C.L.R. James and the American Century:
1938-1953

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ABSTRACT

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The recent re-publication in the United States of Beyond a Boundary has brought once again considerable attention to the literary work of C.L.R. James. A central premise of this paper is that a serious examination of the life and political work of Cyril Lionel Robert James holds considerable interest for the study of the modern political world.

The introduction addresses three questions: why James, what in particular about James, and why the focus on the American years. A section then discusses James’s thirty-seven years prior to his arrival in America. It pays particular attention to his radicalization and his involvement in literature, Black nationalism, and Trotskyism.

The bulk of the paper entails a chronological discussion of James’s involvement in the American left and the development of his own brand of radical politics. In order to explain this development attention is paid to the factional debates of the time within which James sharpened his theoretical teeth.

The conclusion discusses the major themes of James’s Marxism at the time of his forced expulsion from the U.S. Larger questions concerning James’s place within Marxism and political theory are only dealt with implicitly.
C.L.R. James and the American Century: 1938-1953*

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Introduction

In one sense, there are many C.L.R. Jameses. There is the progressive schoolmaster steeped in the Anglo-Saxon classics; the anti-colonial writer; the cricket player, the cricket journalist. And there are other more disparate Jameses: the London literary figure; the hardened Detroit Trotskyist—and other as well: the prophet at Nkrumah’s Accra, the Hegelian, the playwright, the student of calypso and the student of Shakespeare.

There are, in fact, so many different pieces to this Trinidadian that many people only recognize individual parts, unconsciously believing that either only one particular piece is important, or that there is no common thread between them. What is true is that the thread is unusual: James is a creative Marxist with an appreciation of culture derived from Trinidad and a British sense of fair play. He is, in the classic phrase, often ahead of his time: his and Mendes’ Trinidad predated the West Indian literary explosion by twenty years; his agitation for African independence—in the early 1930s—was seen as something odd and eccentric; and when he drew up plans for an independent U.S. Black organization during the Second World War he could have been drawing up plans for 1960s groups like the Black Panthers or the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. Other examples come to mind as well.

Born on January 2, 1901, in the small town of Tunapuna, C.L.R. James grew up on an island crossroads of Britain, Africa, and the U.S.A. James was a promising student and then teacher with an interest in cricket and literature. His short stories, published in journals he helped edit, shocked the reading public of the time with their focus on the “barrack-yards”—the slums. He wrote a biography (The Life of Captain Cipriani, 1932) and in the same year left for England. As he later wrote, the “British intellectual was going to Britain.”

* A large number of libraries and people have helped with this research. Thanks must go to the libraries and librarians at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, the New York City Public Library, the Houghton and Widner libraries at Harvard University, and the Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs located at the Walter Reuther Library at Wayne State University.

Thanks must also go to a number of individuals. First among these is C.L.R. James himself, who put up with a myriad of questions. The interview was arranged through the kindness of E. Ethelbert Miller of Howard University. Martin Glaberman, George Ranwick, Robert Hill, Paul Buhle, Alan MacKenzie and Hugh Morrison all helped, as did Tony Bogues, John Anderson, Paul D’Amato and Christina Bergmark. Final thanks must go to Professor Simonds for his encouragement, editorial assistance, and trouble shooting skills. His generosity and open-mindedness are rare qualities.

1 Some have been bothered by this combination. One commentator writes of “the professional West Indian Trotskyist insurrectionist, C.L.R. James, who can…constitute himself the fulsome Victorian-like apologist of the English gentleman class” (Gordon Lewis, The Growth of the Modern West Indies, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968, p. 69); another writer is surprised that “for the Trinidadian Marxist it is possible to demand revolution, while at the same time write panegyrics on the game of cricket!” (Malcolm Cross, Urbanization and Urban Growth in the Caribbean, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 134).

2 C.L.R. James, Beyond a Boundary (London: Hutchinson, 1963).
James’s output in Britain was prodigious. At first he concentrated on helping his friend Learie Constantine finish his autobiography (Cricket and I, 1993) and revising his first, and only, novel (Minty Alley, 1936). When “fiction writing drained out of me and was replaced by politics,”3 he began to devote himself to Trotskyism (editing the paper Fight, writing World Revolution, 1917-1936, 1937, and translating Boris Souvarine’s Stalin, 1939) and Pan-Africanism (co-chairing the International African Service Bureau and writing Black Jacobins, 1938, and A History of Negro Revolt, 1939). The transition from fiction to politics was marked by his play based on the life of Toussaint L’Ouverture which was produced at London’s Westminster Theatre and starred Paul Robeson (Toussaint L’Ouverture, 1936).

In 1938 he came to the U.S. under the auspices of the Socialist Workers Party and stayed fifteen years. During these years he worked within the orthodoxy: lecturing, writing, and publicizing the ideas of Leon Trotsky—ideas such as the need for a new revolutionary international, opposition to the degeneration of the Russian Revolution, permanent revolution, etc. In fact, James went to Mexico to meet Trotsky in 1939, and some of their conversations are transcribed in the book Trotsky on Black Nationalism.

On behalf of the paper Labor Action James went to southern Missouri in 1942 to cover the growing militancy of sharecroppers and their attempt to unionize and gain higher wages. Combined with his connections with nationalists in New York City and Black comrades in Detroit, his experience with these sharecroppers (who were to go on strike and win their demands) was to form the practical underpinnings to his writings on Black nationalism and socialism. His unorthodox view on what was then called “the Negro question” was paralleled by an unorthodox understanding of the Soviet economy, which he saw as state-capitalist. Along with Raya Dunayevskaya James criticized a number of core elements of the Trotskyist perspective, and ended up leaving the SWP in 1951. Their group, the Johnson-Forest tendency (James was Johnson, Dunayevskaya was Forest), published a large number of pamphlets (such as The Invading Socialist Society, 1947, State Capitalism and World Revolution, 1950) and James individually authored a work on Hegel, Marx and Lenin (Notes on Dialectics, 1948). A study of Herman Melville followed (Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways, 1953).

As an independent Marxist in Britain—James was expelled from the U.S> in 1953 as an undesirable alien—he continued his prolific writing (Facing Reality, 1958) and even expanded his interests, taking in such subjects as art and music which he had only touched on before.

In 1958 the Governor General of the new West Indies Federation invited him to attend its inauguration. Asked to stay and edit The Nation, the weekly paper of Eric Williams’s People’s National Movement, and to be Secretary of the West Indian Federal Labor Party, James decided to return to his native Trinidad for a period. Partly as a result of U.S. pressure James was removed from the People’s National Movement (PNM) in 1960. Speeches from the same year were collected and then suppressed by the PNM (Modern Politics, 1960) and his Party Politics in the West Indies (1961) served as an open letter to the PNM membership. He left Trinidad shortly after.

In the last two decades James has enjoyed a larger audience, particularly in the West Indies and in Britain. Apart from brief visits to Ghana under Nkrumah (writing Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution, 1977), James has spent these years teaching in the U.S. and in Britain. Although his pen returned to Caribbean subjects (Beyond a Boundary, 1963, and various articles), apart from one eventful visit to Trinidad4 the bulk of his time has been spent in the U.S. and Britain. He now lives in London and is writing his autobiography.

3Ibid., p. 149.

4“l went down there to do some work: to report cricket matches for the Times and the Observer, and when I reached there Williams arrested me, put me under house arrest…” Quoted in Ian Munro and Reinhard Sander, Kas-Kas (Austin, TX: African and Afro-American Research Institute, 1972), p. 37.
Apart from the sheer variety and substance of James’s activity, what is important to note is that James didn’t have to do these things. It would have been relatively simple for him to have obtained a comfortable position as a journalist, civil servant, or even cabinet minister (after Independence in 1961) in the expanding state and professional apparatus of the island. Alternatively, James could have stayed in Britain to pursue a career as a respected left-winger, slowly adapting himself to the parliamentary reformism of the Labor Party. Again, James could have found, if not a well-paid, at least an undemanding place within American Trotskyism. At all of these points he could have rested.

This lack of complacency is the precondition for all else that follows. It is partly rooted in his personality—his energy, honesty, curiosity, ambition, and willingness to take unpopular positions. It is foremost a product of his politics: his confidence in the ability of working people to run society in their own interest, in working people presenting a positive alternative to welfare paternalism, bureaucratic state capitalism, or the blank stare of nuclear war. This confidence is sufficiently strong so that he never felt the need to substitute the revolutionary party, progressive planning, or piecemeal legislative reform for his vision of workers’ councils.5

We shall see James’s confidence applied to Trinidad, where he was excited by the buoyant nationalism of the urban poor and the powerful oil workers. We see it applied to the battalions of the British labor movement, and to the explosive energy of the Black struggle in the U.S.A. To take these struggles, and to connect them, live within them, and not reduce any one to the other is the source of the creative in James’s Marxism.

We have chosen to focus on James’s work around questions of Trotskyism, Black liberation, and to a lesser extent, literature. Trotskyism is an ambiguous legacy. Anathema to much of the Maoist-inspired new left, considered irrelevant to most of the Caribbean left, dogma for the cadres of the Fourth International, for James it stood as the most revolutionary of the available choices.

Much of the debate within Trotskyism may be unfamiliar to the reader. More recognizable will be the discussion of Black liberation; James elaborated in the 1930s and 1940s ideas which became commonplace within the civil rights and Black power movements of the 1960s. What will be perhaps new is the connection James made between the two.

Literature has remained a constant in James’s life but played at times only an indistinct role. During the years under consideration James remained an avid reader, frequented the New York movie houses and theatres, and wrote an essay on Norman Mailer and William Gardner Smith (“Two American Writers,” 1950). These efforts don’t, however, compare to his intensive efforts as a young writer or even to his literary criticism of later years. It is true that Mariners, Renegades and Castaways is about Melville, but this study of American life comes at the end of his stay and brings James full circle, taking him back to his original concerns of literature and making possible his return to Caribbean subjects.

During his American years, James devoted considerable attention to such questions as the viability of Leninism as an instrument of socialist change in the advanced industrial countries, the role of small socialist groups and the intellectuals who largely inhabit them, the role of the socialist press, the cultural sources of political rebellion, the relationship of Marxists to social movements outside of the labor movement, and the nature of the Soviet Union. To a large degree, this work was part of a collective project. As he later wrote:

It took nearly a decade of incessant labor and collaboration to break with [Trotskyism] and reorganize my Marxist ideas to cope with the post-war world.

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5James, Beyond a Boundary, pp. 114-5.
That was a matter of doctrine, of history, of economics and politics. These pursuits I shared with collaborators, rivals, enemies, and our public.\(^6\)

That it was a conscious project there is no doubt. At one point in *Notes on Dialectics* James approvingly quotes a passage from Hegel’s *Science of Logic*:

> The demand for the digestion and development of the material now becomes so much more pressing. This is a period in the development of an age as in the development of an individual, when the chief business is to acquire and maintain the principle in its underdeveloped intensity. But the higher requirement is that the principle should be elaborated into systematized knowledge.\(^7\)

He then comments: “We recognize ourselves, I hope.”

There are three parts to this systematized knowledge: a focus on the working class as a whole and in its cultural dimension; a definitive break with the Soviet model of “really existing socialism”; and a theory of Black liberation with implications for revolutionary organization and the relationship of the labor movement to movements of the oppressed.

**Trinidad and Britain: 1901-1938**

A man with a reflective turn of mind, walking through an exhibition of this sort, will not be oppressed, I take it, by his own or other people’s hilarity. An episode of humour or kindness touches and amuses him here and there…when you come home you sit down, in a sober, contemplative, not uncharitable frame of mind, and apply yourself to your books or your business.\(^8\)

If politics was his religion and Marx his god, if literature was his passion and Shakespeare his prince among writers, cricket was his beloved activity.\(^9\)

James would recognize the first quote; it is possible that he could even now recite it from memory.\(^10\) In this passage Thackery captures James’s amused but essentially puritan boyhood relationship to Trinidad and its people. Soaked in a British attitude, James was firstly a young scholarship student and only secondly a rebel.\(^11\) James later captured this attitude in the following fashion:

> Me and my clippings and magazines on W.G. Grace, Victor Trumper and Tranjitsinhji, and my *Vanity Fair* and my puritanical view of the world. I look back at the little eccentric and would like to have listened to him, nod affirmatively and pat him on the shoulder. A British intellectual long before I was ten, already an alien in my own environment among my own people, even in my own family.\(^12\)

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\(^6\)Ibid., p. 149.


