

CLR JAMES: Radical, Humanist and Puritan

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Review of: Farrukh Dhondy, *CLR James: Cricket, the Caribbean, and World*

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Introduction

What can CLR James's lifework teach us in 2002? The publication of Farrukh Dhondy's long-awaited book on James life and workⁱ provides us with the opportunity to reflect on the impact and relevance of this peripatetic radical writer and activist.

There has been a boom in 'James studies' since his death in 1989.ⁱⁱ Much of this new critical literature examines James writing and activism from the perspective of cultural studies, literary criticism and political theory. The more recent works emerge from the North American academy, where James taught for periods in the 1970s, but he always remained distant from academic discourse. Dhondy's book departs from this recent trend in that it is written from the perspective of a British radical writer located outside academia. The book stands largely on its literary merits.ⁱⁱⁱ

Dhondy's book is very readable. He has the novelist's skill. He experiments successfully with point of view and narrative style, moving between conventional third-person biography and more 'novelistic' narrative. The lack of a list of James's writings is regrettable, especially given that Dhondy sees James as a radical writer primarily: readers who might want to pursue James's writings more systematically are left largely to their own devices. This is perhaps the main weakness of the work. In distancing himself - rather refreshingly - from the recent sometimes sterile academic treatises on James - Dhondy leans heavily on memoir, which gives the book a lightweight feel in places. While part of the book's methodology turns on Dhondy's relationship with CLR James (they first met in the early 1970s, and James lived at Dhondy's London home in the 1980s), the reminiscences of his time with CLR are occasionally banal and appear to serve no purpose other than establishing unnecessary authenticity grounded in Dhondy's friendship with CLR. Fortunately, these moments are infrequent. There is much which this book has to offer both to students of James and to anyone interested in radical politics.

In his engagement with a life, with politics, movement and ideas, Dhondy is often compelling. He presents several dimensions of James: the writer, militant activist, tortured lover, humanist, senior Marxist and mentor. The thread running through

Dhondy's account is James's radical humanism, which sits uneasily with attempts to make James an icon of black struggle: 'he [James] was an unlikely godfather to ... racially conscious radicalism'.^{iv}

James's radical humanism is grounded in a multidisciplinary approach to the analysis of culture, politics and social change. He consistently argued that cultural criticism and political activity were closely related and that we understand both when we are ourselves grounded in the material circumstances of real people.

Victorian with the rebel seed

Two people lived in me: one, the rebel against all family and school discipline and order; the other, a Puritan who would have cut off a finger sooner than do anything contrary to the ethics of the game.

CLR James, *Beyond a Boundary*

Cricket is an Indian game accidentally discovered by the English.

Ashis Nandy, *The Tao of Cricket*

Cyril Lionel Robert James was born in 1901 in rural Trinidad. He died in London in 1989. His two childhood passions were reading and watching cricket. At the age of eight, James attempted a novel, which he recalled as an old man was a thinly disguised re-working of the *Last of the Mohicans*. James was a keen observer of the lives of ordinary people - an interest quite likely rooted in childhood days spent watching village cricket. Educated at Queens Royal College, which was modelled on the English public schools and intended to reproduce the white and coloured ruling elite as well as acculturate selected non-whites, in Trinidad James would have been tutored by: '[T]he

old boys of Eton and Harrow, Cambridge and Oxford, [who] arrived in the colonies with cricket, classics and Christianity as the principal components in their intellectual, ideological and cultural baggage.’^v

Dhondy quite properly points to James’s early fiction as noteworthy because of the social realism in which James was a pioneer for fiction from the English Caribbean. *Minty Alley*, written by James in the 1920s when he was a school teacher in Trinidad, seems a kindred text to Engels’s *The Condition of the English Working Classes*.

