

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

“History is never a history only of the past. It is always concerned with the present and therefore the future.”

—C.L.R. James, 1949

In mid-April 1939, Cyril Lionel Robert James sat aboard a ship making its way from Vera Cruz to New Orleans. James was, by now, well accustomed to tropical climes. England had housed and nourished him for the better part of the last decade, but Trinidad had raised him. The southern, spring sun, which hung over the Gulf of Mexico, therefore had on James none of the intoxicating effects which Johann Wolfgang von Goethe described during his similarly warm, maritime sojourn in Naples a century and a half earlier. Goethe had written, “In Rome I was glad to study: here I want only to live, forgetting myself and the world.” James, by contrast, had much to think about and the April sun—“hot as fire, bluish-green”—could not stop him.¹

James had recently left Mexico, where he spent two weeks in the Coyoacán borough of the nation’s capital with Leon Trotsky. Together with a handful of the Russian revolutionary’s American disciples, they discussed the objectives of the Socialist Workers Party, and specifically how to resolve its negligence on the “Negro Question”. James had only embraced Trotskyism five years earlier, but by 1939, he emerged as one of the leading figures in British radical circles. Once Trotsky became aware of the West Indian’s intellectual and oratorical gifts, he encouraged the SWP’s leadership to sponsor

¹ C.L.R. James to Constance Webb, undated, in *Special Delivery: The Letters of C.L.R. James to Constance Webb, 1939-1948* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italian Journey: 1786-1788*, trans. W.H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 208.

an American speaking tour for James. The Russian exile then invited James to Mexico City, hoping that together they would solve what he believed to be the missing piece of the revolutionary puzzle in the United States.²

The Trinidadian showed none of the diffidence that one might expect from a relatively new convert before one of the masters of Marxism. In the few exchanges in which he disagreed with Trotsky, James did not hold back. They did not see eye to eye, for example, on African Americans' inclination toward self-determination. Using the Garvey movement as a prism through which to analyze the question of self-determination, James concluded that "Negroes who followed [Garvey] did not believe for the most part that they were really going back to Africa...but they were glad to follow a militant leadership." Blacks, James thought, did not embrace Garvey predominantly because of a literal desire to claim their own homeland, but rather because his program represented a rare solace from white oppression. Trotsky, by contrast, believed that "It was the expression of a mystic desire for a home in which they would be free of the domination of whites, in which they themselves could control their own fate. That was also a wish for self-determination."³

Still, the two men found themselves in accord much more often than not. One conclusion, in particular, bound James to Trotsky in April 1939—and would continue to link them over the next decade. Writing, from the ship, to Constance "Connie" Webb,

² Kent Worcester, *C.L.R. James: A Political Biography* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 41, 50.

³ Breitman, *Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978), 40, 46; Trotsky's deduction here is more aligned with that of African Americans in the Communist Party. Harry Haywood, one of its most prominent black leaders, later wrote: "[The Garvey movement] was an indigenous product, arising from the soil of Black super-exploitation and oppression in the United States. It expressed the yearnings of millions of Blacks for a nation of their own" (See: *A Black Communist in the Freedom Struggle: The Life of Harry Haywood*, ed. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012], 143).

whom he had met three weeks earlier, and whom he would marry ten years later, James alluded to one point that continued to weigh on his mind as he neared New Orleans:

I have written to Max [Shachtman] asking for a Negro column in the S.A. [Socialist Appeal]. No reply up to now. Patience, my dear. They will be jogged into action if not by me then by L.T. He is the keenest of the keen on the N [Negro] question. You will gasp when you read what he says to the party: (*Strictly between us*) It is roughly this: The attitude of the SWP to the N question has been *most* disquieting and unless the Party can find a way to the Negroes, i.e., to the most oppressed, it will degenerate. The Negroes as the *most* oppressed *must* become the very vanguard of the revolution.⁴

This was a radical idea, one which might have led any other leftist to believe that Leon Trotsky had lost his mind. Having recently published the first definitive account of the Haitian slave rebellion, however, James was well aware of the revolutionary power of an oppressed black population. In England, he had welded his Pan-Africanism with his newly formed Marxism. Their fusion now allowed James to adopt the view that “The Negro represents potentially the most revolutionary section of the population.”⁵ When James arrived in the United States in October 1938, American Trotskyism had no answer to the “Negro Question”. When he returned in April 1939, it had, at least, a foundation upon which to develop one.

In light of this, it is surprising that James scholars have largely ignored or dismissed any notion of the vanguard that James held and continued to hold throughout

⁴ C.L.R. James to Constance Webb, April 1939

⁵ J.R. Johnson, “Preliminary Notes on the Negro Question,” Socialist Workers Party Internal Bulletin, June 1939.

his stay in America. Paul Buhle, a biographer of James, for example, suggests that while Trotsky viewed blacks as the vanguard, James believed they would occupy a less revolutionary role. This, Buhle concludes, marked a “characteristic difference” between the two, “destined to grow in time.”⁶ Christopher Hitchens, not a James scholar but nevertheless a journalist deeply familiar with the history of Marxism, wrote that James “had decided that the entire concept of a ‘vanguard party’ was at fault, no matter who proclaimed it.”⁷ Even James’ later colleague Martin Glaberman recalled that by 1944, James had begun “to depart from the traditional view of the vanguard party.”⁸

Earlier this year, Bhaskar Sunkara, the Editor-in-Chief of *Jacobin*, an unabashedly leftist quarterly, eulogized Pete Seeger, a former member of the Communist Party, by writing, “It’s not that Seeger did a lot of good despite his longtime ties to the Communist Party; he did a lot of good because he was a communist.”⁹ In *New Politics*, Dan La Botz refuted Sunkara’s claim by arguing that this genre of historical analysis serves only to discredit contemporary Marxist critiques. This is not to suggest that Communists in the first half of the twentieth century did not hold progressive ideals, particularly regarding such issues as race and labor. Even if many American Communists did attempt to fight for labor and minority rights, however, they ultimately undermined these efforts by subordinating them to the Soviet Union’s Communist line. Rather than accept Sunkara’s analysis, La Botz argues, we should shed light on Marxist theory and

⁶ Paul Buhle, *C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary* (New York: Verso, 1988), 71.

⁷ Christopher Hitchens, “C.L.R. James: Mid Off, Not Right On,” *Times Literary Supplement*, January 18, 2002.

⁸ Martin Glaberman, introduction to *Marxism for Our Times: C.L.R. James on Revolutionary Organization* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), xv.

