary solution might be found to the ‘Negro Question’, the question of the systematic racism towards black people in America. The article will conclude with discussion of James’s 1938 work *A History of Negro Revolt*, in particular its Marxist analysis of the history of American slavery and its abolition during the American Civil War, as well as the strengths and limitations of Garveyism as a social movement.

“That Dreadful Country”: C.L.R. James’s early thoughts on American civilisation

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“Do you know C.L.R. James?” So asked Carl Van Vechten of his friend the great poet, playwright and writer Langston Hughes in private correspondence in October 1941. Hughes responded that “C.L.R. James I met in Paris. Also I believe in Los Angeles. He was the leading colored Trotskyite of the English speaking world. Said to be very brilliant. But he did not seem to have much of a sense of humor...”¹ Hughes’s brief passing reference to the Trinidadian Marxist historian and writer C.L.R. James (1901-89) is intriguing. The fact that a leading white cultural critic such as Van Vechten was asking Hughes about James tells us that by 1941 James - after leaving Britain in 1938, where he had resided for the previous six years - had in a sense “arrived” in the United States as a black public intellectual figure. The name of James was known in black progressive circles above all as the author of *The Black Jacobins* (1938), a magisterial account of the Haitian Revolution. The work had garnered positive reviews in African-American periodicals and even *Time* magazine had hailed it as “an impassioned account of Toussaint L’Ouverture and the Santo Domingo revolution, written from the Marxist point of view by a young British Negro. It bristles with harrowing atrocities, fiery denunciations of imperialism, but manages to give a vivid account of a revolution which greatly influenced U.S. history before the Civil War.”²

Hughes’s response regarding James stands in its way as testimony to the power of what Brent Hayes Edwards has called “black internationalism”, not least the fact that the paths of these two great black political writers had first crossed on one of Hughes’s extended visits to Paris, a veritable “Capital of the Black Atlantic”, in 1937 or (more likely) 1938. James would himself regularly visit Paris throughout the

¹ “Carl Van Vechten to Langston Hughes, October 27, 1941” and “Langston Hughes to Carl Van Vechten October 30, 1941” in Emily Bernard, ed., *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 192-94.

² *Time*, 5 Dec. 1938. For reviews in African-American publications, see for example W. B. Seabrook, “*The Black Jacobins*”, *Journal of Negro History*, Volume 24, No. 1 (January, 1939); Rayford W. Logan, “Reviews – Caribbean History”, *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, Volume 17, No. 2 (1939); James W. Ivy, “Break the Image of the White God...”, *The Crisis*, Volume 46, No. 8 (August 1939).

1930s for historical research and meetings of the international Trotskyist movement, including the Fourth International's founding conference in September 1938, where James would be elected to its fifteen strong international executive committee.³ That Hughes could use the past tense to describe James ("he *was* the leading Trotskyite...") is indicative of the fact that by 1941 "C.L.R. James" had disappeared from public view in America, having decided to overstay his short-stay visa and become an "underground" professional revolutionary in the American Trotskyist movement, and was now writing under various pseudonyms, most notably "J.R. Johnson".⁴ It is not surprising that the likes of Van Vechten were beginning to wonder what had happened to James, nor could Hughes really help him out, given his own considerable distance from Trotskyism. As Hughes's remark about James's apparently humourless nature reveals, the two writers, despite a number of mutual friends and their shared passion for matters such as theatre and the Haitian Revolution, were unlikely to become friends, let alone comrades.⁵ Though after the 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact, Hughes would steadily become disillusioned with orthodox Communism and the Soviet Union, for most of the 1930s, as "J.R. Johnson" (James) had argued in January 1940, Hughes represented "one of the most pertinacious fellow-travellers of the Stalinists", and so any encounter between the two in the late 1930s was inevitably likely to be a rather argumentative and terse affair.⁶

³ The two had mutual friends in Paris such as Nancy Cunard and Léon-Gontran Damas. For Hughes in Paris in this period, see Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume 1: 1902-1941: I, Too, Sing America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 343-44, 361-62. On "black internationalism", see Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003). On "black Paris", see Jonathan P. Eburne and Jeremy Braddock, "Introduction: Paris, Capital of the Black Atlantic", *Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 51, No. 4, (2005), 731-740.

⁴ In 1941 James – or rather "J.R. Johnson" - travelled to southeastern Missouri to help support and report on a strike by the sharecroppers of local 313 of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA). See Christopher Taylor, "Sharing Time: C.L.R. James and Southern Agrarian Movements", *Social Text*, 111 (2012), 75-98.

⁵ Both for example had written plays on the Haitian Revolution in the 1930s. See C.L.R. James, *Toussaint Louverture: The story of the only successful slave revolt in history* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013) and Philip Kaisary, *The Haitian Revolution in the Literary Imagination: Radical Horizons, Conservative Constraints* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014), 37-55. This essay has not explored the important question of how the US Occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934 shaped James's understanding of "American Civilisation", but for some suggestive comments from James about the occupation, see Raphael Dalleo, "'The Independence So Hardly Won Has Been Maintained': C.L.R. James and the U.S. Occupation of Haiti", *Cultural Critique*, 87 (Spring 2014), 38-59.

⁶ J.R. Johnson, "On *Gone with the Wind*", *Socialist Appeal*, 13 Jan. 1940, republished in Scott McLemee, ed., *C.L.R. James on the "Negro Question"*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi,

On a deeper level, Hughes's brief comment however does at least generously acknowledge something of James's brilliance as a creative Marxist theorist, who as a leading anti-colonialist theorist and Pan-Africanist activist in Britain had been invited over to the United States by the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in late 1938 on the urging of Leon Trotsky himself. Trotsky was concerned that the American Trotskyist movement had not yet seriously come close to answering the critical challenge posed by what was then called "the Negro Question", the massive systematic and deep institutional racism against black people ingrained in the American state and wider society. In April 1939, James would meet the exiled leader of the Russian Revolution himself in Coyoacán, Mexico, and their remarkable wide-ranging discussions on race, class and the appropriate revolutionary strategy and tactics for the black liberation struggle, although structured within the slightly abstract framework of "the right to self-determination", always tried to relate Marxist theory to the concrete reality of anti-racist organising.⁷ Some of the specific campaigning ideas suggested were indeed to be taken up in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s. James for example suggested that "discrimination in restaurants should be fought by a campaign. A number of Negroes in any area go into a restaurant all together, ordering for instance some coffee, and refuse to come out until they are served. It would be possible to sit there for a whole day in a very orderly manner and throw upon the police the necessity of removing these Negroes". Trotsky agreed, adding that "Yes, and give it an even more militant character. There could be a picket line outside to attract attention and explain something of what is

1996), 54. In April 1938, Hughes as an admirer of Stalin had signed a public statement supporting the Moscow Trials, "the efforts of the Soviet Union to free itself from insidious internal dangers, principal menace to peace and democracy". See Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume 1*, 374. Twenty years after their first meeting, James and Hughes enjoyed a more cordial re-union in November 1959, when Hughes briefly visited Trinidad to give a series of lectures. James as a leading member of Eric Williams's People's National Movement in this period would now do the honours by introducing Hughes to the audience at the Public Library in Port of Spain. See Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume II: 1941-1967: I Dream a World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 304.