James/Haynes came to know lower-class life through observation and participation; just as Frederick Engels had to learn the reality of the early industrial working classes in England by going out amongst them. *The Condition of the English Working Classes*, as something of an early ethnographic survey, was important in forming the critical consciousness of Engels and Marx. Similarly, I believe that James’s explorations into plebeian life in Trinidad were crucial to forming his early critical consciousness; in this sense we can read *Minty Alley* as a sort of fictional ethnography; James early social realism resonates with the social realism of classic ethnography of the early twentieth century, for both tried to render through description of place and social relations, a sense of the unfamiliar which could become familiar to the middle-class reader. The forays by the respectable lower-middle-class schoolmaster in the slum barrack yards of Port of Spain were the first moments in James’ ceaseless travels. In this fiction, James is constructing an early critique of colonialism and class hierarchy, but one which is as yet unschooled as still groping for a radical language. That radical language would come after his 1932 move to England, where he became involved with left-wing politics.

Dhondy has James repeatedly confronting and rejecting black nationalist politics in favour of a broader radicalism in which black struggle was necessary but not sufficient. In highlighting James’s enduring contributions to left praxis, chief amongst which is a creative integration of race and class struggle that has informed black radical politics in the USA, Britain and the Caribbean, Dhondy claims:

[James] is the only Marxist whose Marxism will continue to make sense in the twenty-first century, because it is untainted by anything that the world associates with the ideas and practice of Stalinism, the Soviet Union. Or the academic

Marxists of Europe and America, such as Althusser, Balibar and Marcuse who deserve the oblivion that has overtaken them.^{vi}

This (unsubstantiated) claim is breath-taking in its disregard for the incisive criticisms of Stalinism made with the deepest conviction by many Western Marxists, academic and non-academic.^{vii} At the very least, it is odd to claim that James's ideas as an anti-Stalinist, non-academic Marxist will live on and not also allow that the same must be true for Gramsci,^{viii} and arguably to a greater degree.

One of the most distinctive features of James' life and work is the great respect which he held for European culture. James was of a time when non-European intellectuals were not nearly as hostile to the European canon as is the case nowadays. With black power, the modern women's movement and decolonisation as historical accomplishments, it is not always easy at this time to find a place for one of the founders of Pan-Africanism who was also a fervent fan of Ancient Greece and Shakespeare.

Dhondy's James is uncompromising in his demands for Blacks as central to Western civilisation: when, during a conversation on poetry, the late Jamaican black radical poet Mikey Smith dismissed the English poetic tradition as irrelevant, Dhondy recalls James's stern rejection of Smith's 'wearing ignorance as a badge of rebellion'. For all his love of the Classics and English literature, James was, nonetheless, no unreflexive creature of European high culture:

It was only long years after [leaving school] that I understood the limitation on spirit, vision and self-respect which was imposed on us by the fact that our masters, our curriculum, our code of morals, *everything* began from the basis that Britain was the source of all light and leading, and our business was to admire, wonder, imitate, learn; our criterion of success was to have succeeded in approaching that distant ideal-to attain it was, of course, impossible.^{ix}

James' early drive to articulate European literary and philosophical work with the struggle of black people in the Atlantic world, which occupied him from the 1930s,

has parallels with the political development of Angela Davis in the United States in the 1960s. Like James before her, Davis had a sound education in European literature and philosophy. At the same time, and like James, she had early developed a strong consciousness of what it meant to be a black person in a racist society. Like James, she early committed herself to struggle against racist oppression. But the most telling point of similarity is in her insistence that the struggle against racism is part of a wider struggle against capitalism: contests over race and class, and gender (in consideration of which she went *beyond* James) are all critical moments in the struggle against the inhumanity of capitalism and imperialism.^x