⁹ Bhaskar Sunkara, “In Defense of Pete Seeger, American communist,” *Al Jazeera*, 29 January 2014.

practice that remained unfettered by the directives of an oppressive, murderous, top-down government.¹⁰

Much of the scholarship that dismisses James' placement of blacks in the vanguard obscures the significant theoretical contribution of an avowed Marxist who remained bound to nothing but his own conscience and interpretation of Marxist-Leninist theory. James, himself, was aware of the addition that he, together with Trotsky, had made to the American radical landscape: "We claim particularly that our special theoretical contribution to the Marxist understanding of the Negro question, is that the Negro's place is not at the tail but in the very vanguard of the revolutionary struggle against capitalism."¹¹ Moreover, this argument was not transient—he continued to profess this role of the black proletariat until the United States deported him in 1953. Following James' 1948 speech "The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in US"—the last time James explicitly mentioned the "vanguard" prior to his deportation—Simon Owens, a black stamping machine operator from Detroit, recalled: "I never was so shocked and so happy in all my life...That was complete for me. I couldn't see how I could even think of leaving the party after hearing him."¹²

This essay will, first, illuminate James' conception of the vanguard. Scholars who have asserted his abandonment thereof have found reason to do so, and I will try to clarify the space between James' philosophy and their extrapolations. The pages to

¹⁰ Dan La Botz, "Learn—like Seeger did—To Sing Another Tune," *New Politics*, 11 February 2014.

¹¹ C.L.R. James, "The Negro Question," *Socialist Appeal*, October 17, 1939.

¹² Jacqueline Jones, *A Dreadful Deceit: The Myth of Race from the Colonial Era to Obama's America* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 263-4. Simon Owens is referred to, elsewhere, as Charles Denby.

follow also strive to shed light on the ways in which James' philosophy remained disconnected from American reality. The New Deal was already an unprecedented shift to the left for many Americans in the 1930s, and yet James believed that a revolution much more radical in nature was not far off. What inspired him to think that socialism would take root in the United States?

The first chapter will focus on James' arguments for black opposition to World War II. By taking a stand against the United States government, James thought, African Americans would send a message globally that oppressed minorities were no longer bound to their capitalist oppressors. The second chapter will follow James to Southeast Missouri where, in 1942, he reported on a sharecroppers' strike, and drafted a pamphlet on behalf of the black sharecroppers that called for higher wages and a solidarity with their white counterparts. By doing this, James proved that he had remained faithful to points on which he and Trotsky had agreed in 1939. Not only were black workers crucial to the revolutionary movement, but Trotskyists needed to work with them to bring them into the socialist, revolutionary movement without forcing rigid Marxist doctrine on them right away. The third chapter will show that James looked to the industrial scene in 1940s Detroit for hope that the black proletariat would assume its role in the vanguard. It will also attempt to explain why, despite James' use of the term "vanguard" through 1948, scholars have determined his abandonment thereof.

Chapter 1: Against the Arsenal of 'Democracy'

“Nevertheless, if even we are agreed on the necessity of uniting the Negro masses against the war, many American Negroes will say: “I agree with the Socialist Workers Party that the 15,000,000 Negroes in America have as their natural allies in the 150 million Negroes in the world and the millions of Indians, Burmese, Ceylonese, etc. If we all join together, that would be an immense force acting on a world scale. It is true that the imperialists are so hard pressed for men and forces that they are arming and training these millions of colonials. But nevertheless we remain only 15,000,000 out of a population of some 130 million people. The Africans in Africa, the Indians in India will be concerned with their own struggles. We wish them well. But how can we here struggle against the vast numbers and the great power that are opposed to us?”

It is a very good question, and the answer to it brings us to the very heart of the matter.”

—C.L.R. James, ‘Why Negroes Should Oppose the War,’ 1939

C.L.R. James had not intended to stay. Following his arrival in October 1938, he would travel through a dozen American cities, hold forth on the decline of the British Empire, and promptly return to England in time for the spring start of the cricket season. Yet, as James proved his ability to captivate audiences, “with his graceful yet forceful platform style and his ability to clarify the issues on hand,” the Socialist Workers Party knew that it would be a mistake to let him go.¹³ In addition to his lecture series “Twilight of the British Empire,” James soon began to speak to audiences about the black struggle. Although he was still not thoroughly familiar with African American history, his Pan-African background had already led him to write *A History of Negro Revolt* and *The Black Jacobins*, his seminal work on the Haitian Revolution. Hence, his command of transnational black history impressed his audiences, and particularly the African American listeners among them.¹⁴ During his penultimate stopover before meeting with Trotsky in Mexico, *Socialist Appeal* reported that “This was the most successful meeting

¹³ “Big Phila. Meeting Opens James Tour,” *Socialist Appeal*, 14 January 1939, 2.

¹⁴ “James Tour Continues With Striking Success,” *Socialist Appeal*, 28 January 1939, 2.

the Socialist Workers Party has supported here [in Fresno]. It laid the basis for party growth among both colored and white workers.”¹⁵

It was natural, then, that James would fuse his knowledge of Europe and his strengthening grasp of the black struggle in America in his first polemical attack against American capitalism. Because it would take place on a global scale—and therefore attract global attention—James believed that the looming war would give the American working class a rare opportunity to galvanize international revolutionary movements. He had faith in the CIO’s capacity to stimulate proletarian action. James thought, however, that another segment of the American population was even better positioned to tap the revolutionary reserves of oppressed classes around the world: African Americans, and particularly the black proletariat. Because they had suffered the most at the hands of American capitalism, James believed that they would, with unrivaled fervor, challenge the government that maintained this system.

Origins of Distrust

James had grown contemptuous of American and Western European foreign policy even before he immigrated to the United States. As a member of the British Independent Labour Party, he had followed closely the incipient stages of conflict between Benito Mussolini and Stanley Baldwin, and denounced both for their imperialist actions in Ethiopia. Linking what he believed were the barely distinguishable aims of Italy and England in what was then Abyssinia, James wrote, “Musso the Monkey put his

¹⁵ “Many Negroes Attend James Fresno Meeting,” *Socialist Appeal*, 7 March 1939, 2.

fingers into the fire, but the British lion has snatched the nut.”¹⁶ For James, Italian fascism and British ‘democratic’ capitalism represented two sides of the same imperialist coin. England was not alone, however, in pursuing this sort of insidious foreign policy—the League of Nations’ culpability ran equally deep. The League had formed in the first place ostensibly to defend the sovereignty of nations like Ethiopia, but ended up as a “cloak for the machinations of Imperialism which needed some protection against the wide-spread horror of war and the distrust of Imperialism engendered by the war.”¹⁷ The western European members were in collusion, as far as James was concerned, and should not be trusted when they declared war for allegedly humanitarian reasons.

From James’ vantage point, Italy, England, and the League of Nations were not the only villains. In the 1935 Ethiopia conflict, the American government had an opportunity to prove itself as a defender of democracy and the Soviet Union had a chance to prove that it would, consistent with its *raison d’être*, defend the victims of imperialist capitalism. Both countries not only failed to protect Ethiopia—they indirectly contributed to the Italian offensive. Roosevelt, technically inhibited by the Neutrality Acts to provide arms or assistance to either belligerent nation, nevertheless allowed American energy companies to continue providing oil to Italy at the height of its aggression in Ethiopia. The Soviet Union did the same. By the time James traveled to the U.S. in 1938, he was predisposed to trust neither Roosevelt nor Stalin.¹⁸

¹⁶ C.L.R. James, “Intervening in Abyssinia,” *The New Leader*, October 4, 1935.