\(^10\)James, *Beyond a Boundary*, p. 28.

\(^11\)Richard Small’s “The Training of an Intellectual,” *Urgent Tasks*, p. 14, has, I beg to suggest, the order wrong.

\(^12\)James, *Beyond a Boundary*, p. 28.
Ingrained in James was a code, a code more British than Britain, a moral system which stressed honesty, fair play, and stoicism. He never cheated, never appealed a decision of the umpire, and never made excuses for himself. James found this code to be best expressed by Thackery, and suggests in Beyond a Boundary that Trinidad at the turn of the Century was analogous to the “vigorous, pre-Victorian ethos which had produced W.G. Grace and the modern game of cricket: an England still unconquered by the Industrial Revolution, not finicky” about time discipline but finicky about moral discipline.

His family contributed to his character. The first son of an earnest, precariously situated middle class family, James’s mother emphasized strict church attendance and respectability. At the same time his father was among the first generation of Black intellectuals. His father’s best friend was a Muslim, George Padmore’s father. Padmore later became the leading Black member of the Communist International and after that an active Pan-Africanist. James’s family worked to place him in the best secondary school on the island, the Queen’s Royal College.

Queen’s Royal College was the school for the island’s future elite. A scholarship winner at the all-but-unheard-of age of ten, James was uncomfortable with most of the academic subjects except for literature. In a sense he was interested in pursuing the pure forms of the British code: literature and cricket; he didn’t work very hard in the other areas. Nevertheless, he graduated in 1918 and supported himself through tutoring and teaching at different schools including the Queen’s Royal College, Pamphylia High School, Government Training College for Teachers and the Trinidad New College.

His code, his family, and his schooling were all fraught with contradictions, place as they were in the middle of a colonial setting. The code stressed fairness and yet colonialism was unfair. His family wanted him to find a place for himself within the colonial apparatus and yet discussed nationalist and unionist ideas at home. And his school taught the language, history, and culture of a people many thousands of miles away. These contradictions produced a self-conscious young man.

By the time he was sixteen, during the middle of the First World War, James’s passion for cricket was expressed in the form of rebellion against his father’s orders of not staying out late to play. James didn’t know that he was rebelling against more than his father: he was in actuality taking part in a West Indian-wide redefinition of the game. The colonial authorities had introduced cricket to instill a polite and temperate way of life in the native population. In the hands of the West Indians, however, cricket became a social equalizer and a faster and more carefully bowled game, a game which they began to play better than the British. So James’s staying out late was part of a wider appropriation of cricket by Black West Indians.

Cricket gave this “little eccentric” a connection with the bulk of the population. A more indirect connection was provided by calypso music, which his mother frowned upon, but which James was drawn towards. He was “fascinated by the calypso singers and the sometimes ribald ditties they sang in their tents during Carnival time.” These links further forced the contradiction in James’s own mind between his British attitude and his native surroundings.

His father’s mild nationalism came to be supplemented by Marcus Garvey’s Negro World, which he bought “every Saturday morning down St. Vincent Street in Port of Spain.” The paper’s circulation was increased when the strikes of 1919 erupted, which one historian termed a

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13See James’s talk for the BBC Overseas Radio, 1964.
18Ibid.
“series of violent challenges to British colonialism.”\textsuperscript{19} Through a fellow cricketer, a man named Telemaque, James “knew some of the men who were leading it and I am positive that they were Garveyites… All I did was to go and watch what was happening without taking any part.”\textsuperscript{20}

As a young adult the self-conscious James was dissatisfied by the confining air of colonial Trinidad, pushed in part by Garveyism and to a greater degree by the distances between his family, his schooling, and the people of the island. This dissatisfaction was channeled in a literary direction. A literary group formed around Alfred Mendes, a wealthy young white man, and James. They produced two issues of a magazine entitled \textit{Trinidad}. Albert Tomes, who was later to become an important pre-independence politician, superceded this with his \textit{Beacon} (1931-1933) and managed to produce a journal which covered social and political issues as well as publish original fiction.\textsuperscript{21}

The \textit{Beacon} in particular was controversial. The \textit{Trinidad Guardian} editorialized:

\begin{quote}
Letters protesting against the obscenities of the Magazine have been pouring into the Guardian office during the past week. One is from a Boy Scout who says: “Its disagreeable implications cast unwarrantable [sic] aspersions on the fair name of our beautiful island.”\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

The journal’s natural language, use of the native dialect, and anti-colonial stance offended many readers. In many ways it inspired later generations of West Indian writers, among them Wilson Harris, George Lamming, and Derek Walcott.

In total, James contributed three short stories to \textit{Trinidad} and the \textit{Beacon}. His “La Divina Pastora” had been published earlier, and all four stories are notable for their realistic focus on the superstitions, hierarchies, geniality and humor of the barrack-yards. His major literary effort was a novel, however, \textit{Minty Alley}, which he wrote in 1928 “purely to amuse myself one summer.”\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{Minty Alley} tells the story of a young, Black middle class bookstore clerk who moves into a cheap room at no. 2, Minty Alley. This clerk, Mr. Haynes, gradually becomes absorbed in the goings on at Minty Alley and becomes infatuated with a young woman, Maisie. Haynes finds that all of the sundry characters come to him for advice, comfort, and an audience, and decides that his stay at Minty Alley has been very educational. Maisie leaves for America, however, and Haynes moves on, to only occasionally remember the good times and the people.

As with his short stories, James captures well the tempo of life in Port of Spain. Although he doesn’t pinpoint the sources of poverty, he describes the degree and dissects class divisions as well. James’s own ambiguous relationship to the working poor is expressed well through Mr. Haynes, who is an outsider who watches many of the events through a peep hole in his wall. Considering its author was a young nationalist—at best a mild radical—\textit{Minty Alley} is a remarkably attentive and precocious book, and the first West Indian novel published in England.

\textit{Minty Alley} is also notable for its simple and direct prose. Consider this passage, where Haynes is drinking with Benoit, who left his wife at no. 2, Minty Alley, for another woman:

“Well, how do you like your new life?” said Haynes.

\textsuperscript{20}Alan MacKenzie, private interview with James, October 1975.
\textsuperscript{23}Munro, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 33.
“Not bad.” But he avoided Haynes’s eyes. “Of course we haven’t settled down yet. The nurse out working and I have to fix up at home, you know. But we will move soon and get a servant—by the New Year, you know.”

If there was money he wasn’t getting much of it. He hadn’t a cent in his pocket and let Haynes know as much.

“You have cigarettes?”

“No,” said Haynes, feeling his pocket. Benoit asked him to get some.

“let’s have another beer.”

“Yes, man. Liquor is helpful.”

Or consider the final paragraph, when Haynes walks by no. 2 after moving out:

The front door and windows were open, and from the street he could see into the drawing room. Husband and wife and three children lived there and one of the children was sitting at the piano playing a familiar tune from Hemy’s music book. Over and over she played it, while he stood outside, looking in at the window and thinking of old times.

Using bare description and natural dialogue James is able to capture the ambience of Port of Spain life.

The Beacon grouping has been attracted to the popular mayor of Port of Spain, Corsican Captain Cipriani, and James decided to write a biography of the anti-colonial war hero. This biography, condensed by the Woolfs as the Case for West Indian Self Government, outlined the absurdities of British rule, but didn’t go as far as to condemn the roots of the Crown Colony system of government, claiming instead that it “was useful in its day but that day is now over.” At one point James finds fault with West Indians, who “live in the tropics, and have the particular vices of all who live there.”

Like many other Black intellectuals of the West Indies, James decided to go to Britain to find an audience for his writing. He later wrote:

Albert Gomes told me the other day: “You know the difference between all of you and me? You all went away; I stayed.” I didn’t tell him what I could have told him: “You stayed not only because your parents had money but because your skin was white; there was a chance for you, but for us there wasn’t—except to be a civil servant and hand papers, take them from the men downstairs and hand them to the man upstairs. We had to go…”

He left with his novel and biography in manuscript form, and with his complex moral system and cultural tastes intact. James was, in 1932, both anti-colonial and British. Taking up Learie Constantine’s offer to join him in Nelson, Lancashire, James “was about to enter the arena in which I was to play the role for which I had prepared myself.”

James was quickly radicalized in Nelson. Constantine was often asked to speak to church and school groups and pretty soon James was being invited to speak as well. Together they promoted the idea of self-government for the West Indies. Through lecturing James met Labor
Party miners, who “were a revelation and brought me down to earth.” At the same time, he read political classics. Starting with Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution* and Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, James remembers finding it

…necessary to read the relevant volumes of Stalin. And, of course, I had to read Lenin in order to trace back the quarrel. And thereby I reached Volume One of *Das Kapital* and *The 18th Brumaire* of Marx himself.

There was no limit to his interest, partly because he hadn’t a specialized training and partly because he supported himself easily by reporting on cricket matches for the *Manchester Guardian*. Moving to London in 1934, James worked on his play on Toussaint L’ouverture, the Haitian slave rebellion leader, and joined the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.) as a Trotskyist. He also “hung out with German Leninists, people like Korsh, and Daniel Guerin, a life long friend. Who else does he meet? Kenyatta, Padmore.”

His play alternates between scenes of the defiant and spirited camps of Toussaint and his generals, Dessalines and Christophe, and the conference rooms of the French, British, and American ambassadors, who only want, in the words of Dessalines, “land for plantations, and slavees to work.” The themes of the later *Black Jacobins*: the self-emancipation of the slaves, the strained interaction of the slaves and the mulattoes, the brief ties of Toussaint and revolutionary France, the tugs and pulls between the ambassadors and the slave army; were all dramatized on stage.

In the I.L.P. James edited a paper, *Fight*, and lectured widely. The bulk of British Trotskyists, however, worked within the larger Labour Party, following the tactic Trotsky had proposed of entering social democratic organizations. James’s perspective of taking over the I.L.P. was labeled sectarian, but since he was expelled from the I.L.P. during the later part of 1936, the point became moot.

James set out to agitate for Trotsky’s perspective in the pages of *Controversy*, a broad journal of the left, and in his book *World Revolution, 1917-1936*. The articles for *Controversy* were simple restatements of the perspective of opposition to the theory of socialism in one country, opposition to the Russian bureaucracy, a return to the right of factions, gradual collectivization of the peasantry, etc. *World Revolution*, a “bible of Trotskyism,” was more ambitious; James told Trotsky that “at last our point of view will be put before the public in comprehensive form.”

*World Revolution* did, in fact, offer a comprehensive critique of the major foreign policy decisions of the Comintern. Particular attention was paid to the abortive German revolution of 1923, the slaughter of Chinese Communists in 1927, and the Popular Front in Spain. The central theme was the substitution of the needs of the Soviet bureaucracy for the needs of proletarian internationalism. James laid the blame for the defeats in Germany, China and Spain on the shoulders of this substitution. In place of the bureaucracy James proposed working class control.

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31 Personal conversation with George Rawick, December 28, 1981.
33 This was his only play. Ras Makonnen is wrong on this and a number of other points; his *Pan-Africanism from within* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) is useful nonetheless.
36 Warburg, *op. cit.*, p. 211.
37 Letter to Trotsky, June 24, 1936, in Houghton, bMS Russ 13.1 2068.
of the Soviet economy exercised through bodies of shop floor control. These workers’ councils would conduct an aggressive foreign policy aimed at breaking through the encirclement of the young state.  

For an anti-colonialist, Trotsky’s permanent revolution was translated into an emphasis on complete measures to overthrow even the legacy of imperial domination. Permanent revolution places the burden on the industrial working class, and James was perfectly comfortable with assigning the vanguard role to the workers of Port of Spain or Wales. Trotsky stressed workers’ councils and this appealed to James both as a pure form of social transformation and as a contrasting form of organization to the lumbering bureaucracy of the Crown Colony government. Finally, these politics compared favorably to the main alternatives: Stalinism, compromised by the Popular Front era neglect of anti-colonialism in favor of alliances with democratic Western powers; or Fabianism, compromised by years of feeble participation in bourgeois governments.