Both James and Davis would support the work of the major black revolutionary activists of their day, but both on occasion objected to what they saw as strident forms of black nationalism which dismissed Marxism as Eurocentric ideology, as irrelevant to the black struggle. James took issue with the racial essentialism, or 'race first' of Marcus Garvey while conceding the enormous importance of Garvey's life and work. Similarly, Davis objected to the anti-Marxism of Stokeley Carmichael, while conceding the importance of the man who coined the phrase, 'black power'. In a 1968 rally in Los Angeles, Davis heard Carmichael speak. She wrote in her autobiography: "I was [, therefore,] especially disturbed by the content of some of the speeches. Stokeley, for example, spoke of socialism as "the white man's thing." Marx, he said, was a white man and therefore irrelevant to Black Liberation." Davis recalls that after the speech, "I was glad he [Stokeley] was no longer the chairman of SNCC [Students' Non-Violent Coordinating Committee: a radical student organisation with branches across the United States in the 1960s], because after hearing such a speech, I would have left the organization on the spot."^{xi} The life and work of James and Davis, from different generations but both very much of the modern Atlantic world, stand as instances highlighting the importance of a humanist and universalist outlook in socialist politics as against the narrow conception of identity now fashionable and the rigid divisions which such identity politics seeks to impose between cultures.

James' respect for the canon has raised doubts on the part of some persons who are suspicious of non-European intellectuals who pay homage to European cultural models. In an interview with Angus Calder in the *Third World Book Review*, sometime in 1984,

the following was put to James: "Some Caribbean intellectuals of your generation could be accused of excessive veneration for Western culture and implicitly downgrading the African and New World roots of their own languages and culture ..." to which James replies: "I do not know what are the African roots of the language and culture of Caribbean intellectuals. I am not aware of the African roots of my use of the language and culture. ... The basis of our civilisation in the Caribbean is an adaptation of Western civilisation."^{xii}

In drawing upon classical Greece as a source of political imagination, while at the same time insisting on the indispensable role of colonised people in constituting modern Western civilisation, James was a *bricoleur*: he combined seemingly disparate elements to construct a conception of history and culture which would be adequate to life in the modern world. James had a hybrid world vision, but one not without contradictions. In claiming that Thackeray had more responsibility for who James became than did Marx, and moreover in living through an ethics based in cricketing fair play, James does seem to fit uncomfortably in any canon of radicalism, black or otherwise. For Dhondy, this seeming transgression is more of a problem of cultural myopia than a problem for James's praxis:

The Kiplingesque description of the fair play ethic, the cricketing metaphors in which it is enshrined, the sincerity with which the belief is held and the self-consciousness with which it is declared, do not square with notions of a Marxist thinker, a Leninist executor or a black militant. Cricket ethics are, in the public imagination, identical with the moral system of the public schools that gave the sport its social organization. They are assumed to be synonymous with the rulers, not the rebels.^{xiii}

Throughout the book, Dhondy challenges and demolishes the bases of this assumption by showing how James's disregard of cultural boundaries was a resource for his activism. That James could address and sway white English Trotskyists, US Jewish radicals, and US Black sharecroppers, is an indication and at the same time a vindication of a humanist universalism. This humanism was not the result of chance, though; as Dhondy shows, it was built on years of self-directed study and constant

engagement with a whole range of human milieus, from which James always stood back and reflected in writing with a keen ethnographic eye.

James vision of a barbarism for which only socialism could be the counter is grounded in the second world war, in racism, exploitation and colonialism. For Dhondy, James appears strangely silent on the first world war, of which he must have been aware as a youngster in Trinidad, and for which he volunteered to fight in the West India regiment (and was rejected on racial grounds):

The irony was that James, who had been reading the work of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, made no connection between the public school ethic which he embraced and the slaughter of the trenches.^{xiv}

Throughout his life, James inhabited contradictory spaces. In his work on cricket, we may join in his reflections on what this complex social positioning might mean. As James shows in *Beyond a Boundary*, cricket was produced by the dominant culture in the colonial West Indies; it did develop as a counter-culture but ultimately remained tied to that dominant culture. James himself was a product of the dominant culture, he drew on revolutionary currents from within that culture to counter its oppressive aspects, but he remained ultimately tied to that same culture.^{xv}