¹⁷ C.L.R. James, “I.L.P. Abyssian Policy,” *Controversy: Internal Discussion Organ of the I.L.P.* October 1935.

¹⁸ *Ibid*

Taking up the Fight

James began to call for African American dissent soon after he met with Trotsky in April. In his 1939 pamphlet “Why Negroes Should Oppose the War,” James constructed an extensive dialectic between the hypothetical arguments that FDR and the American government would make, followed by the questions and counterarguments that African Americans would—and should—make.

Central to the hypothetical debate was the notion that African Americans, by participating in the war, would gain further acceptance into the American democratic system. James reminded readers that African Americans held out similar hopes during the First World War, when the American government sent black soldiers into war at a proportionally greater rate than their white counterparts. Meanwhile, army divisions remained segregated and African Americans received the worst compensation, housing, food, and medical treatment. James concluded, “This was the way in which the American ruling class fought side by side with Negroes in the great war for ‘democracy’... What happened to the Negroes, after this fine showing, should be branded on the forehead of any so-called Negro leader who tries to thrust them again into war.”¹⁹ Treatment of blacks, James recalled, was outrageous both during and after the war. They would be naïve to expect better should the U.S. enter intervene again.

James did not, however, solely inveigh against the government. He recognized that standing up to Roosevelt and refusing to fight seemed an unimaginably daunting task. He thus shifted his tone: “What then is the Negro to do?”²⁰ The task, James believed, was daunting primarily because African Americans comprised a racial minority,

¹⁹ J.R. Johnson, “Why Negroes Should Oppose the War,” *Pioneer Publishers* (1939).

²⁰ *Ibid*

and if they planned and organized along racial lines, there would be virtually no chance of a successful challenge to the American government:

Poor as the majority of Negroes are, and despised and humiliated as all of them are...there is a small number of Negroes who have better jobs than the others, who have managed to climb onto a little ledge, a little higher than the rest of their fellow-Negroes...They will complain, and pass resolutions, and sometimes will carry a case to the courts. But because they get something between fifty and eighty dollars a week, they are prepared to do anything that the American ruling class really wants them to do.²¹

African Americans could assume a position in the vanguard, but they would have to fend off the temptation to support insurrection along racial—and not class—lines. The black petit bourgeoisie could be as insidious as the white, James warned, and it would be as capable of luring them into the war. Black workers had more in common with the victims of European imperialism than with the black bourgeoisie in America. Therefore, they should conceptualize the conflict in international, class-based terms:

There are well over three hundred and fifty million people in India today, and the large majority of them are just awaiting their chance to get arms in their hands, drive the British imperialists into the sea, and make their country their own again. The same in Burma, in Ceylon, and everywhere. So that from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, you have over five hundred million people, oppressed colonials, who are thinking in terms of freedom from the domination of imperialism. Imagine the enormous power which these colonials can exert for their own

²¹ *Ibid*

emancipation in the tremendous crisis which has been loosed upon all peoples in the world.²²

Although this still did not explain exactly how African Americans should ignite a successful rebellion, it reframed the answer in a radical way. James was drawing on his Marxist-Leninist principles to impress a deeper sense of international solidarity upon his readers.

In addition to transnational solidarity, James emphasized the importance of transracial solidarity within the United States. Black Americans, James argued, could not simply “stand aside in the coming war,” as a *Pittsburgh Courier* editorial had suggested six months earlier. As much as they would like to watch the white, capitalist superpowers drive one another to extinction, this was not plausible, James argued.²³ He understood that it was only a matter of time before the American government would compel them to fight. The most effective way to preempt this would be the unification of black and white workers in a mass opposition to FDR. He was not oblivious to white workers’ frequent hostility toward or rejection of their black counterparts. Affiliates of the American Federation of Labor, for example, continued to exclude black workers even into the 1940s.²⁴ The AFL’s counterpart, however, the Congress of Industrial Organizations had demonstrated that it was among the most progressive and integrated institutions in the

²² *Ibid*

²³ J.R. Johnson, ‘The Negro Question,’ *Socialist Appeal*, 20 October 1939, 3; “Ringside Seat,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 25 March 1939.

²⁴ A. Philip Randolph, in whom James would soon place his confidence, chastised the AFL in December 1941 for failing to make good on its promise of “brotherhood, freedom and democracy” by continuing to discriminate against black workers (See: William P. Jones, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights* [New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013], 29).

United States. This gave James hope for a stronger coalition of black and white workers.²⁵

James concluded by reiterating a point on which he and Trotsky had agreed: African Americans were a crucial component of the vanguard. “In all this difficult work,” he wrote, “the Negroes of America must take the lead.”²⁶ Protesting the war constituted a definitive first step of the revolution and it was the most direct means by which African Americans could demonstrate their rejection of the American capitalist system.

Trotskyism and the War

In April 1940, the Socialist Workers Party split into two factions. The group that kept the Socialist Workers Party name followed James Cannon, who, though he disapproved of Stalin, believed that the Soviet Union was still a revolutionary country, only mired in corrupt leadership. The other faction, now called the Workers Party, followed Max Shachtman and Martin Abern, who concluded that the Soviet Union operated not on worker-driven socialism, but rather a state-capitalist system. In spite of the fact that Trotsky held the former view, James gravitated toward the Shachtman-Abern coalition.²⁷

It was because of the increasingly inevitable prospect of war that this latent difference finally exposed itself. In its first issue of *Socialist Appeal* following the split, the SWP indicated that “The majority upheld our fundamental program for unconditional

²⁵ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright, 2013), 175.

²⁶ Johnson, “Why Negroes Should Oppose the War”

²⁷ Farrukh Dhondy, *C.L.R. James: Cricket, the Caribbean, and the World Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001), 22-23.

defense of the Soviet Union as in no way incompatible with irreconcilable struggle for the overthrow of the Stalin bureaucracy.”²⁸ The revolutionary nature of the USSR was still salvageable, according the Trotskyist group led by Cannon. The SWP would work to depose Stalin following the war, but in the meantime, it was necessary to preserve whatever gains made during the 1917 Revolution that remained.²⁹ The Workers Party, led by Shachtman and Abern, disagreed. They argued that the Soviet Union had, in the process of allying itself with Germany, integrated itself among the capitalist aggressors. By “acting primarily as an agent of German imperialism” and “fighting a war of bureaucratic expansion, of subjugation and oppression of other peoples,” Russia’s involvement, they deemed, was reactionary. From this, it followed that “instead of the class consciousness of the workers being heightened, their bourgeois-patriotic feelings are intensified.”³⁰ Finally, citing Gallup polls that showed an increasingly war-wary American public, Dwight McDonald noted a trend that the Workers Party should pay close attention to: “The interests of American capitalism require our participation in the

²⁸ “SWP Reaffirms Policy of Defense of USSR,” *Socialist Appeal*, April 13, 1940, 1.