⁷ On these see Leon Trotsky, *On Black Nationalism and Self-Determination* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1980), C.L.R. James, "Discussions with Trotsky" in C.L.R. James, *At the Rendezvous of Victory: Selected Writings*, Volume 3, (London: Allison and Busby, 1984), 33-64. For more on these discussions, see Scott McLemee, "Introduction: The Enigma of Arrival" in Scott McLemee, ed., *C.L.R. James on the "Negro Question"* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), Christopher Phelps's excellent introduction to Max Shachtman, *Race and Revolution* (London: Verso, 2003), xi-lxiii, and Christian Høgsbjerg, "The Prophet and Black Power: Trotsky in race in the US", *International Socialism*, 121 (2009), 99-119.

going on”.⁸ A few days after their meeting, James reflected in private correspondence that “I have been thinking over the Negro question ... I have talked much with L.T. [Leon Trotsky], and have been thinking over all that he said. I am now certain that no one in America, none in the party, has ever seen the Negro question for the gigantic thing it is, and will increasingly be. L.T. sees it, I was groping towards it. I begin to see it now, every day more clearly...”⁹

That Trotsky and James recognised the validity of independent black self-activity and self-organisation in the struggle for black liberation was to be of immense importance in enabling at least elements of the American Trotskyist movement after Trotsky’s murder in 1940 to more effectively prepare for the Civil Rights movement when it exploded in the 1950s, and then to relate to leading Black Power figures such as Malcolm X. As James wrote in his famous “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States” (1948) - which may have been read as a SWP pamphlet by the young Malcolm Little in prison - the black struggle had “a vitality and validity of its own” but also had the potential “to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation”, and in particular “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”.¹⁰ However, by the time the Civil Rights movement erupted in the mid-1950s, James himself had been forced to return to Britain with the rise of McCarthyism, though he was able to meet with Martin Luther King for discussions in Ghana and London in 1957.¹¹ Nonetheless, in the United States, works like *The*

⁸ Trotsky, *On Black Nationalism and Self-Determination*, 59, 66.

⁹ Anna Grimshaw, ed., *Special Delivery: The letters of C.L.R. James to Constance Webb, 1939-1948* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 49. Such feelings would be heightened by James’s first direct experience of racism and segregation in the Jim Crow South as he stopped off in New Orleans on his way back from Mexico in 1939. See McLemee “Introduction: The Enigma of Arrival”, xxi-xxii.

¹⁰ McLemee, ed., *C.L.R. James on the “Negro Question”*, 139. For the young Malcolm X’s possible familiarity with James’s text while in prison, courtesy of the Harlem lawyer Conrad Lynn, see Lawrence Ware and Paul Buhle, “Malcolm X, C.L.R. James and Political Choices Today”, *Counterpunch*, 12 Aug. 2015, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/08/12/malcolm-x-clr-james-and-political-choices-today/>. See also Paul Buhle, “C.L.R. James: The Authorized Biography, a Quarter Century Later”. This stands as the Preface to the 2014 Japanese edition of Paul Buhle, *C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary* (London: Verso, 1989).

¹¹ See C.L.R. James and Martin Glaberman, “Letters” in Paul Buhle (ed.), *C.L.R. James: His Life and Work* (London: Allison and Busby, 1986), 154-58.

Black Jacobins, and James's other writings on the black struggle would come to influence a group which Manning Marable once argued represented "in many respects the most significant expression of black radical thought and activism in the 1960s," the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.¹²

In the current climate questions of racism, resistance and revolt have come powerfully once again to the fore across the United States with the inspiring #BlackLivesMatter movement, which started as a hashtag after the shooting of 17 year old Trayvon Martin in Florida in 2013 before going national. Taking to the streets in their thousands against murderous police brutality under the slogans "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" and "I Can't Breathe" (the last words of two young black men killed by police in the summer of 2014 - Michael Brown, in Ferguson, St Louis and Eric Garner, killed as police put him in chokehold in New York - respectively), this movement - together with the riots which saw Baltimore burn in April 2015 following the death of Freddie Gray in police custody - means it is surely timely to return to thinkers like James, author of the path-breaking study *A History of Negro Revolt* (1938).¹³ This article in particular will examine how James – whose experience of race and racism before 1938 had been first in colonial Trinidad and then in imperial Britain, and whose understanding was tied up with challenging a transnational "colour bar" across European empires – imagined and thought as an outsider about the peculiarly "national" question of racism in the United States before he actually confronted and experienced the levels of extreme discrimination directly himself. If James could later reflect that before arriving in Britain in 1932 from Trinidad, "about Britain, I was a strange compound of knowledge and ignorance", then the same it will

¹² Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I do mind dying: A study in urban revolution* (London: Redwords, 1998), xi, 16, 262. Georgakas and Surkin in their history of the League note that "James's ideas were well known to League activists and *Black Jacobins* was the work which struck the deepest chord."

¹³ For more on James's *History of Negro Revolt*, see Christian Høgsbjerg, "The 'Black International' as Social Movement Wave: C.L.R. James's *History of Pan-African Revolt*" in Colin Barker, Laurence Cox, John Krinsky and Alf Gunvald Nilson, eds., *Marxism and Social Movements* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014), 317-335. For more analysis of the recent #BlackLivesMatters movement, see Megan Trudell, "Racism and resistance in the US after Ferguson", *International Socialism*, 146 (Spring 2015), 75-93. For some suggestions of what James himself might have thought of this movement, see Matthew Quest, "C.L.R. James, the Ferguson Rebellion and Radical History", *The New Historian* (2015), <http://www.newhistorian.com/clr-james-ferguson-rebellion-radical-history/2911/> For how another legendary West Indian revolutionary, Frantz Fanon, found a new audience when he was taken up amidst the #BlackLivesMatter movement because of his comments in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) that the Indo-Chinese revolted "because it became impossible to breathe", see Peter Hudis, *Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 1.

be argued was essentially true of James about America before his arrival in 1938.¹⁴ To borrow from the title of a highly original but sadly unfinished (and posthumously published) manuscript that James embarked upon during the winter of 1949, this article will explore how one young black writer born in a small Caribbean outpost of the British Empire at the start of the twentieth century came to initially make sense of “American Civilisation”.¹⁵

IN TRINIDAD

“My mother’s taste in novels was indiscriminate”, James tells us in his 1963 semi-autobiographical classic cultural history of cricket, *Beyond a Boundary*. “She was a reader, one of the most tireless I have ever known.” Of the novels that James describes picking up “as she put them down” as a boy included at least two towering American novelists, Nathaniel Hawthorne and James Fenimore Cooper. The young James particularly admired Cooper’s vivid accounts of native American tribes fighting for survival against British and French colonialism, such as *The Deerslayer*, *The Pathfinder*, *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Prairie*.¹⁶ In 1944, James described in a letter to Constance Webb how one day, when a small boy, “my mother put down *The Last of the Mohicans*”.