Mr. Haynes endured a strained relationship with his neighbors at no. 2 Minty Alley because of his isolation from their way of life. Revolutionary politics has always been one way of ending this isolation. Through advocating working class power the middle class humanist can link him or herself to the working class, albeit in a supportive role. It hadn’t occurred to James in 1928, but Haynes could have bridged the gap by placing himself at the service of his neighbor’s most emancipatory impulses through political activity. It was precisely this that James himself was now doing. For the time being, Trotskyist politics best suited James; its one disadvantage, its marginal quality, didn’t concern him as he had been trained within the marginal Black intellectual life of colonial Trinidad.

James’s next project was the translation of Souvarine’s Stalin. Souvarine had been a leader of the French Communist Party until his expulsion in 1924, and his semi-Trotskyist book became widely read and quoted. James was possibly influenced by the book’s theme, which was that the germ of Stalinism was to be found in the Leninist form of organization: he was certainly influenced by Souvarine’s sympathetic but critical detachment towards Trotsky. By the time James sat down with Trotsky in Mexico, he was to draw upon this detachment and took exception to portions of Trotsky’s argument. James’s work with Souvarine marks the first point at which James felt impelled to develop an independent Marxism.

James combined his Trotskyism with an active participation in Pan-African activities. Pan-Africanism had been first proposed as a philosophy stressing the worth and unity of people of African descent by a Trinidadian lawyer, Mr. Henry Sylvester-Williams. Sylvester-Williams gathered thirty West Indians, Americans, and Africans in London in 1900, and one of the delegates, Professor W.E.B. duBois, organized three following conferences, in 1921, 1923, and 1927. Distinct from the call for a move Back-to-Africa by Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.) and Black communism of the African Blood Brotherhood, the program of the first four Pan-African congresses called upon the Western powers to disengage from colonial involvement.

James was sympathetic to the Pan-African emphasis on Africa. He believed that West Indians had to develop pride in their African heritage. As he later wrote:
Before they could begin to see themselves as a free and independent people they had to clear from their minds the stigma that anything African was inherently inferior and degraded. The road to West Indian national identity lay through Africa.  

James brought with him a stress on the self-emancipation of the Black African masses and found that many of the Pan-Africanists he met in London shared this focus.  

Virtually unique, however, was James’s synthesis of Pan-Africanism and Trotskyism. Both perspectives, of course, share a radical internationalism and an emphasis on the oppressed masses. Despite this many Pan-Africanists were indifferent to Trotsky’s critique of the Soviet Union. George Padmore, upon breaking with Moscow in 1935, wrote for left wing papers but only because they were a convenient forum. Jomo Kenyatta and others were skeptical of a fringe white movement. At the same time, James’s Trotskyist comrades were dubious about any concern with Africa, preferring to emphasize the working classes of the industrial West.  

In 1935 Mussolini’s army invaded Abysinnia (Ethiopia). Together with Marcus Garvey’s second wife, Amy Ashwood Garvey, as well as Padmore, Kenyatta and others, James formed the International African Friends of Abysinnia and set out to agitate within the labor movement and among the general public for her independence. They spoke, wrote letters, petitions and legislation, and pressured unions. As the issue faded, James and the others became active in Padmore’s International African Service Bureau. James was made editor of the group’s journal, International African Opinion.  

It was a remarkable group which collected itself around the Bureau, composed as it was of future African leaders and lively intellectuals. The West Indian component gave the journal a literary flavor and their publishing and speaking managed to keep the issue of African independence alive during the decade. When the fifth Pan-African congress, held in Manchester in 1945, called for the Black African masses to overthrow the British, Dutch, Portuguese and French colonial governments the new direction was a product of the Bureau’s legacy.  

James’s major project had been brewing in him since Nelson, and he now sat down to write Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution. Upon completion, Black Jacobins received favorable reviews in Books, Time, the New York Times, the Journal of Negro History, and Saturday Review, the latter predicting that the book “may prove to be the text of tomorrow’s events in Africa.” The only negative review appeared in the New Statesman and Nation. For the most part, however, Black Jacobins was properly praised as both the first serious study of Haiti’s successful slave revolt and as a convincing work of history from below.  

The central theme of Black Jacobins is the destruction of the plantation economy undertaken first by unplanned slave revolts and then by Toussaint’s ex-slave army. James wanted to show how slavery was destroyed not by humanitarian considerations but by the actual efforts of the slaves themselves. According to James, it was the threat of further Haities that forced the European merchants to develop less repressive forms of labor coercion on other Caribbean islands.  

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42Padmore and James played together as children but had lost touch when James left for Britain. Padmore supervised the anti-colonial work of the Communist International until 1935 when the emphasis was changed to working with the Allied powers. He later advised Kwame Nkrumah and died in Ghana during the 1960s.
43Kenyatta was a young graduate student in London, who later became the Prime Minister of Kenya until his death during the 1970s.
44Revolt in Haiti,” Saturday Review, January 7, 1939, p. 17.
45The intelligent historian should aim at impartiality. The fanatic cannot.”  Flora Grierson, “Man’s Inhumanity to Man,” New Statesman and Nation, October 8, 1938, p. 536.
The final third of the book is taken up with Toussaint’s inability to completely break with French society, and the necessity of General Dessalines’ carrying it through. This was because Dessalines

…was a barbarian and he thought the best Frenchman was a dead Frenchman.
That was all. But Dessalines would never have been able to do it if Toussaint had not laid the foundation of a social structure and an army.46

For a brief period Jacobin France had been supportive of the slaves; Toussaint relied on this and believed that Napoleon would continue this support. Napoleon, acting on this faith, was able to capture Toussaint by trickery. The army had to carry through the revolution, despite the Thermidor in France and Toussaint’s absence. However, the defeat of Jacobin forces in France was debilitating for the independent Haitian state because it deprived the state of any outside assistance.

James suggests at several points in the text that Africa herself would go through a similar process of liberation. He later viewed the Gold Coast revolution in this light. The book was, in fact, widely read by African nationalists during and after the war. Peppino Ortoleva has observed that no Marxist before James had taken up the Haitian revolution since it didn’t easily fit into the “agenda of revolution.”47 This is correct, and draws attention to James’s belief in the universality of resistance to oppression. Ortoleva neglects to point out, however, that it was the possibility of analogous revolutions in Africa that motivated James and that Black Jacobins is interesting not as a perversely unorthodox history but as an “indication of how the African revolution would develop.”48

Previous studies of Haiti had stressed the brutality of the slaves or the luddite extremism of the ex-slave army. James sought to portray the revolution as a precursor to future struggles. It is no accident that Black Jacobins was widely read in the late thirties and sixties but not in between or after: its concern with the precious links of sans culotte and slave, its challenge to notions of West Indian passivity, and its emphasis on self-emancipation are particular concerns of particular generations.

Only one other Caribbean history of the period is of a comparable scope: Eric Williams’s Capitalism and Slavery. Since James tutored Williams and since Williams got his thematic outline from James,49 comparisons between the two books are inevitable.

Both books aim at undermining the notion that humanitarianism ended the slave trade: as James pointed out, his book treats the French case and Williams’s the British. Both show how although the slave trade’s plantation economy was highly profitable, the newly powerful industrialists wished to replace it with a tenant labor system. James alone, however, placed emphasis on the slaves themselves. Williams’s Capitalism and Slavery is a methodical and radical book; James’s Black Jacobins is dialectical and predictive. Given their subsequent histories (James the socialist visionary, Williams the scholarly neo-colonial politician) the difference is revealing.

For the monograph series Fact James wrote a companion volume to Black Jacobins entitled A History of Negro Revolt. This slim book contains many interesting passages on Marcus Garvey, maroon activity in the West Indies, etc., but never achieved the classic status accorded Black Jacobins. Upon republication in 1971 a critic chastised James for failing to provide a

46Munro, op. cit., p. 36.
47Peppino Ortoleva, “A Profound Thinker,” Urgent Tasks, p. 98.
49Munro, op. cit., p. 36.
unifying thread, but in combination the books offer a wealth of pathbreaking research into Black nationalism and radicalism.

The founding conference of the Fourth International was held in September 1938 in Paris; James went as one of two British delegates. The minutes record only five remarks by James. The first voices his opposition to terming the Russian bureaucracy a class, the second stressing the Soviet role in Hitler’s victory in 1933, and the third an inconsequential defense of the necessity to proclaim the new international. All three are fully consistent with Trotsky’s perspective. The fourth remark concerned a technical matter, but the final statement recorded in the minutes is very suggestive:

In view of the fact that neither the Geneva Conference nor the present congress had dealt explicitly with the Colonial question, the congress should officially instruct the English section to work out a program on the Colonial question and to suggest to the Executive Committee a definite plan for an International Colonial Bureau which the EC would be empowered to establish.

What James would have such a bureau do will be seen when he proposes the formation of a Fourth International-inspired independent Black organization to Trotsky. What is conveyed by this statement is James’s willingness to patiently undertake agitation within the F.I. and his tolerance for inactivity around the question. For the time being he was a fully integrated leading member.

At Trotsky’s request James prepared for a six-month visit to the United States between the months of the cricket season. Widgery hints that Trotsky wanted to remove a troublemaker, but it is more likely that Trotsky wanted someone to undertake serious Black work in the U.S. As Trotsky wrote to James Cannon, leader of the SWP:

The party cannot postpone this extremely important question any longer.

James’s sojourn in the States is very important for the serious and energetic beginning of this work.

When James set sail, in October 1938, for New York City, he was a contemplative and reflective man, applying himself to his books and his politics, achieving in 38 years what some might hope to achieve in a lifetime. Driven by restlessness, curiosity and ambition, James took on the boat his six foot frame, his charitable attitude, his Shakespeare, and his volumes of Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky. It was the year of the reprieve: within twelve months Europe would be at war. Intending to return to Britain by May for the opening of the cricket season he would end up staying fifteen years.

The United States: 1938-1953

America, of course, was very different from Trinidad or Britain: James had to acclimatize himself to the country’s wealth (Trotsky complained that SWP members were too interested in having cars), spatial enormity, socialist traditions, and most important her social movements. He...

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52Widgery, op. cit., p. 116.

had grown up amidst the burgeoning nationalism of colonial Trinidad, helping to create an indigenous literary tradition; in Britain he was, in a sense, involved in expressions of left laborism. In contrast, America’s social movements, such as the basic industry organizing which culminated in the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organization (C.I.O.), were explosive, isolated from each other, and non-social democratic in their political character. American social movements had none of the Fabian-tinged gradualism of the British labor movement and none of the unity of Trinidadian anti-colonialism.

James thrived in America. There was a sense of challenge and more importantly a sense of being in the right place. Unaffected by the decline of the earlier wave of immigrant radicalism, James readily proclaimed that the U.S. labor movement would take the lead for labor everywhere. The expected war was just a precursor to bigger battles: battles between capital and labor, fueled by the insanity of war and the initiative of the revolutionary left. James felt, along with Henry Luce, that the coming decades would be known as the “American Century”; the entire globe was beginning to model itself after American screen images, fashion, and music; why not, thought James, after American labor as well.

The dark side of the American century was racism: the lynchings, segregation, Jim Crow and underlying anger. James had dealt with racism before: the British legal and administrative system of Trinidad were by definition discriminatory. But the individual manifestations were new. While never dropping his primary emphasis on class, his experiences in America were to lead him to continually reevaluate his understanding of the connection of racial oppression and capitalism. His experiences also led him to search out the semi-dormant movements of American Black nationalism.