²⁹ In *A People’s History of the United States*, Howard Zinn writes: “Only one organized group opposed the war unequivocally. This was the Socialist Workers Party” (Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* [New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005], 420). This *Socialist Appeal* editorial indicates otherwise. Rather, the socialist group that was unequivocally opposed was the Workers Party.

³⁰ Max Shachtman, ‘The Soviet Union and the World War,’ *New Internationalist*, April 1940, 69-70; In his biography of James, Farrukh Dhondy writes: “The leader of the Party, James Cannon, supported by Trotsky himself, was ranged against a faction of young comrades led by Max Shachtman and Martin Abern in a dispute which was not, as might be expected, about whether to enter the war or not. The dispute was about how to describe the Soviet Union” (63). At this stage, however, these were one and the same. The August 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact precipitated the debate within the Socialist Workers Party over whether or not to support the Soviet Union in the Second World War. The *Socialist Appeal*, in the days leading up to this debate, reported: “The convention will take a definitive stand on the question of the attitude to take towards the Soviet Union in the unfolding war. This question has been up for discussion for the past six months...” (See Farrukh Dhondy, *CLR James: Cricket, the Caribbean, and World Revolution* [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001], 63; and “SWP Convention Opens in N.Y. To Settle Dispute on Russian Question and Map Campaign of Trade Union Work,” *Socialist Appeal*, April 6, 1940, 1).

war. But there is an increasingly powerful pressure of mass sentiment against participation.”³¹

Theoretical Conflicts

As Germany grew stronger and the odds of American intervention increased, James became even more vocal in his advocacy for black opposition to the war. By the summer of 1940, calls for conscription rang out across the United States. England had recently passed a mandatory service law in the Emergency Powers Defense Bill on May 22, and it seemed as though the U.S. would soon follow suit.³² James was well prepared, as usual, to denounce the American government:

The immediate fight is conscription. The Negroes, who more than any other people in the world know what a thundering lie capitalist democracy is, must join every other organized attempt of the working-class to block, impede and prevent this monstrous tyranny that the capitalists want to impose on us. No conscription! Down with conscription!³³

James was not alone in his outrage. The Selective Training and Service Act, ultimately passed in September, was the first peacetime conscription law in American history, and a significant number of Americans were wary of joining the ranks of Germany, the Soviet Union, and Japan who, over the course of the previous decade, had all enacted mandatory service laws of their own.³⁴

³¹ Dwight McDonald, “The United States at War,” *New Internationalist*, April 1940, 74.

³² Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, 310.

³³ J.R. Johnson, “We Must Fight Against Any Kind of Enslavement,” *Labor Action*, August 19, 1940, 4.

³⁴ Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, 310.

At the same time, James called for equal access to military ranks between white and black soldiers. Ignoring any possible contradiction between his opposition to the war and conscription and a demand for equal rights in the military, James vehemently criticized the system of class hierarchy in the army: “When the capitalist keeps the Negro out of the navy, does not want him to be an officer in the army, does not want him to learn to fly, he is carrying on the class struggle – against the Negroes in particular and the working class in general.”³⁵ Here James proves theoretically inconsistent. This approach was realistic, but in no way radical.³⁶ Elsewhere, James had criticized and would continue to criticize reformism, but that is exactly what he was advocating here. From a revolutionary perspective, James was wasting print space to argue for concessions, when he should have been using it to explain, in less abstract terms, how blacks could successfully oppose the war. In the “Plans for the Negro Organization” that James presented to Trotsky in 1939, he had written: “Are we going to attempt to patch up capitalism or break it? On the war question there can be no compromise.” Now, he was compromising.³⁷

James faced his second quandary as the defense industry grew. Contracts proliferated because the United States was preparing itself for war, one that James was ever-ready to condemn. The working class, however, had suffered for a decade, and it desperately needed whatever relief it could get. Somewhat thinly, James summarized his case: “So they go round and round, piling up the weapons of destruction until they are ready to blow the poor people on earth to pieces. But still, there are going to be jobs. And

³⁵ Johnson, “We Must Fight Against Any Kind of Enslavement,” 4.

³⁶ This was, as we will see, precisely the aim of the NAACP.

³⁷ George Breitman, ed., *Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination*, 58.

where there are going to be jobs, there the Negroes must be.”³⁸ Nearly 11 months earlier, he had censured this line of thinking, when a *Pittsburgh Courier* editorial argued that African Americans should support the war lest they lose out on its lucrative side-effects. “The great extermination of imperialism by which Negroes were to enter into the promised land has now shrunk into a war to help get jobs for Negroes,” James wrote sarcastically. “You never know where you are with a petty-bourgeois.”³⁹ James was walking a thin line in the fall of 1940, when he articulated a position that was nearly identical to that of the *Pittsburgh Courier* editorial. James would have shuddered had someone attached to his argument the label “petty-bourgeois,” and yet there seems to be little difference between the two.⁴⁰

These contradictions present us with an almost unanswerable question that could be asked similarly of many radicals in American history. First, did James—as an astute observer who probably knew that an anti-war stance was unviable—aggressively push his opposition arguments primarily because he hoped to expand the leftist side of this dialectic? Did he merely want to expose the democratic excuse for belligerence as a bald-faced lie? If so, these contradictions would be more understandable. If, however, James truly believed that blacks would—and should—protest the war to the end, then he leaves us with an unexplainable cognitive dissonance in his call for military integration and access to defense industry jobs.

³⁸ J.R. Johnson, “The Negro Must Have His Share of the New Jobs,” *Labor Action*, September 16, 1940, 4.

³⁹ J.R. Johnson, ‘The Negro Question,’ *Socialist Appeal*, 24 October, 1939, 3.

⁴⁰ A tenuous case could be made that while the *Pittsburgh Courier*’s argument in the fall of 1939 was opportunist, James’ argument in the fall of 1940 was merely defeatist given the growing likelihood that America would intervene. This is still fairly feeble and James did make this case anyhow.

Randolph and Roosevelt

When, in June 1939, James wrote, “The Negro must be won for socialism,” another, more prominent black socialist was working assiduously for the economic advancement of African Americans. Though not identical, the revolutionary philosophies of C.L.R. James and A. Philip Randolph were strikingly similar. Randolph, 11 years James’ senior, had used the pages of his radical publication, *The Messenger*, to denounce American entry into World War I. Moreover, like James, Randolph was contemptuous of both the Garvey movement and the Communist Party. It is no surprise, then, that James saw in Randolph the leader that the black proletariat badly needed and deserved.⁴¹

Unlike James, Randolph had already risen to national prominence, and by the summer of 1940, he had Eleanor Roosevelt’s attention. Like James, Randolph wanted African Americans to take advantage of the booming war industry, and after he alluded to this at one of his Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters meetings, where the First Lady sat in attendance, she went to her husband and persuaded him to set up a meeting with Randolph.⁴² In September, FDR acquiesced and met with Randolph, T. Arnold Hill of the National Urban League and Walter White of the NAACP. The president, however, rejected their demand for an integrated defense industry, whereupon the civil rights leaders decided to take matters into their own hands. By December, Randolph had

⁴¹ William P. Jones, *The March on Washington*, 5-20. Cornelius Bynum reaffirms that Randolph’s dislike for Garvey was rooted in his skepticism of movements for black empowerment that hinged on race rather than class. Bynum does point out, however, that the Garvey movement forced Randolph to think more about the racial aspect of the black struggle.