I picked it up and read it ... when I finished the *Last of the M* [sic] I got a copy-book and began to write a story of my own. But after two chapters my mother read it and said it was exactly like the *Last of the M* [sic] and I stopped ... she should have told me to go on and I would I have written it to the end I think.¹⁷

¹⁴ C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Hutchinson, 1969), 114.

¹⁵ C.L.R. James, *American Civilization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993). See also Bill Schwarz, “C.L.R. James’s *American Civilization*”, in Christopher Gair, ed., *Beyond Boundaries: C.L.R. James and Postnational Studies* (London: Pluto, 2006).

¹⁶ James, *Beyond a Boundary*, 26. Richard Small, “The Training of an Intellectual, the Making of a Marxist” in Paul Buhle, ed., *C.L.R. James: His Life and Work* (London: Allison and Busby, 1986), 51.

¹⁷ Grimshaw, ed., *Special Delivery*, 171.

If it is indeed the case that when James won his place at the island's elite secondary school, Queen's Royal College (QRC), English literature came to dominate over say, American literature, at least he had already got some sense of how European colonialism had shaped American history. Moreover, some of James's favourite English novelists wrote at length about American society, including William Thackeray, 36 volumes of whose writings were in the QRC library and were systematically devoured by James.¹⁸ In the 1850s, Thackeray had twice visited America, and in *The Virginians* (1857-59), for example, wrote about a slave-holding family in colonial America in the second half of the eighteenth century, making what Deborah A. Thomas notes as his "most explicit fictional description of American slavery".¹⁹ During the 1920s, as a young modern intellectual James kept up to date with American literature, subscribing "for some time" to the *Nation* and the *New Republic*, and reading novelists such as William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway.²⁰ James – who would later write a pioneering work of Marxist literary criticism on Herman Melville – also tackled Melville's classic novel *Moby Dick* for the first time in Trinidad.²¹ He also became not simply a fan but an expert on jazz, and bought and played many records coming out of America during this period. "Particularly Louis Armstrong was one of my favourites."²² One of James's best friends during the 1920s

¹⁸ James, *Beyond a Boundary*, 37.

¹⁹ Thomas notes that "the idea of slavery haunted Thackeray's imagination". Deborah A. Thomas, *Thackeray and Slavery* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1993), 1, 140.

²⁰ James, *Beyond a Boundary*, 70-71. James would later impress the English novelist Edith Sitwell in 1932 by naming the novelist William Faulkner after she had alluded to "a young American writer of 31 or 32 who was a far finer novelist than D.H. Lawrence" but then refused to name him. Nicholas Laughlin, ed., *Letters from London: Seven Essays by C.L.R. James* (Oxford: Signal, 2003), 24-25.

²¹ Louise Cripps, *C.L.R. James: Memories and Commentaries* (London: Cornwall Books, 1997), 117, 168. Louise Cripps also remembers James discussing the idea of writing on *Moby Dick* with her in England during the 1930s, as a work that illuminated "Man's struggle against Fate, and how his own obsessions could destroy him". For James's 1953 work on Melville, see C.L.R. James, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (Hanover, Dartmouth College / University Press of New England, 2001).

²² Paul Buhle, "The Making of a Literary Life: C.L.R. James interviewed", in Paget Henry and Paul Buhle, eds., *C.L.R. James's Caribbean* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 59. According to MacDonald Celestin Taylor, James was offered a job as "manager of the new musical departmental store on Frederick Street" as a result of his expertise in the area of jazz and classical music. See Kent Worcester, *C.L.R. James: A Political Biography* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 249. For one brief later comment by James on the history of jazz, see James, *American Civilization*, 137.

and early 1930s, the Trinidadian writer Alfred Mendes, remembered that James had “an uncanny memory for music and literature”, even American literature.

I can remember one evening putting him to the test. I said ‘Look, Nello, we are going to put you to a test now. We have always heard of this memory that you have for reciting pieces of literature. You must let us choose the piece that we want you to recite, but you can choose the author.’ So James chose O. Henry. James started off with the story, and I held it with the others overlooking the book. It was the typical O. Henry short story with the startling denouement. James missed up on a few words, but no sentences. He got the whole goddamn thing, and it was a story of about three or four thousand words!²³

It is impossible here to do justice to the way in which America, in particular the “Negro Metropolis” of New York, home of the Harlem Renaissance, appeared attractive to black West Indians.²⁴ As James wrote in 1938, the USA was “the Mecca of all West Indian Negroes before the slump”.²⁵ There was a huge wave of migration to the “black Mecca” of New York in particular, and even James might have considered joining his childhood friend Malcolm Nurse (George Padmore) when he made the move in 1924. As James remembered, “Padmore shook the dust of the cramping West Indies from his feet in the early 1920s and went to the United States”.²⁶ James instead stayed and gravitated around a group of young intellectuals, black and white, who formed independent literary journals, *Trinidad* and then, more substantially, *The Beacon*. The editor of *The Beacon*, Albert Gomes, had a conscious aim to help foster a national “West Indian literature” and he was inspired by American literature.

²³ Reinhard W. Sander, “The Turbulent Thirties in Trinidad: An Interview with Alfred H. Mendes”, *World Literature Written in English*, Volume 12, No. 1 (1973), 70. James would quote from an O. Henry short story, “Brickdust Row”, in one of his 1932 articles for the *Port of Spain Gazette*. See Laughlin, ed., *Letters from London*, 100, 135.

²⁴ There is extensive discussion of this in Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1999).

²⁵ C.L.R. James, *A History of Negro Revolt* (London: FACT, 1938), 67.

²⁶ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Penguin, 2001), 310.