Explicitly radical nationalists had built the African Blood Brotherhood in the years after World I. Composed primarily of returning veterans, the Brotherhood published The Crusader and led the defense of Tulsa’s Black community during a race riot in 1920. Marcus Garvey’s U.N.I.A. claimed a U.S. membership of several hundreds of thousands and was influenced by socialists. Both organizations demonstrated a widespread sympathy and interest for nationalism among Blacks. The left ignored this. Eugene Debs, on behalf of the Socialist Party, stated that “we have nothing special to offer the Negro worker.” And John Reed told the Comintern that

The Negroes do not pose the demand for national independence. A movement which aims for a separate national existence like for instance the Back to Africa movement that could be observed a few years ago is never successful among the Negroes.54

All of James’s work in America was conducted along Trotskyist lines, which may account for its relative obscurity. Many writers assume that Trotskyist politics were inherently marginal; but by 1938 the activists of the SWP had built the Northwest section of the Teamsters; had led strikes in the rubber industry, among New York hotel workers, and in portions of the auto industry; had fractions in the steel, maritime and other small industries; and had a large group of intellectuals, some of them writing for Partisan Review, looking to the party for leadership.

When James arrived the SWP was at its height. Thousands came to hear him speak. Martin Glaberman, an associate of James’s, remembered the first talk of the tour, in Manhattan, as inspiring:

He was an honored visitor, a fabulous speaker; they sent him on tour around the country as a matter of fact. I remember the first time I ever saw him—it was a lecture at a hotel ballroom in New York, where he spoke for about three hours on

54Quoted in Tony Bogues, Marxism and Black Liberation (Cleveland, OH: Hera Press, 1980), p. 32.
the British empire, walking back and forth across the stage without notes or anything else.\textsuperscript{55}

The tour was designed to recruit Black members. James Cannon, chairman of the party, later recalled that at the time the party had fewer than a dozen members;\textsuperscript{56} it is unclear whether the tour increased this figure. James made valuable contacts, however, with NAACP members and with journalists of The Pittsburg Courier, an anti-Roosevelt Black paper with a circulation of some 100,000 copies. After the tour James went to Mexico to meet Trotsky.

Trotsky had, ever since 1933, complained about the lack of party agitation around racism. As he told James:

I believe the first question is the attitude of the Socialist Workers Party towards the Negroes. It is very disquieting to find that until now the party has done almost nothing in this field... It is a bad sign. The characteristic thing about American workers’ organizations was their aristocratic character. It is the basis of opportunism. The skilled workers who feel set in the basis of opportunism. The skilled workers who feel set in the capitalist society help the bourgeois class to hold the Negroes and unskilled workers down to a very low scale... Under this condition our party cannot develop—it will degenerate.\textsuperscript{57}

This was very strong; it certainly excluded the infallibility of the party. Trotsky wasn’t just pointing out an oversight, he was suggesting that the question of social hierarchy was fundamental. Certainly he was willing to listen to whatever points James wanted to make. James remembers that he had

…written down some notes on the Black question. I had noticed that the party had no policy at all. And there should be a policy, and the policy ought to be that Blacks should be allowed to run their own organization. And their organization shouldn’t be run by the socialists or the Trotskyists or the Communists or the Democrats—that was in 1939.\textsuperscript{58}

a. The Negro represents potentially the most revolutionary section of the population.

b. He is ready to respond to militant leadership.

c. He will respond to political situations abroad which concern him.

d. He is today more militant than ever.\textsuperscript{59}

The organization could be built because Blacks “have followed similar movements in the past and are looking for a similar movement now.” (Emphasis in the original) He continued:

The great argument for such a movement is that it has the possibility of setting the Negro masses in motion, the only way in which they will learn the possibilities of political activity and be brought to realize the necessity of mortal

\textsuperscript{55}Personal conversation with Martin Glaberman, May 31, 1981.


\textsuperscript{58}Personal conversation with James, August 9, 1981.

\textsuperscript{59}C.L.R. James, “Preliminary Notes on the Negro Question,” in Houghton, bMS Russ 13.1 16953, p. 2.
struggle against capitalism… What precise aims will such an organization have?… One of its main tasks will be to demand and struggle for the right of the Negro to full participation in all industries and in all unions. Any Negro organization which fought militantly for such an aim would thereby justify its existence.

There are many other urgent issues: the struggle for the Negro right to vote, against social and legal discrimination, against discrimination in schools (and universities), against oppressive rents… it must be insisted upon that support of a Negro mass movement must not be conditional upon whether it is or soon will be Socialist or not. (Emphasis in the original)

Here James broke with all traditional left conceptions of the Black struggle. According to James, revolutionaries should work in the movements of Blacks which themselves would develop appropriate strategies and forms. The party’s role would be to provide a socialist pole within the larger movement.

The notes concluded with prescriptions for party activity. These included calls for a party “Negro section,” a series in the journal New International on Communist party historians and Blacks, and circulation of the journal International African Opinion.

These notes formed the basis of the discussion, which was broken into three parts: self-determination, independent organization, and the structure of such an organization. The first part was taken up with Trotsky’s objection to James’s claim that “the Negro, fortunately for socialism, does not want self-determination,” just independent activity. Trotsky wanted a more flexible view of self-determination.

The second portion concerned the feasibility of such an organization, as well as its relationship to intellectuals. Trotsky was convinced that if such an organization could be built, James’s attitude would be correct. He was less sure of the prospects for building such an organization, but if it was created, the “task is not one of simply passing through for a few weeks. It is a question of awakening the Negro masses.” The role of Black intellectuals was left unresolved in the discussion. Trotsky wanted to sharply differentiate strata within the Black community, and James questioned too sharp a differentiation. In defense of his position, James cited the material interests of the Black petty bourgeoisie in a program of civil rights.

In the third portion James outlined what an independent organization would do, and what shape it would take. Proposals included a weekly paper, offices in New York City and St. Louis, attempts to draw in Black women, and a campaign around discrimination in restaurants:

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. A campaign to be built around such action.

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60Ibid., pp. 10-11.
61Padmore replaced James as editor when James left for the U.S. Publication was suspended during the war.
62James, “Preliminary Notes…,” p. 10.
63Trotsky, On Black Nationalism…, p. 55.
64James, “Preliminary Notes…,” p. 10.
As for the question of socialist politics, James stated that he was “afraid of putting forth an abstract socialism…the socialist education of the masses should arise from day-to-day questions.”

All that remained was for Trotsky to give his approval to the project, for the SWP to take up the proposals, and for James to continue his study of the Black movement. James was, in fact, able to produce a number of articles on Black liberation within a short span of time, although it would be a number of years until he wrote anything on the Communist party historians and Blacks. He also visited with Father Divine, an “Ethopian” with 10,000 supporters, upon his return to New York City, noting “sublimation of revolutionary emotion” in Divine’s service.

The war interrupted James’s plans, although some confirmation of their perceptiveness can be found in the degree to which they foreshadow nationalist organizations of the 1960s. Groups such as CORE, SNCC, and the Panthers developed a similar orientation to the Black masses, a similar indifference to socialist theory, and agitation around similar issues.

Other subjects were raised at Coyoacán; the history of the Left Opposition, Trotsky’s criticisms of World Revolution, the coming war, etc., were all discussed. James later remembered one discussion in particular:

One night I asked him why was the French workers’ movement rising and the movement of the French Trotskyists dying? And he told me some answer but then I found out myself the answer was that the French Trotskyists were calling themselves Bolsheviks and were calling themselves a party in 1937… They believed that the working class needed them and I said no, that the workers themselves can speak and that they don’t need a communist party.

But James only decided this attitude many years later. At this point he was simply disturbed by Trotsky’s answer, and drew upon his discussions with Souvarine in order to ponder his own concerns about applying Leninism to non-Russian circumstances.

Returning to New York, James decided to remain, illegally, in the U.S. and set out, under the name J.R. Johnson, to write for the party’s press. This material included weekly articles for the Socialist Appeal, as well as longer articles for the New International. Two sets of the weekly articles for the paper became pamphlets: “Why Negroes Should Oppose the War” and “Labor and the Second World War.” Both expounded the SWP’s view of the war; mainly, that “Democracy has nothing to do with this war…the war is an imperialist war run for and by the imperialists.” Using Britain’s colonies, as well as American racial segregation, as examples of the Allied disinterest in democracy, James concluded in the latter pamphlet that “A worldwide crisis, thirty million unemployed, fascism and imperialist war—that is what they the capitalists have to offer. They must be broken, and only the workers’ revolution can break them.” The argument was unpopular and conducted at a feverish pitch.

The party’s unity was torn asunder by differences over the nature of the Soviet Union and the party’s leadership. When the Hitler-Stalin pact encouraged Russia’s invasions of Poland and later Finland, a minority grouping emerged which questioned Trotsky’s belief that state-property

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65 Ibid.
66 James, “The Negro Question,” no date, in Houghton, bMS 13.1 16954.
67 Personal conversation, op. cit.
68 This was not a Communist Party pamphlet. See Neil Wynn, “Black Attitudes towards Participation in the American War Effort, 1941-1945,” Afro-American Studies, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 1972), for this odd view. This pamphlet is reprinted in a recent Pathfinder compilation, Fighting Racism in World War Two.
70 Ibid., November 21, 1939.
forms imposed by the Red Army were progressive, leading ultimately to a split in the SWP, and
the growth of the Worker’s Party, which James joined.

In April 1940, an 800-person convention inaugurated the Workers Party. The group would
through its journal, activity, and weekly Labor Action, agitate for the “third camp”; the
“submerged smoldering working masses of the world,” united against both the West and the
East.\(^71\)

Beginning in May 1940 James wrote a weekly column for \textit{Labor Action}, entitled “The
Negro’s Fight.” This column was modeled after his \textit{Socialist Appeal} columns. But his talents, as
well as his optimism, were called upon for other uses as well. Gloom befell the SP when France
was overrun by the Nazis, and Shachtman asked James to speak on the question of war. Conrad
Lynn remembered that meeting:

\begin{quote}
C.L.R. James was the only speaker and he was magnificent. His address lasted
seventy-five minutes, and he seemed equally at home in English, Yiddish, and
French... Never had I witnessed such a performance. James proved that despite
all appearances Hitler could not win.
\end{quote}

The meeting unanimously delegated to James the authority to write the
entire next issue of \textit{New International}. It was entitled “Capitalist Society and the
War” and it must be a bibliophile’s prize now.\(^72\)

Encouraged by James the party carried out a policy of opposition to the war. More than
half of the membership took jobs in war-related industries in order to engage in struggles against
wartime labor restrictions. Non-industrial members moved to industrial centers in order to
support the party’s industrial work. \textit{Labor Action}, at the time edited by Irving Howe, became a
popularly written paper with articles by James Farrell, B.J. Widick, Dwight MacDonald,
Shachtman, James, and others.\(^73\) Through the industrialization, the paper, coast-to-coast tours by
Shachtman, running candidates, etc., the group argued that the war would only hurt workers, that
in Europe the Nazis were best fought by trade union regiments, and that since the drift of the
allied camp was towards domestic facism anyway, American workers needed to defend their
living standards and unions and not the U.S. government.

With this platform the WP was able to grow, albeit slowly, and even take part in industrial
actions. The paper’s circulation rose to the tens of thousands of copies, and as the war dragged
on a sympathetic minority of workers worked with party members in the auto and steel unions.
But the party also suffered from its assumption of mass opposition to the war. Waves of
demoralization periodically swept through the branches. Recruitment was slow, and indigenous
workers were hard to hold. The frustration of activity, captured by Harvey Swados’s novel
\textit{Standing Fast}, took its toll.

A good deal of debate was carried out in the pages of the journal, which had the effect of
containing some of the frustration. One of the hottest topics was the nature of the Soviet
economy. Having broken with Trotsky’s “degenerated workers’ state” thesis, they sought a new
position.