⁴² Calvin Craig Miller, *A. Philip Randolph and the African American Labor Movement* (Greensboro, N.C.: Morgan Reynolds, 2005), 86.

developed a blueprint for the March on Washington Movement that would, he hoped, compel the president to agree to their terms.⁴³

Randolph's decision to exclude white progressives from the movement was one example of a divergence with James.⁴⁴ Cornelius Bynum writes that Randolph thought "Negroes must first 'depend on Negroes to fight the battle of Negroes.'" Each minority, Randolph believed, had to pursue its own self-interest. He concluded that "If a white person was allowed to join the MOWM, he would gain no right he did not already possess before he joined."⁴⁵ James would have disagreed. Even if the white worker stood to gain no immediate, palpable benefit for himself, he would have taken another crucial step toward the solidarity between white and black workers, which would, in turn, increase their collective leverage. Even if blacks were in the forefront of the revolutionary movement, they could not carry out the revolution alone.

Still, James continued to champion Randolph's cause. In June 1941, he published a series of articles advocating mass participation in the march. In the first article of June 9, James wrote, "The plan of a march on Washington by thousands of Negroes is one of the best political ideas that has appeared in this country since the war has begun."⁴⁶ Because he focused primarily on the courage that standing up to Roosevelt would require, James did not preoccupy himself with the segregationist nature of the march. The precise means and demands were not nearly as important as the general aim of galvanizing a

⁴³ Cornelius L. Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 164-5.

⁴⁴ Randolph chose to exclude whites, in large part, because he feared that Communists would commandeer the March and use it for their own purposes (See Kenneth Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP* [New York: The New Press, 2003], 254).

⁴⁵ Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 166-7.

⁴⁶ J.R. Johnson, "We Must Strike a Mighty Blow at Jim-Crow Now," *Labor Action*, June 9, 1941, 4.

movement against the president of a capitalist democracy. One week later, he confirmed this:

Properly organized, this march will be an international event of the first importance. To every oppressed nationality in Europe, to a hundred million in Africa, to Indians and Chinese, such a march brings home precisely what the world situation is revolving around. Is man going to be more free or less free?⁴⁷

James' belief in the black vanguard was front and center. As a revolutionary force, African Americans represented more than merely one segment of one country pushing for their own self-interests. These interests were undoubtedly important, but for James, they were secondary to the interests of the international revolutionary workers' movement. Because James took this broad view of the black proletariat's role in the global revolution he was bound to be disappointed when Randolph used his leverage to focus his efforts on what seemed to benefit African Americans—and other non-white races—alone.

The Communist Party's True Colors

As far as James was concerned, the CPUSA had never been a true ally to anyone but the Comintern. In an August 1939 essay, James outlined the recent history of its relationship with African Americans:

The CP passed through three stages in its Negro work: (a) up to 1928 when the Negro work was neglected, (b) 1929-35 when it made a drive, the period of which coincided with the period of [denouncing all other left currents as] social-fascism,

⁴⁷ J.R. Johnson, "All Out July 1 for the March on Washington," *Labor Action*, June 16, 1941, 4.

and (c) 1935-39, the open abandonment of the revolutionary line by the CP and the catastrophic loss of nearly all its Negro membership.⁴⁸

On August 23, 1939, eight days after James published this essay, the Soviet Union and German foreign ministers agreed on a non-aggression pact between the two countries. CP members like lawyer William L. Patterson defended this pact by asserting that it “does not mean that the Soviets endorse fascism any more than the signing of such a pact with the United States would mean that the Soviets suddenly endorsed lynching [and] Jim Crowism.”⁴⁹ For a short while after the American Communist Party adopted a non-interventionist approach, James and his Stalinist counterparts would use very similar language to malign the war.⁵⁰

This lasted until the summer of 1941. In June, novelist and Communist Richard Wright embraced Randolph’s March on Washington and approached CP leaders Ben Davis and James Ford about writing an essay that would promote the march. Sure that they would share his enthusiasm, he was shocked when they scolded him and told him to leave politics to the Party’s leadership. On June 22, the Nazis had invaded the Soviet Union, and the Party line, unbeknownst to Wright, had shifted back to support of American intervention. In her biography of Richard Wright, Constance Webb concluded, “The truth was, Richard thought, the Communists had decided to abandon the pressure for freedom for the Negro because it might interfere with the war effort.”⁵¹ Although

⁴⁸ J.R. Johnson, “The Negro Question,” *Socialist Appeal*, August 15, 1939, 3.

⁴⁹ Gerald Horne, *Black Revolutionary: William Patterson and the Globalization of the African American Freedom Struggle* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 86.

⁵⁰ Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 110.

⁵¹ Constance Webb, *Richard Wright: A Biography* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1968), 155. I first found mention of Richard Wright’s turbulent relationship with the Communist Party in Glenda Gilmore’s *Defying Dixie*, where she cites Webb. I feel compelled to acknowledge, however, that Webb’s account may

James had already loathed Stalinists for a half-decade, this new “zigzag” only further reinforced James’s conviction that the Communist Party did not primarily align its interests with defending African Americans or any other class subordinate to the capitalists.

A March Deferred

When Randolph reneged on his commitment to lead a March on Washington in late June, James rebuked what, in his view, amounted to a capitulation to Roosevelt and betrayal both of African Americans and the global working class. Prior to the accord made between Randolph and Roosevelt, James had warned his readers of the latter’s “notorious tricks” referring, perhaps, to the tenuous concessions made by Roosevelt five months earlier. Randolph, Walter White of the NAACP, and T. Arnold Hill of the National Urban League had originally met with Roosevelt in the fall of 1940 to secure a guarantee that the president would desegregate the military and war industries. Although Roosevelt had rejected this proposal, he ultimately agreed, in January, to increase training opportunities for African Americans.⁵² Therefore, when Roosevelt wrote a letter to the Office of Production Management, calling for desegregation of the war industries, in the hopes of appeasing Randolph and the estimated thousands of demonstrators who would march on Washington, James, on June 23rd, wrote, “Now this is exactly what Roosevelt

be biased given her relationship with C.L.R. James and the American Trotskyist Movement. Unfortunately, the majority of those who have chronicled James’ Communist contemporaries have largely ignored their reaction to the proposed March on Washington in 1941. This section, therefore, must rely heavily on Webb’s account.