The day will come when we, like America, will produce our Walt Whitman; then, and only then will the movement towards an art and language indigenous to our spirit and environment commence. One has only to glance through the various periodicals published in this and the other islands to see what slaves we still are to English culture and tradition.²⁷

The Beacon had a number of Americans who would contribute to the journal, including two socialists based in America who were involved in editing and contributing to the journal from the outset, Sheldon Christian and Nathan Schneider.²⁸

James himself in the 1920s while in Trinidad was already also beginning to grapple for the first time with the systematic racism of American society. A reader of such towering black figures of black American thought as the Jamaican Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey – who he first met and interviewed when he visited Trinidad in the late 1920s - and the historian and scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, in August 1931, in *The Beacon*, James was well prepared when he wrote his famous article on “The Intelligence of the Negro”. James here paid particular tribute to the black American artist and activist James Weldon Johnson, who had just retired from his position as NAACP secretary.

How many white people, particularly Colonials, hear of a man like Johnson? How many men today know what was the real quality of Booker T. Washington? To most he was a clever, even a distinguished negro, and nothing more. Time will right all these things. When names like Hoover, Coolidge, Mellon, Stimson and Walker, which fill the American news today, are dead as dust, there will yet be a place in history for Booker T. Washington, James Weldon Johnson, Moton of Tuskegee, Burghardt du Bois, and others of their kind who, in the face of every imaginable difficulty, have fought and are still fighting the cause of negro emancipation.

²⁷ *The Beacon*, Volume 2, No. 12 (June, 1933).

²⁸ Brinsley Samaroo, ed., *The Beacon, Volumes I-IV, 1931-1939* (New York: Kraus, 1977), xviii. Nathan Schneider was a supporter of the Communist Party in America, and wrote articles for *The Beacon* on the appeal of Communism in America during the Great Depression. See *The Beacon*, Volume 1, No. 1 (March, 1931) and *The Beacon*, Volume 1, No. 2 (May, 1931). Hazel V. Carby has argued that these two Americans had a significant influence in shaping the direction of *The Beacon*, in accordance with orthodox Communist approaches to literature. I think whatever the merits of this position in general, there is no evidence to suggest that James himself was influenced significantly by this, as he had left Trinidad before *The Beacon* made any serious “Communist turn”. Hazel V. Carby, “Proletarian or Revolutionary Literature: C.L.R. James and the Politics of the Trinidadian Renaissance”, *New Formations*, 10 (1990).

Surely there is a case for saying that James's profound writings on "the Negro Question" in America date from this article written in Trinidad in 1931, rather than say 1939. However, James insisted on making a qualification.

I am not touchous on the race question. If at times I feel some bitterness at the disabilities to which my being a negro has subjected me it is soon washed away by remembering that the few things in my life of which I am proud, I owe, apart from my family, chiefly to white men, almost all Englishmen and Americans, men some of them of international reputation, who have shown me kindness, appreciation, and in more than one case, spontaneous and genuine friendship.²⁹

Indeed, even before James arrived in Britain and became a Marxist, he was fundamentally committed to the idea that class usually explained far more than race. On his way to Britain, James stopped off in Barbados and got talking to a small black boy, "a boy with a grievance".

[The boy] told me that the white people took terrible advantage of the coloured. I asked for one instance. He said that years ago, fourteen men used to be employed lifting goods in a certain place. But the wicked white people had brought a crane which needed only one man to operate and so threw that thirteen out of work. I wanted to explain to him, but I didn't. I had had enough of in my life of explaining things to people.³⁰

Yet James was of course not unaware of the way in which racial oppression was often intimately linked with, and reinforcing of, brutal class exploitation.

It must be a terrible thing to want work and not be able to get it. People say that the West Indian negro is lazy. They lie. I wish some of them would try going out to work in the sun at 40 cents a day. During the evidence given before the Sugar Commission in Barbados, Lord Olivier was astonished to learn that for years

²⁹ C.L.R. James, "The Intelligence of the Negro", *The Beacon*, Volume 1, No. 5 (August, 1931).

³⁰ C.L.R. James, "Barbados and the Barbadians", *Port of Spain Gazette*, 20 March 1932.

thousands of pounds, about a hundred thousand pounds had come into Barbados every year from the Canal Zone and America, saved by Barbadian black people who had gone out there to work.³¹

Yet, while James was doubtless more than aware of the horrors of racism in American society, epitomised in this period by the Scottsboro case, there is a sense in which his early view of America was also shaped by a kind of dismissive, even snobbish, attitude derived from English writers. Matthew Arnold for instance, so important an intellectual influence on the young James, was rather “anti-American” for reasons other than slavery and black oppression. As Stefan Collini notes of Arnold, “his assessment of American civilization had always been unflattering”.³² James’s descriptions of America in the early 1930s arguably need to be read with this in mind. In his first published work, a political biography of Captain Arthur Andrew Cipriani, the charismatic nationalist leader of the Trinidad Workingmen’s Association, *The Life of Captain Cipriani* (1932), James denounced American politics as poisoned by “corruption ... naked and unashamed”, while American “men of business” were “given to fraud”.³³ As James put it in an article sent back from London to the *Port of Spain Gazette* in 1932, America was truly a “dreadful country”. Indeed, British and French official politics may be “bankrupt”, Italy may be languishing under Mussolini, Germany may be stuck between “a feudal baron like von Papen and a cinema gangster like Hitler”, but “Western Europe can say at least that she is better off than America - if that is any comfort”.³⁴

IN BRITAIN

Readers who know of James’s later fascination with American popular culture, particularly Hollywood movies, might be surprised to know that his love of films was

³¹ C.L.R. James, “Barbados and the Barbadians, II”, *Port of Spain Gazette*, 22 March 1932.

³² Stefan Collini, *Arnold* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 24. For Arnold’s influence on the young James, see Christian Høgsbjerg, *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

³³ C.L.R. James, *The Life of Captain Cipriani: An Account of British Government in the West Indies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 40.