For Helen Tiffin,^{xvi} James in his only novel, *Minty Alley* and *The Black Jacobins* is acutely aware of the richness of the life of the masses; in both books, he critiques bourgeois notions of the cultural inferiority of the working class. But, she argues, James in *Boundary* does not face squarely the tensions between his intellectual standpoint as a man of the middle class on the one hand, and that of the oppressed West Indian masses, on the other: he skirts the tensions by emphasising the culture and mass appeal of cricket over its oppressive side. Tiffin attributes these tensions to the divided quality of the West Indian; she writes: 'A remarkable West Indian writer, nationalist and revolutionary thinker, James proves in all his works that which is West Indian, *sui generis*, will always be partly British. That 'part' is noticeably more prominent in his book on cricket than in any of his other writings.'^{xvii}

The British, even Victorian, side of James was always in struggle with the side that was not-British, the other term in the equation of creole, that is to say, Afro-European, identity. In his personal life, James perhaps managed to keep the conflict from boiling over, but the pent-up stresses break free in the text of *Boundary*. IN Dhondy's interpretation, a Jamesian cultural politics is one which would encompass the tension between dominant and subaltern cultural forms as James in his own life encompassed the tension between being a colonial subject and being at home in the dominant European culture.

Pleasure and Paradox of Exile

After a six-year in the UK period in which he went from an unknown to a leading figure in British Trotskyism, James was invited to the United States by the American Socialist Workers' Party in 1938. Planning a visit of just a few months to engage in a speaking tour, James would end up staying for fifteen years. He travelled extensively throughout the American South, experiencing the United States version of apartheid - Jim Crow. He became involved in labour organising. During this period he applied himself to an in-depth study of Marx's *Capital* and Hegel's *Logic*.

According to Grimshaw and Hart,^{xviii} life in the United States had the most profound impact on James. He seemed to have found the new environment a liberating change from Europe. As a black British colonial and an intellectual, James must have seemed exotic in America. As a black man who was at ease with the Western literary canon, a Trotskyist of note and a published author with two substantive works under his belt, not to mention numerous shorter pieces, James made quite an impact on audiences and comrades in the United States.

James's movement was a source of tension on which he drew in his work, and while there can be no doubt that his travels served to reinforce his commitment to internationalism as a political project, these travels were sometimes forced on him, as with his departure from the USA in 1953. Dhondy differs in his interpretation of the significance of James's American period from other recent commentators on James. For

Dhondy, James returned to his Britishness later in life, consolidating and at the same time in *Beyond a Boundary* reflectively distancing himself from four decades of activism and writing after coming to terms with the failure of his American revolutionary period.

The contradictory existence of the Victorian with the rebel seed is the leitmotif of James's lifework for Dhondy. This reading stands in provocative contrast to Grimshaw and Hart,^{xix} for whom the American period was James's peak as a revolutionary. Where they see James's political vision expanding in the vastness of the US, Dhondy has James reflecting that this was a period of useless endeavour:

Years later, in December 1962, in a letter to his friend and comrade from the 1940s, Martin Glaberman the revolutionary [i.e. James] says: 'Even now when I think of it, the work that I used to do, I feel distressed. It is perhaps the only thing in my life which I look back on not so much with bitterness, but with regret, with recognition of the fact that I wasted my strength, my time and my physical health on something that was absolutely useless.'^{xx}

Whatever the significance of the US period, James never managed to ground himself in one place, but that in itself is no reason why so many of his political projects met with failure or severely qualified success; more importantly I think, he failed to locate himself securely in networks, local or transnational; the constant movement, physical, theoretical, which he so prized and which makes his work still exciting to read now, had a negative dimension in terms of his never seeming to carry through a political project, because there was always another on the horizon. This is one of the tensions of the life of the diasporic intellectual activist. Dhondy's biographical study is at its best in drawing out these uncertainties and unsettling tensions.