⁵² Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 357.

has been doing to Negroes for years. And a Negro who lets that fool him is a dope; in big letters: D-O-P-E.”⁵³

So when Randolph did just that, James joined those whom he had previously called “radical or pseudo-radical” in denouncing Randolph, White, Crosswaith “and the rest in this latest action of theirs” as “stooges for the American ruling class.”⁵⁴ It did not matter to James that Randolph had extracted an Executive Order from the President—despite the fact it represented the first Executive Order issued on behalf of black Americans since Reconstruction.⁵⁵ Even if James had fully digested the historical significance of this, he still would have found at least three faults with the boast. First, it had primarily racial—and not proletarian—implications. Second, these were reformist—and not revolutionary—concessions. Third, Randolph and Roosevelt had come to an agreement behind relatively closed doors, which did not have the effect that a mass demonstration would have had. A deal reached by phone could not fill the pages of an international press with pictures of thousands of revolutionary African Americans voicing their opposition against an oppressive, capitalist government.

A week later, James still had not finished with Randolph and his collaborators. He fulminated: “The worst traitors and enemies are always the traitors and enemies inside the camp. Today at the head of the traitors is Philip Randolph with his two assistants, Walter White of the NAACP and Frank Crosswaith of the Socialist Party.”⁵⁶ That White would succumb did not surprise James, who had disparaged the NAACP in the past and, in his article of July 14th, recapitulated his belief that the organization’s allegiance to the

⁵³ J.R. Johnson, “FDR’s Latest Trick Is So Old It’s Moth-Eaten,” *Labor Action*, June 23, 1941, 4.

⁵⁴ J.R. Johnson, “Beware of Those Pushing You Into the War,” *Labor Action*, July 7, 1941, 4.

⁵⁵ William P. Jones, *The March on Washington*, 39.

⁵⁶ J.R. Johnson, “Negroes, We Can Depend Only on Ourselves!” *Labor Action*, July 14, 1941, 4.

government took precedence over its allegiance to African Americans. That Randolph, on the other hand, gave in struck a more serious blow to James' confidence in the rise of the working class in a common struggle against Roosevelt. Randolph, unlike NAACP leaders, had never represented bourgeois interests in the first place. Rather, James lamented, "Randolph had organized the Pullman porters, the best labor organization that Negroes have today. The struggles of Negroes are first and foremost labor struggles, particularly the struggle for jobs in the war industries. So everybody looked to Randolph."⁵⁷

James was likely bound to be disappointed with the March on Washington's results from the beginning. Its authors had not intended to wield the threat of a mass march as a revolutionary tool. Rather, Roosevelt and White had a specific set of objectives that the march would achieve.

For Randolph, and especially not for White, the March was not primarily a step toward revolution. Although Randolph believed that it would have wider rippling effects, his principal objective was to see the end of discrimination against blacks in the military and wartime industries.⁵⁸ James was too busy considering the potentially international consequences of the March on Washington to focus on what Randolph would do if Roosevelt acquiesced to his specific demands.

James' program of African American opposition to the war died with Randolph's decision to cancel the March on Washington. Although he held out hope that another

⁵⁷ *Ibid*

⁵⁸ This becomes more evident in light of the fact that Randolph offered to call off the March in mid-June in exchange for Roosevelt's pledge to issue an Executive Order banning discrimination in these industries.

group of African Americans would coalesce and resume the work that Randolph had started, the United States—African Americans included—had come to accept a potential American intervention. James would have to look elsewhere for the revolutionary spark that he was still sure could be found in America. A few weeks after Randolph called the march off, James had nursed his wounds and was ready to reenter the ring: “[Roosevelt] has won the first round in the fight. Without Randolph and White he couldn’t have won. But the fight isn’t over. It is just the beginning.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ J.R. Johnson, “Negro Protest Runs Too Deep to Be Squashed,” *Labor Action*, July 21, 1941, 4.

Chapter 2: 'Down with the Starvation Wages in South-East Missouri'

Take the following dialogue. A farmer is asked if he isn't concerned about the fear that Hitler may bomb his house.

"That shack!" he replies with scorn. "That shack should have been bombed 50 years ago."

"But the bomb may kill you."

"What does it matter? I get six bits a day, when I work."

- C.L.R. James, 'What Is It the Sharecropper Fights For?', 29 September 1941

Three months had yet to pass when James found more fertile, revolutionary ground. In Mississippi County, Missouri, sharecroppers continued to protest the mass evictions that white landowners had issued for nearly two years. Taking advantage of the chinks in the Agricultural Adjustment Act's armor, these landowners had begun to reduce their labor, leaving thousands of former tenants without homes and land to farm. They attributed sharecropper layoffs to increased mechanization, and subsequently began to rely more heavily on wage workers and tractors than on sharecroppers who rented land and equipment from them.⁶⁰

Since the mid-1930s, several unions had, with varying degrees of success, insinuated themselves into the sharecropper cause. Black and white farmers, between 1937 and 1942, turned at various times to the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU), the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and its affiliate, the United Cannery and Allied Packers and Agricultural Workers of America (UCAPAWA). These organizations,

⁶⁰ For a lucid history of the sharecroppers in southeast Missouri, see: Jared Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

however, had difficulties attracting and retaining the sharecroppers' allegiances largely due to the incompetent or precarious support they offered the destitute farmers.⁶¹

Thus, in September of 1941, James began to apply his socialist remedy to the Missouri sharecroppers' plight. Not technically part of the Jim Crow south, Missouri nevertheless had enough in common with neighboring Arkansas, Tennessee, and Kentucky that success there might spread across its southern borders. Moreover, these sharecroppers had garnered national attention since the early stages of evictions. A triumphant campaign, James hoped, would galvanize oppressed farmers throughout the southern United States.

James' engagement with the Missouri sharecroppers began in the fall of 1941 and would culminate in the spring of 1942. This experience shaped his formulation of the revolutionary forefront in two ways. First, it began to show him the corruptible, bureaucratic elements of organized labor. Two years earlier, James had praised the CIO as a revolutionary force. Throughout the strike—and particularly at the local level—it would occasionally exhibit this potential. It also, however, manifested some of the negative tendencies that James would later come to despise. Second, the sharecroppers' strike persuaded James that black laborers remained crucial to the revolutionary vanguard.

Radicalism and the South

The southern United States had been on the radical left's radar for more than twenty years. As early as 1919, Russia's political leaders, operating through the

⁶¹ *Ibid*

Communist International, had begun to look for foreign outposts of revolutionary activity.⁶² The American South, with its scant unions and industry, and its internationally notorious oppression of African Americans, appeared to be a promising place to start. The Comintern therefore invited Southern African Americans to travel to Moscow in order to learn about the tenets of Communism. This opened a dialogue between black America and Communist Russia that would last more than two decades.⁶³

Disagreements regarding African American self-determination added to the early turbulence both within American Communist organizations and within the Third International. Although he initially viewed self-determination as “far-fetched and not consonant with American reality,” Harry Haywood, in an illuminating example of the Russian influence on American Communists, was soon convinced that this was the best solution for African Americans after all. N. Nasanov, a Russian Communist, persuaded Haywood that blacks comprised an oppressed nation within the United States. Haywood coupled this insight with the response of many African Americans to Garveyism, and decided that the Communist Party should harness this energy rather than allow another “Back to Africa” movement to rise from the ashes.⁶⁴ Joseph Stalin, crucially, supported self-determination. Therefore, despite the fact that other black Americans—including Haywood’s brother Otto Hall, who called this “criminally stupid”—protested, the Comintern officially adopted the line of self-determination.⁶⁵

⁶² Also referred to as the Comintern and Third International

⁶³ Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 30-57.