³⁴ Laughlin, ed., *Letters from London*, 117.

not so apparent while he was in Britain. Ross McKibbin has noted “the cultural hegemony of the American film in the interwar years” in England, yet in 1932, James had criticised “the English people” for being “still mentally adolescent” as “they live on cheap films”.³⁵ Critically, black people were barely shown in any films made in America at this time, and those that did, the “Jungle pictures” of the 1920s, portrayed black people in a deeply racist fashion, either as servants or savages from “Darkest Africa”. As Paul Robeson - whose portrayal of *The Emperor Jones* in 1933 was a critical moment in breaking away from this tradition - was to note in *Film Weekly* in September 1933, “Hollywood can only visualize the plantation type of Negro - the Negro of ‘Poor Old Joe’ and ‘Swanee Ribber’. It is absurd to use that type to express the modern Negro as it would be to express modern England in the terms of an Elizabethan ballad.”³⁶ As James himself would put it in 1938,

... the millions who watch the films always see Negroes shining shoes or doing menial work, singing or dancing. Of the thousands of Negro professional men, of the nearly two hundred Negro universities and colleges in America which give degrees in every branch of learning, and are run predominantly by Negro professors, of this the American capitalist takes good care that nothing appears on the screen.³⁷

Indeed, Hollywood also eagerly embraced propaganda films about the British Empire, and as *The Times* noted in 1937, “the Union Jack has in the last few years been vigorously and with no little effect waved by Hollywood”. British film censors repaid this debt, and as John MacKenzie notes, “no film was banned for showing black people in an unpleasant or derogatory light”.³⁸ No wonder that James in 1932 was quick to blame racial prejudice he experienced at the hands of “an ordinary, middle-class, commonplace Englishman” on “his *Daily Express*, cinema-fed mind”.³⁹

³⁵ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 434; Laughlin, ed., *Letters from London*, 122.

³⁶ Peter Noble, *The Negro in Films* (London: Skelton, 1948), 48, 56.

³⁷ James, *A History of Negro Revolt*, 66.

³⁸ John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 80, 95.

³⁹ Laughlin, ed., *Letters from London*, 86-87.

In Britain, James's knowledge about "American civilisation" was no doubt expanded by conversations with friends and comrades who had been politically active in America. These ranged from the Canadian Trotskyist poet Earle Birney to other West Indians in the Pan-Africanist movement in Britain who had spent time organising in America, such as George Padmore, Ras T. Makonnen and Amy Ashwood Garvey, while James would also have occasional brushes with Marcus Garvey again himself at various meetings. James would also have some contact with Africans who had been students in America before coming to Britain to study.⁴⁰ But perhaps more significantly, in London James would also meet a number of black Americans, including Ralph Bunche and Paul Robeson (who would go on to star in the title role in James's 1934 play about the Haitian Revolution, *Toussaint Louverture: The only successful slave revolt in history*, when it was performed on the London stage in 1936).⁴¹ In March 1933, for example, at the first weekend conference of the British civil rights organisation the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP), James would have heard Harry Roberts, a black American visiting lecturer at the London School of Economics, give a presentation on "The American Negro". Roberts "drew a picture of the slave trade, proving it to be Capitalism at its worst" before dealing with the Scottsboro case, and then "the contributions of the Negro to American civilization - music, poetry, literature, politics and fine arts".⁴²

Such internationalist and critically-minded contacts perhaps presented James with a rather misleading and idiosyncratic view of American civilization - one that ignored what Kent Worcester has called the "sheer insularity of life as lived by ordinary people outside the micro-landscapes of Los Angeles, Cambridge, San Francisco and Manhattan".⁴³ Nonetheless, James's knowledge about race in America inevitably expanded from such contacts, together with his wider reading. In March 1934, James discussed "the American situation" at some length in a lecture on "The

⁴⁰ These included the Ugandan prince Akiri Nyabongo and the Kenyan nationalist Mbiyu Koinange.

⁴¹ For more on the relationship between James and Robeson, see James, *Toussaint Louverture*.

⁴² *The Keys*, Volume 1, No. 1 (July, 1933). Roberts was on the LCP Executive alongside James, as was another American, Warren H. Scott, from 1933-34. See *The Keys*, Volume 1, No. 2 (October, 1933). James and Roberts corresponded before Roberts returned to America in December 1934. Personal information from David Killingray, 6 November 2014. See *The Keys*, Volume 2, No. 3 (January-March, 1935), which also has a photo of Roberts.

⁴³ Kent Worcester, personal communication, 28 October 2009.

Negro” he gave to the Nelson Sunday Lecture Society in Lancashire. After noting there had been 7,300 lynchings over the past thirty years, James commented that “the position of the masses of negroes in the Southern States was just as precarious as it was in the days of slavery”.⁴⁴

THE REBELLION OF AMERICAN LABOUR

When James joined the Trotskyist movement in Britain in 1934, he joined a tiny group inside the socialist Independent Labour Party (ILP) that did not have the resources for a paper of their own and so his group initially had to make do selling the American Trotskyist paper *Militant*.⁴⁵ From July 1934, the American Trotskyist movement also began publishing the *New International*, a theoretical journal edited by James Burnham and Max Shachtman. Through reading the *Militant* and the *New International*, James would have been able to follow quite closely political events in Roosevelt’s New Deal America, above all the explosion of American trade unionism during the 1930s.⁴⁶ For example, in the first issue of *New International* Alfred Weaver described how he had rightly predicted in December 1933 that

... considering the present historic period, and the deep-going wage cutting, speed-up, and general suffering (unemployment, etc.) which the present crisis has brought to the American proletariat, any appreciable revival of industry carries with it the perspective of a strike movement of hitherto unseen proportions.⁴⁷

In September 1934, the editors of *New International*, noting that “rarely do strikes anywhere in the world last as long as in the United States; rarely are they

⁴⁴ *Nelson Leader*, 16 March 1934.

⁴⁵ As Trotsky noted in August 1934, “the ‘Minority’ that entered the ILP has maintained its internal solidarity and its connection with the international Bolshevick-Leninists, has made large use of the publications of the League in America”. Quoted in Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, *Against the Stream: A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1924-1938* (London: Socialist Platform, 1986), 194.

⁴⁶ For a brief recent overview of these struggles, see John Newsinger, *Fighting Back: The American Working Class in the 1930s* (London: Bookmarks, 2012).

⁴⁷ Alfred Weaver, “Strikes and the Economic Cycle”, *New International*, Volume 1, No. 1 (July, 1934).

fought with such spontaneous vigour and even violence”, described how the peculiarities of the American working class gave it its spirit of militancy.

We have before us a proletariat unique in world labour history. Peculiar historical circumstances have combined to keep the political development of the workers as a class at an inordinate distance from the economic development of the country ... once started on the road of radicalisation, the American workers will move with seven league boots and more likely than not, tend to skip over stages in which the workers in other countries lingered for longer periods. As soon as the retarding burden of its petty bourgeois past is shaken off, it will shoot to the top with phenomenal speed, just as a deep sea diver, divesting himself of artificial lead weights, would surge to the surface with all the greater speed the deeper and denser the level at which he was working.⁴⁸

Such information and reports meant that James was confident enough to not just expose some of the failures of the Communist International under the leadership of Stalin and Zinoviev with respect to America in his pioneering 1937 anti-Stalinist history of the Comintern, *World Revolution*, but also to pass comment on the rising wave of industrial struggle there for the British Trotskyist journal he edited, *Fight*.⁴⁹ The year 1937 saw what James noted was “a welcome revival in Britain of working class militancy” since the Lancashire cotton workers’ strike he had witnessed in Nelson in 1932. This was “an extension of the widespread international strike wave” that had begun in Spain in 1935 and since spread to France, Belgium and the U.S.A. In America, “amid all the social and political corruption of a highly developed Imperialism, with different races and stratas among the proletariat, the workers are noted for their extreme economic militancy and political backwardness”. “The struggle has taken the form of a fight for industrial unionism”, James noted, and he wrote about the rise of the Committee of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and its “partial victories” despite “the sabotage of the A.F. of L. [American Federation of Labour], use of State troops, tear gas, company thugs and all the other methods of ‘restoring industrial peace,’ so expressive of American Imperialism”.