The majority followed Shachtman’s descriptive “bureaucratic collectivism.” As he wrote:

\[^{71}\text{See Milt Fish,} \textit{Socialism from Below} \text{(Cleveland, OH: Hera Press, 1977), p. 16.}\]
\[^{72}\text{Conrad Lynn,} \textit{There is a Fountain} \text{(Westport: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1979), p. 81.}\]
\[^{73}\text{James Farrell was the well known author of the} \textit{Studs Lonigan} \text{trilogy. B.J. Widick, now the}\]
\textit{Nation}’s labor correspondent, was a former Socialist Party member. Dwight MacDonald founded \textit{Partisan
Review}, and also wrote for various notable magazines such as the \textit{New Yorker} and the \textit{Atlantic}.\]
Under capitalism, the purpose of production is the production of surplus value, of profit, “not the product but the surplus product.” In the workers’ state, production was carried on and extended for the satisfaction of the needs of the Soviet masses. For that, they needed not the oppression of themselves or of other people but the liberation of the peoples of the capitalist countries and the colonial empires. In the Stalinist state, production is carried on and extended for the satisfaction of the needs of the bureaucracy, for the increasing of its wealth, its privileges, its power. At every turn of events, it seeks to overcome the mounting difficulties and resolve the contradictions which it cannot really resolve, by intensifying the exploitation and oppression of the masses.74

This implied that Trotsky’s collectivized property forms still existed, but that his distinctions of political and social revolution, as well as social stratification along caste and not class lines were no longer valid. But problems remained. On what basis did the economy function? Simply for the pleasure of the bureaucracy? What was the relationship of the Soviet to the world economy? How could property relations be divorced from social relations?

James constantly argued that Russia was state-capitalist: her economy operated as one giant firm competing on the world market. It was particular in the same way the Nazi economy was peculiar. The state property form was a specific method of organizing capital accumulation under unusual circumstances. He wrote:

> Today the bureaucracy…plans in order to get as much surplus value as possible from the workers, it plans to preserve itself against other capitalist classes. An individual capitalist who is unable to extract surplus value goes bankrupt, gets a government subsidy, or allows his capital to lie fallow. The state, as national capitalist, produced in certain branches at a loss, which is atoned for by gain in others. Why is the total national capital any less capital because it exploits the workers under unified control instead of in separate conflicting parts?75

The problems with James’s analysis—its exaggerated comparison of the Soviet and Nazi economies, its vagueness as to how the law of value functioned inside Russia, its static description of a bureaucracy destined to remain Stalinist until overthrown—were secondary to its value in linking property and social forms, as well as suggesting the integration of the Soviet economy into the world system. While various WP members took exception to James’s lack of supporting detail, the majority were challenged by his overall analysis.

Raya Dunayevskaya, a former secretary of Trotsky’s, had written a document on state-capitalism in Russia. Beginning serious collaboration, they divided their work: Dunayevskaya continued her academic research in the Slavic Division of the Library of Congress, and James related her research to his deep reading of Marxist classics.

Perhaps deliberately they were separated by James’s assignment to political work in Missouri. Ironically, James conducted the most successful wartime agitation of the WP during this assignment. The St. Louis branch had made contacts with the mostly Black sharecroppers in the southern part of the state, and by the end of 1941 it appeared likely that industrial action might be undertaken. James traveled to meet with the sharecroppers’ leaders and covered their story for Labor Action.

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74 Max Shachtman, “Is Russia a Workers’ State?” *New International* (December 1940).

“The Negroes,” he wrote, “try to organize themselves and must be aided in their attempts to prepare a striking force.” 76 He meant in general but set out to apply it in practice. The Black organization he discussed with Trotsky couldn’t be built but the discontentment still existed. In Southeast Missouri James sought validation of his perspective.

His first articles, in October 1941, described the poverty and racism in what is known as the booteel of Missouri. He described the sharecroppers’ attempts to form a union and the St. Louis-based official leadership, under C.P. domination. It appeared, purely by accident, that the St. Louis branch had stumbled across a struggle which illuminated race, class, and anti-Stalinist issues. It seemed that a local group of sharecroppers wanted to take on the Missouri state government, the employers, and their own union leadership in order to win decent wages. It was just the sort of struggle the SP leadership had been looking for.

By late May Labor Action announced the sharecroppers’ decision to strike. Demanding 30 cents an hour (ordinarily wages were $1.25 a day), 54 cents an hour for tractor drivers, and time and a half for overtime, the scattered groups of sharecroppers began to refuse to thin the fields of cotton.

James himself encouraged their strike and wrote a pamphlet, “Down with Starvation Wages in South-East Missouri,” for Local 313 of the Union of Canning, Agricultural Packing and Allied Workers, CIO, of Lilbourn, Missouri. He described his role:

I went down to Missouri and decided that the only thing we could do, after I’d discussed with them, was to have a strike; the sharecroppers should have their own strike, and it was very successful in fact... When the time came for us to have the strike, I called some of the leaders together and said, “We have to publish something, for everybody to read about it.” They said yes. So I sat down with my pen and notebook and said, “Well, what shall we say? So [I used to call myself Williams] they said, “Well, Brother Williams, you.” I said, “I know nothing. This is your strike”...and I went through each of them, five or six of them; each said his piece and I joined them together.77

At one cent a copy thousands of the pamphlets circulated throughout the area. Its circulation was aided by the popular character of the prose. Two sections demonstrate this:

To The Merchants

We say to the merchants: Why don’t you support us? Every penny we get we spend with you. So we look to the merchant, especially the little merchant, to support us and stand by us if we are compelled to strike. If during the strike we ask for a little credit the merchant must give it.

The Preachers

All the preachers must get their flock together and preach to them about the union and solidarity in the struggle. If a preacher is not with us he is against us. That is the voice of scripture. Also the laborer is worthy of his hire. That is

scripture also... Solidarity in the union, that is the way to get the Kingdom of Heaven upon Earth.78

By July the landlords gave in to the sharecroppers’ demands. The first major wartime strike had ended in victory, and James returned to New York. His activity had fit into his political perspective: he had helped develop the instinctive ability to fight already present within the sharecroppers. He wrote down their demands but didn’t formulate them. The strike itself fit into his perspective. Mostly Black workers found support among the more militant sections of white workers (the St. Louis CIO raised funds for the strike), but conducted the fight on an independent basis. In a small way the strike “intervened with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation”79 and promised further upheaval.

The Johnson-Forest group began to study the French, American, and Russian revolutions, as well as Hegel, Marx, and Lenin. “We worked together from 1941 and examined all of the main questions,”80 as James was later to put it. They were also involved in extensive debate with the WP majority around three main questions: Russia, socialism in Europe, and Black liberation. James also wrote for the party press.

He wrote on American labor history, Blacks during the Civil War, Indian independence from the British, Ireland’s Easter revolt of 1916, Harold Laski’s adoption of Stalinism, American miners, and the politics of Wendel Wilkie, the Republicans’ candidate in the 1944 presidential election. Most of these set out either to suggest the existence of radical currents in American labor, to poke fun at the British Empire or to comment on Black history.

In a pair of articles he set out to place the Knights of Labor, the National Party, and the CIO in the context of demands for an independent labor party. The Trotskyist left had traditionally called for a labor party in order to have a political arena to work in. Generally, both the SWP and the WP believed that conditions for building such a party were better during the mid-1930s, when it appeared that John L. Lewis of the miners and some auto locals were interested in breaking with Roosevelt. Neither group was as optimistic as James, who suggested that the Post-war period would bring about excellent conditions for the emergence of an independent labor party. He wrote:

The American working class has not suffered the destruction of the American economy by war. It...has suffered none of the drastic blows which have fallen upon the European proletariat during recent years. It is conscious that its great battles are before it.81

But this was very general. It was left unsaid as to what workers would demand, what role labor leaders would play, and why the clearly favorable conditions of the mid-1930s hadn’t produced a labor party.

His writings on anti-colonial movements were directed partly at white workers (“World Events are of Great Importance to U.S. Labor”) and partly at friends abroad. Some of these wrote, in fact, for Labor Action; Fenner Brockway of the I.L.P. and George Padmore both contributed articles on the British Empire. A recurrent theme in James’s articles was an appeal to making the American Century a period when the U.S. would take a lead in extending help to anti-colonial movements and giving aid to independent nations.

78Ibid., pp. 92-94.
79James, “The Revolutionary Answer,” p. 120.
80Personal conversation, op. cit.
81Ibid., pp. 11 and 13.
Through “One Tenth of the Nation,” James’s retitled column on Blacks for *Labor Action*, James pointed out a contradiction in the Allied effort: segregation. He also used the column to discuss white prejudice:

He [the white worker] does not ask for anti-Negro literature. As workers do in every country, he reads books, newspapers, and goes to the show. From every one of these organs of communication and education his daily impressions about Negroes are reinforced... In books and magazines, all grace, strength, beauty, nobility, courage are automatically attributed to members of the white race. It isn’t that these books are openly or even subtly anti-Negro. It is that in the mental and emotional stimulation which they provide, good or bad, the Negro is usually excluded. If he is included, he is placed in his usual menial position, made the butt of jokes or at best portrayed as a good and loyal servant.82

All of these points had been stated before. The strength of the column was its readability, topicalness, and lack of a narrow economic focus. These columns were the most successful of James’s scattered writings because they were the product of direct experience and much study.

By the beginning of 1943 it appeared likely that the Allies would win the war. A group of European Trotskyists had earlier argued in the New International that socialists in Europe would have to fight for the institution of capitalist-democratic regimes, as a precondition for a socialist movement developing, amid the rubble of countries such as Germany and France. Since Lenin had, during the last war, called for a “Socialist United States of Europe,” this new position was distinctly “revisionist.” It suggested that any socialist movement would have to wait for a bourgeois regime to develop first.

Shachtman, Chairman of the Workers Party, suggested that Lenin’s formulation should be replaced by the more realistic “Through National Freedom to Socialist Freedom.” This raised the issue of what national freedom meant. Was national freedom a Comintern member party coming to power? Shachtman said no, that there are no democratic rights in Russia and that a socialist movement is best built under conditions of private capitalism. But what should socialists do in the meantime? While the Bolsheviks had enjoyed the luxury of mass discontent, bread riots, and military turmoil, the left during the 1940s was faced with quiet demoralization, and wouldn’t be in the position to take advantage of favorable conditions anyway.

At least, this is how it would seem looking back. For James, who had great hopes for the American labor movement, Europe was on the brink of revolution. He argued:

…the more reactionary the steps imperialism takes, the greater the degradation it imposes upon Europe, the more concrete will become the slogan of the Socialist United States of Europe.83

But how was this so? James explained:

The workers were all thrown together, irrespective of nationality, millions of German soldiers scattered over Europe, not only on battlefields but among the population, millions of oppressed nationalities in Germany. The vanguard had not to pose before them the question of unity and leave the rest to the rapidly developing situation.84

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In effect, James was arguing that even in “the absence of working-class organization
Soviets could be formed in European factories within hours.” Unfortunately, this was an
unconvincing rebuttal to Shachtman’s postponement of socialist agitation. Not only was James
misreading the European situation, with its tremendous demoralization, no possibility of
international unity, etc., but he was mechanically linking capitalist degradation with socialist
potentiality. Contributors to the debate had no trouble dismissing James’s romanticism.

James was, with the position, attempting to argue that there are no conditions under which
socialist transformation is not possible. Increasingly the hallmark of James’s perspective was to
become this continual emphasis on the hidden possibilities. This would distinguish him from the
leadership of the Workers Party, who were less and less confident about the post-war period. In
distinguishing himself, James engaged in occasional rhetorical excess and ignored the empirical
evidence.

Trotsky had agreed with James that the Black movement had an independent character, and
that separate struggles were sometimes necessary in order to convince not only capital but labor
as well. The WP was convinced that this underplayed the importance of labor’s leadership, and
put forward the slogan “black and white, unite and fight.” Ernest McKinney, a Black and the
WP’s Labor Secretary, argued the majority position and James, once again, argued for the
minority.

McKinney argued that discrimination would end as Blacks became part of the industrial
work force, and the struggle for “democratic rights” had no revolutionary character. As he wrote
for the majority:

Under the present leadership, white or Negro, the struggle is and will be carried
on entirely within the framework of bourgeois democracy and capitalism. The
program of this leadership does not include a struggle against capitalism now or
in the future... It is the task of the party to steer the Negro proletarians to the
labor movements and towards organic unity in class struggle with the white
proletariat.86

He continued:

The WP is not unaware that Negroes have been indoctrinated with ideas of racial
separation, racial sufficiency, and racial autarchy. These dogmas have paraded
under a banner labeled “race consciousness.” The most extreme form of this is
promulgated by the advocates of black chauvinism or Negro nationalism.