⁶⁴ Harry Haywood, *A Black Communist in the Freedom Struggle: The Life of Harry Haywood*, ed. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 138-143.

⁶⁵ Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 30-57.

By the fall of 1941, when he began to advocate for a sharecroppers' strike in Southeast Missouri, James had already decided that self-determination was among the least effective channels of African American and proletarian empowerment. This did not, however, prevent him from sharing the Comintern view that southern, agrarian African Americans represented a revolutionary segment of the United States. In his first report on the strike, James wrote that "Despite the most vicious exploitation, despite terror—yes, actual, real terror—and despite starkest oppression, these are men whose spirits have not been broken, who stand ready to fight with every worker against class tyranny."⁶⁶ Although the Declaration of Independence's promise of equality was illusory throughout the United States, nowhere was it more so than in the South.

Failed Support

James did not travel to Missouri right away. He remained in New York throughout the fall of 1941, where he began to report remotely on the sharecroppers' plight. In a series of articles which James wrote for *Labor Action* between September 22nd and October 6th, he sketched a short history of the sharecroppers' clash with the white landowners, and outlined the inefficacies of the local and federal institutions that should have assisted the sharecroppers. Much like the Bolsheviks who exempted themselves from any serious involvement in the provisional government following the February Revolution, and who therefore attacked it without inviting any blame for failed governance, James could assail the government's miscues in Missouri without being

⁶⁶ J.R. Johnson, "Sharecroppers Fight Poverty & Oppression," *Labor Action*, September 22, 1941, 3.

criticized for any hypothetical steps he would have taken had he been there over the previous two years—and had he been in a position of power.

James launched his first attack on the Agricultural Adjustment Act, a staple of Roosevelt’s New Deal legislation. On September 22, 1941, he wrote, “To enrich the soil one third of the crop was to be plowed under and soil conservation payments were made to the landlord, providing that the money advanced by the government should be shared by the farmer. On paper it was beautiful.”⁶⁷ Indeed, the AAA seemed to be an ingenious piece of legislation. The government would pay farmers not to plant parts of their crop, which would curb surplus, and increase the value of the crops they did plant. The law, however, was riddled with flaws that the Roosevelt Administration had not foreseen. Among those, James highlighted the one that had a particularly significant impact on sharecroppers:

By 1938 the landlord calculated that if he had no tenant farmers and no sharecroppers he would not have to divide the government’s subsidy with anybody. The sharecropper’s contract is from January to December, and in January 1939 the landlords in southeast Missouri gave notice to the sharecroppers to vacate by January 10.⁶⁸

It was not enough that the government had established a subsidy that was, by mandate, to be shared between the landowner and the sharecropper. Because the Roosevelt Administration did not enforce this, and because it did not hold local authorities

⁶⁷ J.R. Johnson, “Sharecroppers Fight Poverty & Oppression,” 3.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*; As Jared Roll points out, the Roosevelt Administration passed a second iteration of the AAA following the *United States v. Butler* decision that ruled the AAA of 1933 unconstitutional. Although the government designed the AAA of 1938 such that it would prevent the kind of manipulation that James alluded to, the legislation nevertheless retained substantial flaws that allowed landowners to take advantage of their tenants. Either James was not aware of the passage of a second AAA or he conflated the AAA of 1933 and that of 1938 due to their similar deficiencies.

accountable, it was complicit in the ongoing exploitation of sharecroppers. James was not about to give FDR the benefit of the doubt, and the perceived failure of the AAA had provided him yet another reason to distrust the federal government.

James also found fault with the locally prominent preacher and sharecropper Owen Whitfield. Whitfield, who had farmed in Mississippi County since 1923, joined the newly formed Southern Tenant Farmers' Union in 1936, after one of its representatives, Rev. Claude Williams, held a meeting at Whitfield's church in Deventer. The black pastor soon emerged as one of the union's most charismatic leaders, and, bearing this responsibility, he began to agitate on behalf of the sharecroppers in Mississippi County. In 1937, the STFU appointed him a part-time organizer in Missouri, which outraged the ousted organizer John Handcox who warned that Whitfield would not be able to simultaneously fulfill his duties as a pastor, farm, and organize sharecroppers.⁶⁹

James was aware of Whitfield's leadership abilities. He credited the Missourian with carrying out a roadside demonstration that the STFU had planned and the evicted sharecroppers executed three years earlier. Calling the demonstration "a complete success" and "a landmark in the history of the class struggle in America," James was undeniably pleased with Whitfield's potential as a revolutionary leader. Nevertheless, Whitfield's recent political maneuvers had left a bad taste in James' mouth. In the midst of a senatorial campaign, Missouri Governor Lloyd Stark reached out to Whitfield, hoping to dissuade him from organizing another demonstration.⁷⁰ Stark, promising 10,000

⁶⁹ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 100-111.

⁷⁰ Stark's opponent in the senatorial race was the future president Harry Truman, who promised to alter federal subsidy laws to prevent further mass evictions. When, however, white landowners refuted the notion that the demonstrators were evicted tenants, both Stark and Truman backed away from their prior support (See: Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal* [Chapel Hill: University Press of North Carolina, 1971], 181-2).

houses and ten acres of land for each sharecropping family, had attempted to coerce John Moore, a black leader in the Missouri Agricultural Workers Council, to drop the idea for a demonstration prior to meeting with Whitfield. When Moore refused, Governor Stark, undeterred, “got hold of Whitfield at the Park Plaza Hotel, having paid all his expenses back from his tour, with cigars included. Where Moore had held firm, Whitfield capitulated and agreed to call off the projected demonstration.” Furthermore, instead of the 10,000 houses and ten acres of land that were to comprise La Forge Farms, the government had, by September 1941, only furnished the sharecroppers with 500 houses, with access to a meager three-quarters of an acre each.⁷¹

Recounting Whitfield’s capitulation, James must have experienced a painful feeling of déjà vu. Like Randolph, Whitfield had had a propitious opportunity to place better demands before the government and like Randolph, he negotiated, James thought, too quickly.

The Leftist Landscape in Southeast Missouri

James was far from the only leftist on the ground when he arrived in Missouri in 1942. He meditated on them less than on Whitfield and La Forge, but he was nevertheless aware of the political alliances in the sharecroppers’ strike prior to his departure for Missouri. He knew of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU), for example, formed in 1934. He was slightly more familiar with the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing,

⁷¹ Johnson, “Sharecroppers Fight Poverty & Oppression,” 3; Jared Roll casts a more positive light on Whitfield’s achievement. Following the meeting with Gov. Stark, Roll indicates, Whitfield “wrote directly to President Roosevelt to protest the Bootheel evictions and demand that the federal government prevent more from occurring.” Following this, FSA representatives began to discuss problems in the Bootheel with Whitfield, and the FSA concomitantly conceived La Forge Farms (123).

and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), into which “the Stalinists of the CIO demanded as a condition that the strikers enter.”⁷² With these forces already entrenched in the tenants’ labor movement, what could James offer that the STFU, CIO, and UCAPAWA could not?