⁴⁸ *New International*, Volume 1, No. 3 (September-October, 1934).

⁴⁹ C.L.R. James, *World Revolution, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1994), 195.

The issue has been in general for recognition of the Committee and its affiliated unions to represent the workers. Its importance is that it organises the workers in units, based on the factory. The form of struggle has been mass “sit-down” strikes; thousands of workers have occupied the factories, and the usual brutal methods of repression have failed to break their spirit ... the situation presents great opportunities for the militants to play the leading role in the struggle for Industrial Unionism. In this way they can strengthen the workers’ fighting power for the future revolutionary struggles of the factory committee, council or Soviet. The importance of American Imperialism in world politics renders the raising of the struggle in that country of vital importance to the international proletariat.⁵⁰

No doubt it was the rise of such inspiring industrial action on such a large scale, increasingly around the CIO, which pulled into the struggle black workers for the first time in mass numbers, and James’s Marxist understanding of the significance of such struggle, that led him to quickly rethink his opinion of American society and culture while still in Britain. In 1938, Bob Edwards, Chair of the ILP Industrial Committee, visited Detroit and reported back in glowing terms about the class struggle in America for the *New Leader*. In an article on “Sit Down Strikes”, Edwards described the growth of the auto workers union from 30,000 in 1936 to 400,000 by 1938. “Nowhere in the world has the Trade Union movement advanced so rapidly. Nowhere in the world of labour have the masses developed such a militant programme of struggle.”⁵¹ In September 1938, Edwards, now back in Britain, reported on the growth of the CIO from one million members to four million members over the last three years through struggle in an article titled “America Now Leads”. “I left the American scene full of hope and enthusiasm for the CIO, and full of an eagerness to share my impressions, experiences and estimations ... a new spirit is abroad in America. A new workers’ army is on the march.”⁵²

⁵⁰ “Lessons of the International Strike Wave”, *Fight*, Volume 1, No. 7 (June, 1937).

⁵¹ *New Leader*, 15 July 1938.

⁵² *New Leader*, 2 September 1938. Edwards had been the first commander of the ILP contingent in the Spanish Civil War, and would later serve as ILP chairman and then a Labour MP. Such optimism was shared by the editors of the *New Internationalist*, who noted in January 1938, “it is increasingly clear that the centre of gravity of the revolutionary labour movement is shifting Westward” to the United States where “the labour movement is experiencing a sweeping upsurge”. “The Aims of Our Review”, *New Internationalist*, Volume 4, No. 1 (January, 1938).

A REVOLUTIONARY ANSWER TO THE “NEGRO QUESTION”

As Editorial Director of the publications of the militant Pan-Africanist International African Service Bureau (IASB), formed in 1937 out of the earlier network of solidarity that had come together in London in the International African Friends of Abyssinia (IAFA) in 1935 at the time of Mussolini’s barbaric war on the people of Ethiopia, James would deepen his already quite advanced understanding of the systematic racism in America.⁵³ The IASB newsletter *Africa and the World* carried reports on “West Indians in America” on 14 August 1937, its successor, *African Sentinel*, reprinted an article from the *Afro-American* on 25 Sept 1937 while the journal *International African Opinion* carried a regular section, entitled first “American Notes” and then “The American Scene”. One issue of *International African Opinion* in August 1938, for example, among other things, carried an obituary of James Weldon Johnson, discussed Joe Louis’s triumph over white German boxer Max Schmeling (seen by many as a symbolic blow to fascist ideology), the proposed establishment of a “Negro Division for the U.S. Army”, discussed the novelist Richard Wright (who James would become good friends with after his move to the United States), and published a poem by Langston Hughes on the Scottsboro Boys (the permission for which may have been secured by James when he met Hughes in Paris). Accompanying Hughes’s poem on Scottsboro, *International African Opinion* carried a “Brief History of the Case” which ended as follows:

Lynch terror is the weapon in the hands of the white ruling class in order to keep the Negro workers in subjection and misery, so that the boss class can wring their super profits out of them. The subjection of the Negro workers is also used as a club to beat down the standards of the white workers. Thus by breeding this racial discrimination, white and black workers are pitted against each other.⁵⁴

⁵³ For more on the IASB and James’s political activism in Britain, see Høgsbjerg, *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain*. Interestingly, according to James’s Special Branch file, James was from late 1935 in contact with the former American Communist leader Jay Lovestone and his group in America, who sent him copies of their *Negro Voice and Race*, and put him in contact with their black American contacts. The National Archives, Kew, London [TNA]: KV/2/1824/1z.

⁵⁴ *International African Opinion*, Volume 1, No. 2 (August, 1938). James was assisted in editing this journal by a black American student at the LSE, William Harrison.

As Matthew Quest notes, in various news items, *International African Opinion* sought to “foster autonomy from the Democratic Party at their best” during the era of the New Deal and to challenge “the increasing loyalty of African-Americans to Franklin Roosevelt’s Democratic Party machine” through exposing “the American ruling elite regardless of party affiliation” on the question of black liberation.⁵⁵ Yet James’s greatest elucidation on “the Negro Question” in America, before he left for America itself, came in his short work *A History of Negro Revolt*, where James discussed “The Old United States”, “The [American] Civil War” and “Marcus Garvey”. In his discussion of the Antebellum South, James briefly discussed a huge variety and number of slave revolts which had taken place, some with the Haitian Revolution in the background, from the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina in 1739 to Turner’s Revolt in 1831, making good use in particular of “an admirable and well-documented” article by the American Communist historian Herbert Aptheker on “American Negro Slave Revolts” which had recently appeared in the summer 1937 edition of the American journal *Science and Society*.⁵⁶ Nat Turner’s revolt, James noted, “had an effect out of all proportion to its size”.