The root evil of black chauvinism, as of all chauvinism, is disregard of class
lines, class distinctions, and class struggle... Unity of the black and white
proletarians is a prerequisite for proletarian victory in the U.S.87

James borrowed from his earlier discussion with Trotsky and on behalf of the Johnson-Forest
tendency wrote:

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86 Fisk, op. cit., p. 21.
1945, p. 9.
To the degree that the Negroes are more integrated into industry and unions their consciousness of racial oppression and their resentment against it become greater, not less. (emphasis in original)

This took issue with McKinney’s claim that racism would decline due to industrial integration. Responding to the question of “democratic rights” James argued:

Within the United States, the Negroes are undoubtedly powerless to achieve their complete or even substantial emancipation as an independent factor in the struggle against American capital. But such is the historic role of the Negroes that... the Negro struggle for democratic rights is not a concession that Marxists make to the Negroes. In the United States today this struggle is a direct part of the struggle for socialism. (emphasis in original)

On the question of “Negro nationalism” he quoted directly from the 1939 discussions:

Black chauvinism in America today is merely the natural excess of the desire for equality while white American chauvinism, the expression of racial domination, is essentially reactionary.

McKinney saw Black demands as part of a stage prior to class consciousness; James saw them as part of class consciousness. If the first was true then nationalism hinders unity; if the second is true then nationalism is as important as unity. McKinney’s perspective, adopted by the WP, led to a focus on equal rights. The Johnson-Forest tendency saw this as a turn to the right.

When Cannon gave a speech on “The Coming American Revolution,” Johnson-Forest members felt that perhaps their old organization may be a more comfortable environment. It had workers, an optimistic perspective, a similar position on Black liberation, and fewer debates. In July 1947 the tendency left the WP, and in September they joined the SWP. During the intervening period they produced a weekly bulletin and four pamphlets, which will be considered in a moment.

It is worth briefly reviewing their development in the WP. At first only James, Dunayevskaya, and a man named Tobin (who soon dropped out of politics) met together to study Russia. They were joined by people like Grace Lee, a trained philosopher, who was interested in placing state-capitalism into a dialectical framework. They also attracted a group of young miners from West Virginia, and Dunayevskaya spent a good deal of time with them, encouraging them to write. The strongest centers of the tendency were New York and Detroit, however. James was in New York (although he later moved to Detroit) and various students joined the tendency. In Detroit they built a core of auto contacts; in particular they trained a Black auto worker names James Boggs. This group, which grew to about seventy people, carried out constant internal discussion and argued various minority positions at branch and district meetings. Gaining confidence, the tendency began to act more and more as a cohesive group with a distinct set of politics, mostly around the question of Europe, prospects for a labor party, and Black liberation. James was very much the intellectual leader, but Dunayevskaya, Lee, and Martin Glaberman played leadership roles as well.

89Ibid., pp. 15-16.
90Ibid., p. 19.
91In 1946 or 1947 Cannon made a speech entitled ‘The Coming American Revolution’ and C.L.R. said ‘There is no use having two groups who believe in the coming American Revolution,’ so we went back to the S.W.P.” Boggs and Paine, op. cit., p. 285.
The first pamphlet they produced as an independent group was “Balance Sheet,” to explain their split from the WP. They charged the Workers Party with pragmatism; that is, not expecting socialism because the immediate prospects don’t appear favorable. They also charged that the WP was unwilling to fully relate to the industrial upturn and that the group was becoming increasingly literary and inward.

James’s presence envelopes “Balance Sheet”: this is revealed in the pamphlet’s hurt tone. How could they not listen? James also threw in rhetoric, as confirmed by this passage, which refers to the article in the *New International* by the aforementioned European Trotskyists:

> Johnson’s article had no abuse and merely characterized the I.K.D. as petty-bourgeois revisionists of the worst type that the movement had yet seen.92

The “American Worker” is, for the modern reader, more interesting. Instead of an internal polemic this was a description of life in an auto plant by a rank and file worker, Paul Ramano. The description was obtained by Dunayevskaya’s placing a “full fountain pen”—that is, a microphone—in front of a worker and editing the results.

Ramano was an excellent choice for an interview of this kind. In a natural manner he depicted the daily life in the factory, the political debates, and the interaction of Blacks, whites, young women, and veterans. He believably stated that most workers were very willing to fight for their earned rights, class conscious, and dubious about Democrats and union bosses. (The latter were referred to as “pork-choppers.”)

Placed next to this description was a shorter philosophical essay by Grace Lee which recast the pamphlet in terms of Marx’s categories of alienation, exploitation, and oppression. By placing the theoretical next to, and after, the day-to-day account, the tendency was suggesting that theory should be related to and determined by the experience of mass production workers. Although many may have agreed with this approach in theory, no one had produced a pamphlet like it before. It was an experiment that would be continued in the pages of *Correspondence*, the group’s post-SWP paper.

“Balance Sheet” argued that the problem with the Workers Party was that it didn’t have faith in the shop-floor. “The American Worker” was designed to validate that faith. The other two pamphlets were more ambitious: they set forth the full range of Johnson-Forest politics: the former in Trotskyist terms, the latter in Hegelian terms.

With the end of the Second World War, “The Invading Socialist Society” argued, a new stage of human development was initiated. This stage was characterized by: the integration of the Soviet economy into the world system, heightened class struggle, and the erosion of any distinction between politics and economics. The phrase “invading socialist society,” taken from Engel’s Anti-Dühring, referred to the acts of rebellion, sabotage, strike and cooperation undertaken by workers as proto-socialists.

The post-war period, then, was characterized by the integration of local parts into the world system and the attendant possibilities of an international collective reconstruction. We read:

> The world now moves from day to day by a series of gigantic convulsions. Men have to think in terms of global solutions. It is precisely the character of our age and the maturity of humanity that obliterates the opposition between theory and practice, between the intellectual preoccupations of the “educated” and of the masses... The unending murders, the destructions of peoples, the bestial passions, the sadism, the cruelties and the lusts, all the manifestations of

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barbarism, of the last thirty years are unparalleled in history. But this barbarism exists only because nothing else can suppress the readiness for sacrifice, the democratic instincts and creative power of the great masses of the people.93

But if partial solutions were no longer adequate, what was the role of the party? Their answer was that the party would become the class:

Any revolutionary party today which initiated actions for the conquest of power would rally such a membership as would reduce to the vanishing point the organizational difference between vanguard and masses, party, Soviet, and union.94

It is unclear, really, as to why a party would be necessary. And it was precisely this consideration which led them, within a year, to abandon the idea of a Leninist party altogether. But their description of the post-war period failed to account for countervailing tendencies to global unification, such as the continued political divisions along national lines, the specialization and stratification of production, and the internal divisions within the working class along sex, race, and age lines. They (James, Dunayevskaya, and Lee) unconvincingly discard any notion of differing levels of political awareness within the working class.

“Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity,” written by James alone, further expounded these themes. The new period, he said, was “the result of the dialectic.” He wrote:

…it is that moment when the world system of capitalism has demonstrated the greatest productive powers in history is exactly the period when barbarism threatens to engulf the whole of society.95

James made bold claims for the period: it was the culmination of the challenge to and division between material necessity and “abstract universality.” It is the first moment when the working class can, in a fully conscious and international way, move towards socialism.

In reality, it is an unsuccessful effort to place upon their optimistic hopes a grand Hegelian schema. To a large degree it was also another installment in the debate over European socialism in the new period. At one point James writes about the “dialectical materialist”:

In his boldest flights he will not exceed the real history of humanity which is being prepared by the revolutionary masses.96

But we must ask where was the evidence of this preparation? Is it enough to simply not be pessimistic? Is the reverse inevitably dialectical? Lenin spoke of “revolutionary patience,” but by the sound of it James neither had it nor understood what it meant. As someone once pointed out, grandiose schema and overdramatic expectations have themselves been breeding grounds for the very things James opposed: reformism and pessimism.

The tendency produced the pamphlets, engaged in internal discussion through their weekly bulletin, and even raised funds for the 1947 miners’ strike. They were willing to go back into the Socialist Workers Party, however, and having put their ideas in printed form, they joined as a

94Ibid., p. 10.
95James, “Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity,” op. cit., pp. 72 and 84.
96Ibid., p. 105.
group. Promising to “distinguish themselves in external practice,” they would continue their own internal development but would take advantage of the party’s connection to labor.

The SWP was “going through a tremendous crisis on the Negro question, so they really welcomed James—who gave the report at the next convention.” James’s report, later published as “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the U.S.,” was a synthesis of his debates with McKinney and Trotsky, his work in Missouri, and his discussions with Black members such as Boggs in the Johnson-Forest group.

His report began with three propositions:

We say, number one, that the Negro struggle, the independent Negro struggle, has a vitality and a validity of its own; that it has deep historic roots in the past of America and in the present struggles... We say, number two, that this independent Negro movement is able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation, despite the fact that it is waged under the banner of democratic rights, and is not led necessarily either by the organized labor movement or the Marxist party.

We say, number three...that it is able to exercise a powerful influence upon the revolutionary proletariat and that it is in itself a constituent part of the struggle for socialism.

He then traced the Black involvement in the Civil War, in the populist movement, and in the CIO and other labor struggles of the 1930s. Just as the three tenets were more careful and more expressive versions of points raised during his discussion with Trotsky, his conclusion, printed in full at the beginning of this section, was again reminiscent of that discussion. With the resolution he once again argued that the Black movement would develop independently but alongside the radical movement, and that the movement could be a spark for the labor movement as a whole.

It may be true that “it is difficult to find in this coldly incisive analysis the sense of personal hurt.” James was, after all, from another country and was writing in the impersonal style of the movement. But the essay is immersed in its subject and is pathbreaking in its emphasis on the self-organization of the oppressed. Certainly Black SWP members were very excited, as evidenced by Charles Denby’s recollections:

He said the workers as a whole are the ones we must rely upon. But that didn’t mean that the Negroes must not do anything until the labor movement actually came forward. The Negro struggle would help bring the workers forward. That was complete for me. I couldn’t see how I would ever think of leaving after hearing him. I was tied and wedged into the party...I felt good. Now we had something, something to go by.

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98Personal conversation with Glaberman, op. cit.
99James, “The Revolutionary Answer,” op. cit., p. 120.
101Charles Denby, Indignant Heart (Boston: South End Press, 1978), p. 173. Denby joined the tendency soon after. He is a little dishonest in not naming the author of the resolution. At any rate, one author sees the resolution as “the only really original contribution to the understanding of an American question in the party was to produce.” Tim Wolforth, The Struggle for Marxism in the U.S. (New York: Labor Publications, 1971), p. 106.
Whereas the Workers Party was reverting to the traditional Socialist Party position, the SWP, because of its loyalty to Trotsky, supported James’s perspective. It was a happier atmosphere for James. He toured the branches with the resolution, and Johnson-Forest engaged itself with party work.

James was able to review Communist Party historians for the SWP journal, *Fourth International*. In “Stalinism and Negro History” and “Herbert Aptheker’s Distortions” James argued that the C.P.’s historians were presenting Black resistance to slavery as heroic and able but never independent or political. Since the C.P. had developed, during the 1930s, deep roots in the Black community, especially in the major northern cities through work around police harassment, housing issues, and civil rights, James felt it important to criticize their historical perspective.

James used the abolitionist movement as a case in point. In his *The Negro in the Abolitionist Movement* Aptheker speaks of the *Liberator* newspaper as a source of “encouragement and assistance for progressive forces” where Blacks “did not, of course, restrict themselves to independent work but struggled side by side with white people in common effort.”

Negro parsons giving invocations, Negro boys singing, and old Negro women blessing Abolitionism [as] the most characteristic aspect of Negro contributions to the struggle.

Left out, says James, are the political debates over the direction of the movement, support for John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, the issues behind the Douglas-Garrison split, and the argument radical Blacks made for agitation against the slave south.