NOTES

- i. F. Dhondy, *CLR James: Cricket, the Caribbean, and World Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001).
- ii. For books and edited collections on James see: P. Buhle, *CLR James: The Artist as Revolutionary* (London: Verso, 1989); A. Bogue, *Caliban's Freedom: The Early Political Thought of C.L.R. James* (London: Pluto Press, 1997); P. Buhle, *CLR James: His Life and Work* (London: Allison and Busby, 1981); P. Buhle and P. Henry, *CLR James's Caribbean* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992); W. Cain and S. Cudjoe, *CLR James: His Intellectual Legacy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1995); G. Farred, ed., *Rethinking C.L.R. James* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); A. Grimshaw and K. Hart, *C.L.R. James and the Struggle for Happiness* (New York: The C.L.R. James Institute, 1991); S. McLemee, *CLR James on the 'Negro Question'* (Jackson: University Press of Minnesota, 1996); A.L. Nielsen, *CLR James: A Critical Introduction* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997); K. Worcester, *CLR James: A Political Biography* (Albany: State University of New York, 1996); Nicole King, *C.L.R. James and Creolization: Circles of Influence* (Mississippi: Univ Pr of Mississippi, 2001).
- iii. Rather confusingly, and incorrectly, the book's dust jacket claims it to be the 'first full-length biography' of James. Buhle's 1989 book is arguably a biography; Worcester's 1996 text is certainly a biographical study.
- iv. Dhondy, *CLR James*, p xi
- v. K A Sandiford and Brian Stoddart, "The elite schools and cricket in Barbados: a study in colonial continuity", in Beckles and Stoddart (eds), *Liberation Cricket* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995) p 45. These two are writing with the colonial grammar school of Barbados in mind, but their comments are entirely applicable to James's school and others throughout the colonial West Indies. See also: Carl Campbell, *The Young Colonials: A Social History of Education in Trinidad and Tobago 1834-1939* (Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago: The Press, University of the West Indies, 1996).

- vi. Dhondy, *CLR James*, pp x-xi vii. Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976); Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997); R. Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).
- viii. W.L. Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).
- ix. *Beyond a Boundary*, pp 38-39.
- x. See Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983); and, *Women, Culture and Politics* (London: The Women's Press, 1990). Like other radicals of his generation, gender analysis was not James' strong suit; see Hazel V Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1998). The CLR James archive in New York (www.clrjamesinstitute.org) contains some scattered writings on women, but James never wrote systematically or at length on the gender question in politics.
- xi. Angela Davis, *An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1988), pp 167 - 168.
- xii. A. Calder, "An Audience with CLR James," *Third World Book Review* 1 (1984).
- xiii. Dhondy, *CLR James*, p 10
- xiv. Dhondy, *CLR James*, p 11
- xv. The parallels between *Boundary* and the kindred study of cricket and colonialism in India by Ashis Nandy are striking; see A. Nandy, *The Tao of Cricket: On Games of Destiny and the Destiny of Games* (New Delhi and New York: Viking, 1989). Given the way in which Dhondy saw James's lifework as illuminating his (Dhondy's) own early upbringing in India, a chance was missed to put James in conversation with Nandy, over cricket.
- xvi. See Helen Tiffin, "Cricket, literature and the politics of de-colonisation: the case of C.L.R. James", in H Beckles and B Stoddart (eds) *Liberation Cricket: West Indies cricket culture*, xvii. Helen Tiffin, "Cricket, literature and the politics of de-colonisation", p 368.
- xviii. See their introduction to James's posthumously published *American Civilization*, edited by K. Hart and A. Grimshaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). See also Grimshaw's introduction to *Special Delivery: The Letters of C.L.R. James to Constance Webb 1939-1948*, edited by A. Grimshaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

xix. See: A. Grimshaw and K. Hart, *C.L.R. James and the Struggle for Happiness* (New York: The C.L.R. James Institute, 1991), 57; also their introduction to *American Civilization*, edited by K. Hart and A. Grimshaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

xx. Dhondy, *CLR James*, pp 89-90