Though there are reports of slave conspiracies and of plots all over the Southern states for the next thirty years, nothing on a large scale seems to have been attempted. On the other hand at the time of the Turner revolt the Southern slave owners realised that the unrest ‘was not confined to the slaves.’ Henceforth the fear of unity between the blacks and the poor whites drove the South to treat with great severity any opposition to slavery in the South from whatever source it came. A rigid censorship was instituted. In the years before the American Civil War the turmoil among the slaves was widespread all over the South. Their chance came, however, not from the poor

⁵⁵ Matthew Quest, “George Padmore’s and C.L.R. James’s *International African Opinion*”, in Fitzroy Baptiste and Rupert Lewis, eds., *George Padmore: Pan-African Revolutionary* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2009), 113-14.

⁵⁶ James, *A History of Negro Revolt*, 22. For James’s later analysis of Aptheker’s work, see C.L.R. James, “Stalinism and Negro History” in Scott McLemee and Paul Le Blanc, eds., *C.L.R. James and Revolutionary Marxism: Selected Writings of C.L.R. James, 1939-49* (New Jersey: Humanity Books, 1994). Aside from acknowledging James’s *History of Negro Revolt* in the bibliography to his *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943), Aptheker was in general silent on James’s work. See Anthony Flood, “C.L.R. James: Herbert Aptheker’s Invisible Man”, *The C.L.R. James Journal*, Volume 19, Nos. 1-2 (2013), 276-297.

whites of the South but from the economic and political necessities of the Northern whites.⁵⁷

James noted that if the American Civil War “resulted in the abolition of slavery it was not fought for the benefit of the slaves”.

Negro slavery seemed the very basis of American capitalism. Slavery made cotton king; cotton became the very life food of British industries, it built up the New England factories. This accounts for not merely the support given to the South by Conservatives but even by certain British Liberals ... The South had dominated the Federal Legislation for more than half a century, but with the increasing industrial expansion of the North, that domination was now in danger. Both North and South were expanding westward. Should the new states be based on slavery as the South wanted or on free capitalism as the North wanted?

“This was not a moral question”, yet “Karl Marx hailed the Civil War as the greatest event of the age ... What he could see so early was the grandeur of the civilisation which lay before the States with the victory of the North”.

What we are really witnessing here is not that sudden change in the conscience of mankind so beloved of romantic and reactionary historians, but the climax of a gradual transformation of world economy. Where formerly landed property had dominated, the French Revolution marks the beginning of the social and political domination of the industrial bourgeoisie. It began in the French Revolution, in Britain its outstanding dates are the Reform Bill of 1832 and the Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, and it reached its culmination with the Civil War in America. The process worked itself out blindly and irrationally.⁵⁸

Abraham Lincoln originally “said openly that to save the Union he would free all the slaves, or free some, or free none” and “long maintained his attitude. It was the pressure of war which forced him to accept emancipation.” Lincoln now “saw the necessity of at least using slaves for labour purposes. Refugees poured over to the

⁵⁷ James, *A History of Negro Revolt*, 24-25.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

Northern forces” and soon “were establishing themselves in the army as capable teamsters, mechanics, and general workers”.

They were industrious and loyal. The South was proving more difficult to conquer than had first been thought, and the Negroes would have to be used as soldiers ... thus Lincoln’s objections were finally overcome by the necessity of events.⁵⁹

By the end of the war 178,875 blacks had been enrolled in the Union army and while “unfair treatment affected the morale of the blacks ... of their military quality there was never any question”. They were “fighting for freedom” and “defeated some of the crack Southern troops, men who had formerly owned them ... Lincoln himself admitted that but for the assistance given by the Negroes, the North might have lost. He spoke more wisely than he knew.”⁶⁰ Among the slaves still in the South,

... after the proclamation of emancipation, the news spread and it is claimed that there took place a sort of general strike, an immense sabotage, which helped to bring the South to its knees. Slavery degrades, but under the shock of great events like a revolution, slaves of centuries seem able to conduct themselves with the bravery and discipline of men who have been free a thousand years.

After victory in the Civil War,

... the Negroes themselves knew what they wanted - the land - and had they been strong enough to take it, or had the Northern capitalists the wisdom to give it to them, the possibilities opened up for the Negro and American capitalism would have been immense ... Only a revolution in which the poor were the driving force would have held out its hand to the blacks and made common cause of its own objectives and land for the blacks. There was no such revolution in America ... monopoly capitalism was on its way ... in another generation, Northern monopoly capitalism had America in its grasp. It left the Negro to his fate, and the South turned on him.

⁵⁹Ibid., 29-30.

⁶⁰Ibid., 30-31.

Landless, his Northern collaborators gone, he was whipped back to an existence bordering on servitude.⁶¹

Robin D.G. Kelley once claimed of “James’s analysis of the slaves’ actions during the conflict”, from his “invocation of the ‘general strike’ to his description of the slaves’ hesitant responses toward the Union soldiers”, that they are “taken straight” from Du Bois’s monumental 1935 work *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*.⁶² It is testament to James’s historical skill that his writing evokes Du Bois, and James did indeed take note of “Negro scholarship in America” as well as the claim of a “general strike”. However, if this confirms James was aware of some of the recent historical debates around the Civil War, it does not necessarily confirm his having read *Black Reconstruction* itself.⁶³

James finally turned his attention to “the Garvey Movement” from 1919-26. In modern America, James wrote, “the prevailing attitude to the Negro is one of strong and sometimes ferocious prejudice”, usually related to notions of black sexual promiscuity, but “the Negro question” is not one ultimately of race but “a social and political question”. “The Negro must be kept in his place.” “All Negroes are aware of the mass of lies on which the prejudice is built, of the propaganda which is designed to cover the naked economic exploitation,” a propaganda particularly

⁶¹ Ibid., 31-36. James did not pass over the period of “Reconstruction” when blacks played a part in the government of some Southern states in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War and were able to implement “the policy of a people poor and backward seeking to establish a community where all, black and white, could live in amity and freedom. It deserves to be remembered.” For more on Reconstruction, see Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

⁶² Robin D.G. Kelley, “Introduction”, to C.L.R. James, *A History of Pan-African Revolt* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1995), 15. Cedric Robinson had previously also advanced the case that James during the 1930s was influenced by *Black Reconstruction*. See Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Books, 1991), 380, 409.

⁶³ James, *A History of Negro Revolt*, 22, 31-32, 34. The only articles James refers to are Aptheker’s effort in *Science and Society* from 1937 and one by a “Southerner” from April 1938 in the *American Mercury*. Indeed James himself later commented that he “had no idea what Du Bois was doing” with respect to the history of the American Civil War until he left Britain for America. MARHO, ed., *Visions of History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 275. In a lecture in 1971, James reiterated that “I learnt quite a few things in the United States. Among them I learned the work of Dr Du Bois, than whom no more important name in the political and intellectual development of the twentieth century can be called.” C.L.R. James, “The Old World and the New” in C.L.R. James, *At the Rendezvous of Victory: Selected Writings*, Vol. 3 (London: Allison and Busby, 1984), 209.

apparent with respect to Hollywood. But despite barbarous racism, there was no “clash of civilisations” in America.