Much of the C.P. writing, as James points out, was geared towards finding historical parallels to the 1930s popular front. James cites the final paragraph of Aptheker’s *Negro Slave Revolts*, which reads:

…unity between the white and Negro masses was necessary to overthrow nineteenth-century slavery. That same unity is necessary now to defeat twentieth-century slavery—to defeat fascism.

James then comments:

See how swiftly in the last paragraph capitalism is pushed aside and fascism is substituted for it. This is vital to the whole schema. To talk about the overthrow of capitalism would destroy the concept of anti-fascist coalition, it would bring on to the scene independent proletarian politics and independent Negro politics.

Here lies James’s case against the C.P. histories. James is anxious to uncover those moments when Blacks went beyond the prevailing conceptions of bourgeois democracy; he is decidedly unanxious about broad coalitions where Blacks played a small role in a benevolent tide of humanitarianism. Clearly both strands exist in Black history, although not in equal proportions, and if C.P. policy precluded discussion of the more radical and independent then that policy is evidence of bureaucratic Stalinism.

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The tendency did work as a group within the SWP, continuing their reading of Hegel. They felt it important to ground their ideas in the “architecture” of Marxism:

We live our daily lives in the upper reaches and derivative superstructures of Marxism…the foundations and lower floors are huge unexplored buildings in which we enter if at all in solitude and leave in silence. They have been shrines too long. We need to throw them open…

These buildings were the Marxist method, philosophy, and dialectic. Lengthy letters, between James, Dunayevskaya, and Lee, extended the pamphlet “Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity.” Parallels were drawn between their work and Lenin’s return to philosophy after the outbreak of the First World War. Just as Lenin used his reading to clarify his thinking about imperialism and Soviets, the Johnson-Forest group used their readings to illuminate state-capitalism and the merging of party and class.

The fruits of this work is a book, by James, entitled Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx and Lenin; there are also thirty-five unpublished letters at Wayne State University, dating from February 18, 1949 to January 15, 1951. The book is, in fact, a compilation of letters James wrote from Nevada, and the letters extended the discussion of Notes’s main reference points, Hegel’s Science of Logic and the smaller Logic. These letters are concerned with Hegel’s categories, and it would take us too far afield to discuss them in depth. Suffice it to say that their political arguments are introduced in the book.

Notes on Dialectics slips back and forth between Hegel and the post-war period. It introduces Hegel’s concept of “category” (a new system of thought) and then criticizes Trotsky’s mechanical equation of socialism and state property and the fixed character of this category. The “speculative truth” (new idea) of state-capitalism, leading to “reason” (intelligent understanding of a new category) is the working of the dialectic. As James writes:

People go through experiences and change their ideas of objects and so change their notion. They do not know they are…constantly negating, changing objects and their notions to them. Thus, there is a constant development of objects… Now God help you if your concept, your notion of a workers’ state in 1917, remains static, while everything else around you changes.

Trotskyism, then, is the

…use of the categories, etc. of Lenin’s practice, 1903-1923, preserved in their essential purity, and transferred to a period for which they became day by day more unsuited.

Use of these categories (Russia as workers’ state, vanguard party, death agony of capitalism after the war) will steer anyone who uses them further and further from concrete truth.

The tendency had broken with Trotskyism on almost every point. All that remained was for them to gather their supporters and further develop popular presentations of their politics through the pages of the party press. James, for instance, wrote an article for the Militant which discussed informal workplace organizations. Here again is the focus on the creative self-activity,

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106James, Notes on Dialectics, p. 55.
107Ibid., p. 34.
in the form of social ties which bolster morale and provide support for confrontations with management. That these ties are ignored by the media and politicians is not surprising:

The community of workers is based upon practical activity in common. It is difficult for the petty-bourgeois intellectual to understand this. His community is a community of talk and discussion. Where ideas about art, politics and literature are exchanged he feels at home.  

The social ties, on the other hand, are geared toward production; fighting or escaping it. This is what makes the social ties proto-socialist. Socialism would give workers

…the opportunity to carry into their lives outside of the factory the social ties which they have created inside the factory.

As the SWP’s 1950 convention neared, James wrote State Capitalism and World Revolution, sharpening and reiterating the tendency’s views. State Capitalism and World Revolution was written in the context of a debate in the Fourth International over Tito and Yugoslavia. Since Trotsky had expected Russia to collapse after the war, the extension of the Red Army into new territories came as a surprise. A few Trotskyists were inclined to see these Eastern European nations as capitalism, but this then raised this issue of Russia itself. The majority, represented by Ernest Mandel, termed them “deformed workers’ states.” They were particularly fond of Tito, whose speeches they reprinted. Some French Trotskyists, represented by Michal Pablo, wanted to know if a workers’ state could be created by Soviet expansion, why the need for the Fourth International? Why fight for socialism if, as Pablo suggested, there might be “centuries of workers’ states?” This question really set the various organizations into turmoil.

James’s intervention in the debate followed different lines. He argued, of course, “that the Soviet Union was state-capitalist and basically only a variation in the present historical phase of capitalist development.” As James outline, the five year plans, the 1929 conference of planners, Stakhanovism, and the introduction of systematic piecework in 1937 all marked stages in the development of state-capitalism. The expansion into Eastern Europe is for “world mastery rather than the redivision of colonies.”

This Soviet centralization of political and economic power found its parallel in the U.S. labor bureaucracy. Just as the Soviet bureaucracy rose out of revolution, the U.S: labor bureaucracy rose out of the CIO:

The history of production since is the corruption of the bureaucracy and its transformation into an instrument of capitalist production, the restoration to the bourgeoisie of what it had lost in 1936, the right to control production standards.

Viewing the period in this fashion poses political questions in terms of the fight against bureaucracy. As James wrote:

109 Ibid. See also his “The Social Thinking of the Workers,” The Militant, October 19, 1947.
The Leninist party in 1950, in practice where it can, but in theory always, must be the expression of the proletarian mobilization aimed against the bureaucracy as such.\textsuperscript{113}

And as Glaberman points out in the pamphlet’s introduction, this struggle does not “require indirect methods of representation,” nor does it require “the conception that there is a revolutionary potential in the American trade union movement.” As he suggests, James is advocating workers’ councils. Initially directed at the debate in the Fourth International, \textit{State Capitalism and World Revolution} ended on a very different plane.

The Socialist Workers Party had reprinted some of Tito’s speeches, and in general had taken an uncritical approach to the new regimes in Eastern Europe. After observing the group’s 1951 convention the tendency decided that this approach would not be changing and left to build their own group based on their own conceptions.

The SWP was hostile to the Johnson-Forest exit. In particular, they leveled two charges: that they were buckling under pressure of the Korean War (the idea being that a state-capitalist position inevitably leads one to support the West), and that they were a cult.\textsuperscript{114} Neither of these arguments was very satisfactory. If the Johnson-Forest tendency was buckling under anything, it was the idea that socialism was on the agenda. And although James expected (and received) undue influence upon the tendency, the amount of internal discussion suggested genuine political unity.

It had been a long haul in the Trotskyist movement. James himself had spent almost twenty years as an orator, writer, and activist in the Fourth International. Dunayevskaya had spent almost as much time. Together they had been in factional activity for ten years. And now they set out to build an independent Marxist group during the 1950s, during which it was difficult for radicals to find work, not to speak of building contacts, spreading literature, or finding an audience for their ideas.

James still believed, however, that the American Century could be turned around if socialists approached it right. He was confident that militants still existed in basic industry, that the Black communities were still smoldering, and that there were Americans who would participate in a movement that promised to extend democracy into the sphere of economics and into the structures of community life.

All seventy of them set out to publish a paper, \textit{Correspondence}, which would “encourage the workers to speak for themselves.” They would listen, not lead; the paper would spread their ideas and recruit workers to the tasks not of building the party but of circulating literature and reporting incidents of militancy. They would base themselves on four groups: factory workers, women, Blacks, and young people. Above all, they would believe in the American revolution.

\textit{Correspondence} took two years to come out; they spent the intervening period divided into three layers: intellectuals, mixed, and workers, in order to discuss the future of a non-vanguard group. Unlike other left groups, the workers told the intellectuals what politics was about:

> The real proletarians were put in the first layer; people of mixed status, like housewives, in the second; and the intellectuals were put in the third. Our meetings consisted of the now highly-prestigeful first layer spouting off, usually in a random, inarticulate way, about what they thought about everything under the sun. The rest of us, especially we intellectuals in the third layer, were told to listen.\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{113}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 52.


This recollection, by an ex-member, may have been produced by bitterness: *Correspondence* itself was devoid of inarticulateness. Its first issue, typical of issues to come, opened with a column in the first person by Charles Denby entitled “Workers’ Journal.” Other front page articles discussed Lucile Ball’s appearance in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee (“In those days,” she remembered about her father, “it was almost as bad to be a Republican” as to be a Communist”), a cartoon, and a statement by the editor:

*Correspondence* is a paper in which ordinary people can say what they want to say and are so eager to say. Workers, Negroes, women, youth, will tell in this paper in their own way the story of their own lives, in the plant, at home, in school, in their neighborhoods, what they are doing, what they are thinking about… You will find in the pages of *Correspondence* a total hostility to all forms of bureaucratic domination, anti-Communist as well as Communist. In Russia, everything and everybody is subordinated to the frantic drive to outdistance the United States in production. In the United States, dominated by the Almighty Dollar, there is McCarthyism, McCarranism, and Taft-Hartleyism.116

Inside were articles on conditions at Ford Rouge, anecdotes, a report from the coal fields, more cartoons, comment on the Kinsey Report, a review of “From Here to Eternity” and columns on “How We Beat the Boss,” “Young Guys and Gals,” and “In This Corner”—on sports. It was absorbed in “daily life” and extremely lively.

Many of the paper’s concerns were ten years ahead of its time. They published articles on sexuality, male chauvinism, high school alienation, and blue collar discontent. One of the group’s pamphlets was “A Woman’s Place.” Another, “Artie Cuts Out,” was about a high school strike in Los Angeles against a repressive school administration. They were looking at new and unorthodox places for evidence of American radicalism.

But the decade’s chill was felt in two very important ways. Firstly, it was very difficult to raise subscriptions for the paper. People were wary of being on any list of a subversive group. Peripheral members drifted away. And as the economy grew and the left shrunk the potential audience for their brand of politics became smaller. James and other long-time members were confident both of international developments and of a swing of the political pendulum back towards radical ideas. But it was difficult to convince many outsiders, and it was a far cry from the heady days of 1946 and 1947.

The effect of these factors were diffuse and difficult to measure. More immediate was James’s arrest and internment on Ellis Island during November of 1952. He remained on the island for six months as he applied for, and was finally denied, U.S. citizenship. For James these six months were difficult. Stomach problems he had fifteen years before complained to Trotsky about, developed into an ulcer due to prison food. He was placed in a small cell with five Communist Party members who recognized him from the pages of the *Militant*. After two days’ deliberation they decided to treat him as a fellow prisoner and not as a plant.117

For the *Correspondence* group as well these six months and then his expulsion were difficult. James was their leading member; he was energetic, experienced, and a source of political theory. Certainly the group felt it difficult to rely on letters and rare trips to London, where James settled.

116Statement of the Editor,” *Correspondence*, October 3, 1953, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 1
For a number of years James had planned on writing about Herman Melville; he used the six months on Ellis Island to write *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*. It was written as a study of the people he had spent fifteen years with and as an appeal for citizenship. The last fourth of the book is an account of his stay on Ellis Island and is very much directed at the authorities.

*Mariners* is about Melville’s use, especially in *Moby Dick*, of personality conflicts to dissect the central social features in American life. For James, Melville “was the first great critic of bureaucratic capitalism and totalitarianism.” Ahab is the embodiment of the soulless bureaucrat, concerned only with the containment of nature and with science. Ahab is Melville’s great character. With Ahab, according to James, Melville introduces to literature a modern type, a character which definitively captures the values and morals of this type.