The American Negro, in language, tradition and culture is an American. He was in America almost from the beginning and he has helped to make the country what it is ... literate, Westernized, an American almost from the foundation of America, [he] suffers from his humiliations and discriminations to a degree that few whites and even many non-American Negroes can ever understand. The jazz gaiety of the American Negro is a semi-conscious reaction to the fundamental sorrow of the race.⁶⁴

It was a combination of disillusion among black Americans who had returned home having fought for nothing during the Great War coupled with the tireless dedication, exceptional oratorical talents and militant vision of Marcus Garvey that gave birth to what, by 1920 was “proportionately the most powerful mass movement in America”. “That nine-tenths of the Negroes in America were listening to him is probable ... his name rolled through Africa.” James himself as we have already noted elsewhere used to read Garvey’s paper, the *Negro World*, in Trinidad and briefly met Garvey himself in 1927, just as the movement was in decline. However, in London, James had become closely acquainted with Garvey’s first wife, Amy Ashwood, who had been there from the start. “The King of Swaziland told a friend [Amy Ashwood] some years after that he knew the names of only two black men in the Western world: [the boxer] Jack Johnson and Marcus Garvey.”⁶⁵ James later recalled Kenyatta once told him that illiterate Kenyan nationalists in 1921 would gather around and listen to one person read aloud an article from the *Negro World* two or three times. “Then they would run various ways through the forest, carefully to repeat the whole, which they had memorized, to Africans hungry for some doctrine which lifted them from the servile consciousness in which Africans lived.”⁶⁶

As a Marxist, James was naturally highly critical of the apparent glaring contradictions of Garvey’s politics. Garvey “attacked lynching, he formulated militant demands, equal rights for Negroes, democratic liberties, etc” but also

⁶⁴ James, *A History of Negro Revolt*, 63-66.

⁶⁵Ibid., 68.

⁶⁶ James, *The Black Jacobins*, 310.

“negotiated with the Ku Klux Klan for the repatriation of Negroes to Liberia”. He “attacked imperialism” but “appointed himself President, Emperor, King and what not, of Africa” and ultimately “made his peace with British imperialism”. Garvey “viciously attacked Communism and advised the Negro workers against linking up with white workers in industrial struggles” at a time when “revolution was in the air, and the Negroes were ready for revolution”. Garvey’s alternative to revolutionary politics was not only “confused” but “pitiably rubbish”. He spoke of “Africa for the Africans”, but as James pointed out when it came to an actual programme “for the Afro-Americans he had none, not even a bad one”.⁶⁷

Yet James knew that an understanding of Garveyism, less of Garvey himself but what his movement represented and signified, was absolutely critical as it showed “the fires that smoulder in the Negro world, in America as in Africa”. “Negroes wanted a leader and they took the first that was offered them ... desperate men often hear, not the actual words of an orator but their own thoughts.” But there was “one thing Garvey did do”. “He made the American Negro conscious of his African origin and created for the first time a feeling of international solidarity among Africans and people of African descent. In so far as this is directed against oppression it is a progressive step.”⁶⁸ The “revolutionary answer to the Negro Question” therefore for James in 1938 lay in building on the strong foundation laid by Garvey in providing a militant lead for black Americans, and igniting “the fires that smoulder” among them in a revolutionary conflagration directed against the racism of the American state and the capitalist system in general. No wonder that Trotsky was so keen that the newly formed American SWP should invite him over for a lecture tour.⁶⁹ Aware that “a new workers’ army” was now also “on the march” in America in the form of the CIO, it seems doubtful James took much persuading.

Overall, C.L.R. James’s understanding of “American civilisation” and its potentialities underwent an important transformation in Britain after leaving colonial

⁶⁷ James, *A History of Negro Revolt*, 68-70.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 69, 71.

⁶⁹ In the summer of 1938, on Trotsky’s urging, James P. Cannon had invited James to do a speaking tour for the SWP that winter on Europe, the coming war and “the Negro question”. As James later proudly remembered, he “had written the history and articles. So I brought to the Trotskyist movement some international reputation.” Grimshaw, ed., *Special Delivery*, 8. Al Richardson, Clarence Chrysostom, and Anna Grimshaw, *C. L. R. James and British Trotskyism: An Interview* (London: Socialist Platform, 1987), 11-12.

Trinidad, the result of his development into a Marxist and his subsequent reading of the rise of the CIO together with his own activism and education by figures like George Padmore and Amy Ashwood Garvey in the tiny militant Pan-Africanist movement. It would clearly be deepened and transformed once again when James crossed back over the Atlantic to experience America for himself, in ways which this article can only point towards. When Marcus Garvey died for example, in his obituary for *Labor Action* in June 1940, James wrote – perhaps implicitly half-critiquing some of his own comments about Garveyism just two years in *A History of Negro Revolt* - that “every two-cent revolutionary who has talked to Negroes in cafeterias and therefore knows the Negro question, points out Garvey’s errors and absurdities and thinks that thereby a contribution has been made to knowledge”. Now after a year and a half in America James showed a new level of respect for Garvey’s achievement: “more than in all the theses of the Comintern, a basis for the building of a real mass movement among the Negroes lies in a thorough study of this first great eruption of the Negro people”.⁷⁰ It is perhaps most appropriate given the heroic recent struggles against police violence in the United States to conclude with the stirring words with which James himself concluded his 1948 “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States”, which also stand as testimony to the distance that James had travelled over the preceding twenty years:

Let us not forget that in the Negro people, there sleep and are now awakening passions of a violence exceeding, perhaps, as far as these things can be compared, anything among the tremendous forces that capitalism has created. Anyone who knows them, who knows their history, is able to talk to them intimately, watches them at their own theatres, watches them at their dances, watches them in their churches, reads their press with a discerning eye, must recognise that although their social force may not be able to compare with the social force of a corresponding number of organised workers, the hatred of bourgeois society and the readiness to destroy it when

⁷⁰ McLemee, ed., *C.L.R. James on the “Negro Question”*, 115-16. It is not an accident that one of the most outstanding Garvey scholars, the Jamaican historian Robert A. Hill, editor-in-chief of the Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers, himself was a leading supporter of C.L.R. James from the 1960s onwards.

the opportunity should present itself, rests among them to a degree greater than in any other section of the population in the United States.⁷¹

Biographical note⁷²

⁷¹ Ibid., 146-47.

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