Ahab’s officers, Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask, are helpless before the authoritarian personality. They worry about the futility of the ship’s mission, but offer no alternative. They have been trained to take orders; they are uncomfortable making their own decisions. The crew, on the other hand, are not worried: they are on board in order to work and to explore the open sea. Melville takes great care in demonstrating their skill and technical talents. They are united by their work, are neither revolutionary nor suffering, and unlike Ahab or his officers they live by no plan.

Ismael is an intermediate character. He works with the mariners but is unable to focus on anything because of his dreaming. James hints that he is similar to a leftist: he is unable to either plan, as Ahab does, or act, as the crew does.

The ship, with its thirty crew members, contains modern conflicts over science, absolutism, and class differentiation. The interaction of the officers, the crew, Ahab, and Ismael is the drama; the tragedy is the foolishness of Ahab’s hunt. Other writers suppose that the modern tragedy is greed, or an end of innocence. Melville sees it as bureaucratic domination and the desire to control nature herself. As Ahab pushes the ship towards destruction the modern totalitarian pushes society towards destruction.

James is frightened by this desire to control nature. One of the book’s most important passages comes when James warns the reader about abusing nature:

> Nature is not a background to men’s activity or something to be conquered and used. It is a part of man, at every turn physically, intellectually and emotionally, and man is a part of it. And if man does not integrate his daily life with his natural surroundings and his technical achievements, they will turn on him and destroy him.

Again, we see the engagement with issues long before they are popular. *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* is both a work of literary criticism and an environmentalist’s lament.

The American people, and here we see again James’s redefinition of the American century, have the choice of taking the world on as Ahab takes on the whale, or combining Ismael’s consciousness and the crew’s innate skill and collectivity and offer the mixture to the natural and political world. It was a challenge issued from the pen of an Ellis Island subversive, read only by skeptical Immigration officials and associates of James’s. Would Americans read Melville this way? James hope they would. And with this amount of confidence how could the authorities turn him down? This short book expressed more patriotism than 420 Congressional Forth of July speeches. But it wasn’t enough. During the early part of the spring of 1953 James was forced to leave the country and he headed back to Britain in order to support himself as a writer.

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His fifteen years in America impressed upon him the tremendous importance of Americans. James had arrived as a confidant of Trotsky’s, eager to put aside his literary work for the continual strain of revolutionary agitation. He developed as an independent thinker, always revising his work but never his precepts. The next section will discuss his contributions, but it is useful to note that by the end of his stay he was once again able to see the centrality of community and social life; that is, culture, and to see the importance of placing it into the political context without defining it in terms of the political vision alone.

In many ways they must have been frustrating years. He arrived hopeful of the future, confident in the movement and its leadership, and secure in his own power to influence events. Within two years he was unhappily in a factional split; twelve months later he formed a small group around an independent position on the fundamental question of Russia. At no time did this minority group number more than 100, and consequently had to measure its success in terms of pamphlets sold, or creative thinking encouraged. As soon as he left the SWP, James’s illegal status forced him to await a judge’s verdict as to whether he could stay in his chosen home. His forced expulsion may have affected his political development. He was never able to recapture the intense environment of the Johnson-Forest group, with its steady reading and its keen interest in daily life. Two of his closest associates from these years, Grace Lee and Correspondence editor James Boggs, say that outside of America James stopped growing. They write:

When C.L.R. left this country in 1953, he left behind his base and became a cosmopolite. In the U.S., although he had been to some extent underground, he had an organization of Americans of very different types, blacks, women, middle class professionals, intellectuals, youth, workers who were passionately concerned with the American Revolution... After 1953, C.L.R. didn’t have the challenge of the United States which had never failed to excite him.120

Conclusion

It is convenient to list three contributions James made during his American years. They all spring from the same sources: a unique personality, a focus on socialism as self-emancipation, and an unorthodox approach.

1. An eye not to what the working class should be doing but to what the working class is doing; witness the interest in conditions of production, social life, informal workplace interaction, etc. We are reminded by James that if social change is plausible it is only so based on the shared and understood experiences of ordinary people conducting their lives. This also led him to discard the vanguard party model, at least in the form that it is understood, and to sketch a model of transformative organization that would encourage and express native radicalism and aim for the creation of American workers’ councils.

2. A definitive break with the Russian model of socialism. The state-capitalist theory, as James pointed out, was not so much a description of the workings of the Soviet economy (although it was an outline), but a clear statement as to what socialism wasn’t. The integration of the two systems: the Soviet and the Western, produced a new conflict: bureaucracy vs. workers’ self-rule. Again, as with the emphasis on daily life, James was evoking themes that the new left would assume was theirs alone.

3. A useful paradigm regarding Black liberation in the United States. With his careful interplay of independent nationalism, Black labor, and the radical left, James issued a program which realistically linked the left and Black movements without subordinating one to the other.

120Boggs and Paine, op. cit., p. 287.
He hoped, and acted upon the belief, that the conditions for creating workers’ control, breaking with bureaucracy both East and West, and building a fighting force of oppressed minorities, were most favorable during these years of American expansion and cultural growth. While much of the left underwent a crisis of confidence, James felt that if a socialist current wasn’t visible then the left wasn’t looking in the right places. This was his response to the reconsideration of the centrality of the working class in Marx that portions to the left undertook. Partly because of his arrival at politics, and partly because of his awareness of the continuing anti-colonial skirmishes, James never felt compelled to give up the God as failed.

There are various hints in his own writing about the effect of America on his thinking. We have tended to cast this in terms of the American century phrase of Life’s Henry Luce. To what degree James was consciously redefining this phrase into his own vision of an America taking the lead along Marxist lines is unclear. Until his autobiography is finished, we can’t be sure; although it isn’t certain that he will put these feelings on paper. What is certain is that through his entire stay in America he held grand ideas about what Americans could do, and what American Marxists could do.

Yet much of his contribution was suggestive. With the exception of his work on Black liberation James was largely unable to ground his bold vision in a tested understanding of the daily life he was so concerned with. Perhaps, given his confident self-appraisal, he was sure that an outline of an argument would suffice for the argument itself. He was convinced, for instance, that the Correspondence group could be built based on the negative experience of the Socialist Workers Party and the Workers Party. But it is unclear that even in a better climate than the 1950s their group could have grown; there were too many internal differences as to what this negative experience meant.

He was too quick to project tendencies into established facts. Three examples come to mind. One is his argument that in the European factories of 1946 workers’ councils could be formed. While it was true that Allied victory brought hope, James was unable to demonstrate (with the possible exceptions of Yugoslavia and Greece) how a demoralized, impoverished and atomized working class could do anything but sigh relief. Relatedly, James predicted that the war’s end would see the “utter collapse of capitalism.” Why? Marxist economic theory stresses the sustaining aspect of war’s destruction (and therefore devaluation) of capital. The parallel with the 1920s promised extended prosperity. James was projecting, and with dubious results.

James also raised the theory of state-capitalism without explaining why economic tendencies particular to capitalism should appear in the Soviet bloc. Even though it was reasonable to begin the analysis by demonstrating the existence of alienated social relations, he failed to integrate his sociological insights into a broader framework. Dunayevskaya attempted to fill in the holes: James never went beyond the outlines of the argument.

Mention was made earlier of James’s overly broad sweep in Notes on Dialectics. In it James fails to discuss countervailing tendencies to the model of global fissure along bureaucratic vs. workers’ councils lines. For all of James’s criticisms of Trotsky’s fixed categories, the “new stage” was depicted in two dimensional and therefore undialectical terms.

Questions must be raised, moreover, about two other (internally related) aspects of James’s theorizing. First is his correlation of a worker’s presence in production and socialist consciousness. In many ways this was postulated as an alternative notion to the vanguard party leading the workers, and in doing so correctly re-emphasized the democratic roots of a popular socialist current, as well as the potentially radicalizing effect of involvement in mass production.

The problem, of course, with contrasting arguments is that they often reverse the original argument’s defects. While James was justified in centering his attention on the ability of ordinary workers to relate the socialist perspective to their own lives, he ignored the effect of mass communications, advertising, and institutional pressures (such as organized religion, personnel departments, family obligations) in situating workers’ perceived reality in non- or anti-socialist
contexts. Ironically, James was interested in the texture of social relations, yet he failed to take into account the pressures that this texture provides against the radicalism he was interested in.

There was little sense, in other words, of the socialist case being argued among others in the cafeterias, shopping centers, porches, or union halls of working class life. *Correspondence*, for instance, was oriented towards a passive reflection of workers’ consciousness. There was no feel for the intervention of an active minority working on the basis of the ideas presented in the paper, challenging the norms of society. Perhaps workers do leap; they don’t do so every day.

James rebelled against Trotsky’s interpretation of Bolshevism, with its expectation that a correct revolutionary program would propel the Fourth International into the front of the workers’ movement. But, and this is the second question, he also rebelled against the “need for the sinews of socialist organization.”121 Dropping, as mentioned, the notion of an active minority working within working class society, James also dropped the idea that revolutionary organization must coordinate and develop this intervention. In rejecting Trotsky’s theory of the party James abandoned the distinction between one’s left wing ideas, and the wider public.

Socialist organization should gather collective experiences and offer particular ideas as poles of attraction within a wider movement. Working under the assumption that workers have mostly contradictory and half formed views, socialists work to bridge the gap and to engage workers in moving through their ideas. Because it is unworkable to believe that all workers will break through all political barriers at the same time, it is vital that socialists systematically orchestrate the presentation of their ideas. Workers only leap to positions that have been at least discussed. If socialism is part of the collective political vocabulary then it can be posed concretely as an alternative. In the act of placing socialist ideas in this vocabulary, socialists work together in order to better their efforts.

*Correspondence* and its related publications relied on an assumption of mass radicalization. This bred an inward orientation; although the paper was popularly written, it wasn’t popular. James himself recognized the problem when, in a private letter, he remarked:

> In the past our great weakness had been that we produced the documents with energy and devotion but were conspicuously deficient in circulating them. That was because I daresay we were over-concerned with the production of other documents.122

It wasn’t enough to print brilliant socialist analysis; it had to be pushed into the hands of as wide an audience as possible.

James’s anti-party attitude meant two things: he was “flexible enough to understand the relationship between the Black struggle and the struggle for socialism,”123 and he substituted spontaneity for organization and spontaneity; the former propelling the latter, the latter transforming the former. His break with Leninism was rooted in his healthy distrust of unresponsive leadership, his tendency to turn models into strategies, and his restless hereticism. These are admirable qualities, but they produced an uneven and insufficient theory for the maturation of a revolutionary alternative.

It may be that the obscurity of James is coming to an end. Certainly in Britain and the West Indies portions of his work are gaining a larger audience. Even in America, through *Radical America*, new editions of his books, and the *Urgent Tasks* retrospective, some familiarity is being developed for his ideas. Despite the failure of the *Correspondence* group in sustaining a presence, James’s analysis of the Soviet Union, of the Black movement; his emphasis on the

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121Widgery, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
122Letter from James to Glaberman, July 27, 1964, in Glaberman Collection, Wayne State University.
123Tony Bogues, letter to author, November 1981.
culture and rebellion of ordinary people, and his stress on workers’ councils have slowly begun to filter through the isolated left to a wider audience.
# 1 Carl Stone. "The Caribbean and the World Economy: Patterns of Insertion and Contemporary Options."


# 3 Edward Gonzalez. "U.S. Strategic Interests in the Caribbean Basin."


# 5 Paul W. Ashley. "Jamaican Foreign Policy in Transition: From Manley to Seaga."

# 6 Selwyn Ryan. "Administrative Capability and Choice of Development Strategy: The Case of Trinidad and Tobago."

# 7 Samuel Silva Gotay. "La transformación de la función política en el pensamiento teológico caribeño y latinoamericano."


#11 Franklin W. Knight. "United States Cultural Influences on the English-speaking Caribbean during the Twentieth Century."


#14 Fernando Cepeda. "Colombia: ¿Una vocación caribeña?"


#16 Gonzalo Falabella. "Movimientos sociales, intelectuales organizados y el intelectual orgánico en América Latina: Una perspectiva comparada."

#17 J. Edward Greene. "Perspectives on U.S.-Caribbean Relations in the Mid-eighties."