First, the STFU’s impact in the Bootheel had significantly diminished. Ever since 1938, when it had failed to attenuate the first round of evictions, the union grew increasingly subservient to the UCAPAWA, an outgrowth of the CIO, founded by Donald Henderson in 1937. Although initially reluctant to withdraw from the STFU, local activists gradually shifted their allegiance to the larger, more robust CIO, and by extension the UCAPAWA. Moreover, Henderson expelled the STFU from the UCAPAWA in February 1937, leaving its members the choice to join his union or remain in the enfeebled STFU. Whitfield, who had worked with both the STFU and UCAPAWA in the previous few years, aimed to fill the void left by a crippled STFU, and thus helped form the Missouri Agricultural Workers’ Council (MAWC). It is plausible that the consolidation of trade unions would have made James’ efforts unnecessary. Had one, unified negotiating force presented itself as a cohesive and competent opponent to the white landowners, the local sharecroppers might not have felt compelled to turn to an outside voice. Instead, because these unions remained splintered and because they answered to different leadership, James would find space to inject his own agenda—at least in part.⁷³

⁷² Johnson, “Sharecroppers Fight Poverty & Oppression,” 3.

⁷³ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 150-1.

The War's Impact on Labor

If John L. Lewis' resignation as president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in November 1941 had signaled an increasingly hawkish CIO, the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 further confirmed this trend. Although the CIO was not a Communist Party front organization, Communists filled its ranks. Reflecting the Communist Party's about-face concerning a U.S. intervention in the war, the CIO's Communists began to call for support for FDR's interventionist program. The majority of the labor movement now held this view, and the ensuing months saw a decline in dissent within the CIO.⁷⁴

Whitfield refused to genuflect before the Roosevelt Administration so easily. Even after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, the pastor focused more on the war's implications for negotiating leverage than on the need for farm laborers to stand behind Roosevelt. His correspondence with Washington officials took on a tone of admonition rather than one of support, warning that African Americans, without better treatment, would become increasingly radicalized. In some ways, Whitfield's calls for labor strikes became more frequent and intense in the ensuing months.⁷⁵

Laboratory for the Cotton South

Such was the scene when James arrived in 1942. Although accounts vary regarding the exact timeline of his stay in the Bootheel, James found himself in Missouri

⁷⁴ Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 42, 64.

⁷⁵ Erik S. Gellman and Jarod Roll. *The Gospel of the Working Class: Labor's Southern Prophets in New Deal America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 122.

no later than April of 1942.⁷⁶ On April 18, H.L. Mitchell, a co-founder of the STFU, wrote to his colleague J.E. Clayton:

There is some trouble brewing up there and around Sikeston. Whitfield doesn't seem to be doing anything but some Negro who is a Trotskyite communist has been in there and is trying to get something started for UCAPAWA.⁷⁷

Indeed, James had met with local union activists in the hopes of launching another strike. Seizing on Whitfield's notion that cotton choppers—among other farm laborers—had gained leverage since the attack on Pearl Harbor, James decided to publish a pamphlet that would articulate the farmers' grievances, desires, and strategy. The pamphlet, entitled 'Down with the Starvation Wages in South-East Missouri,' expressed the farmers' three priorities in very simple terms: 30 cents an hour for ten hours of daily labor; 45 cents for tractor drivers; and time and a half for overtime. Echoing James' earlier denunciations of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, the pamphlet stated, "The Government said it would help the croppers through the A.A.A. The landlord made us into day laborers and stole the money we should have got."⁷⁸ This specific reference to the AAA served to remind the farmers and unionists that the government and the New Deal had largely failed them. Whereas many African Americans appreciated FDR for the

⁷⁶ In Kent Worcester's chronology, the strike that James supported took place in May 1941. This strike did not, in reality, take place until May 1942. Paul Buhle indicates that James was there in the spring of 1942, but did not actually organize the strikers. Consuelo Lopez is alone in suggesting that James arrived as early as September of 1941, when he began to publish articles on southeast Missouri in *Labor Action*. This is plausible, but cannot be confirmed because Lopez cites his sources thusly: "Taken from a conversation with C.L.R. James. Location, date, and name of interviewer are unavailable. Transcript in the possession of the author." Lopez's 1983 dissertation remains unpublished. Lastly, Farrukh Dhondy claims that, at the end of 1941, James traveled around the South, and in early 1942, he settled in southeast Missouri. This chapter takes Dhondy's and Buhle's chronology as most accurate.

⁷⁷ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*; Although James' black Workers Party colleague Ernest Rice McKinney was also in Missouri at this time, but he does not seem to have collaborated with the local branch of the UCAPAWA as James did.

⁷⁸ "Down with the Starvation Wages in South-East Missouri," *Local 313, U.C.A.P.A.W.A.—C.I.O.*, undated,

benefits he had extended to them since 1933, compared to halfhearted efforts of previous presidents, this pamphlet reinforced the argument that the Roosevelt Administration had not done all that it could.⁷⁹

If farmers wanted to gain these concessions, they had to follow the pamphlet's most basic prescription:

To win these demands is simple. You must join the union. The old locals must be revived. New locals must be formed. If even you haven't a charter, call a meeting, write for a charter, saying you will pay afterwards, and begin to function like a local. All you have to do is to get in contact with Local No. 313, Lilbourn, South Delmo Project. The U.C.A.P.A.W.A. gave us full authority to fight and if need be strike to raise our wages. Bring everybody from your district in.⁸⁰

Given the UCAPAWA's Communist affiliations, why would James approve of such a statement, much less transcribe it? Even if he was willing to collaborate with non-Trotskyist organizations, his open-mindedness surely stopped short of collaboration with Stalinists. It is therefore likely that both James and the Local No. 313 considered this pamphlet a break with the UCAPAWA national leadership, because, in fact, Donald Henderson had given them no such authority. A Communist, Henderson supported the wartime no-strike pledge that CIO members had offered to Roosevelt. In light of this allegiance to the American government—and to the Comintern—Henderson counseled the MAWC to seek alternative channels by which to increase wages for farm laborers. He

⁷⁹ In his essay, 'The Impact of the New Deal on Black Southerners,' Harvard Sitkoff suggests that black southerners glorified Roosevelt "on the basis of what they believed could be and has been rather than damning him on a standard of what might be" (*The New Deal and the South: essays*, James C. Cobb and Michael V. Namorato, eds. [Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1984], 128).

⁸⁰ "Down with the Starvation Wages in South-East Missouri"

suggested, for example, that the council turn to Missouri representatives, like the Southern Democrat Orville Zimmerman. This was unsuccessful, however, and Henderson therefore advised the Local 313 to formulate a pamphlet listing the unionists' demands. Even though the Local 313, with James' help, ultimately did this, they were also intent on launching a strike, which Henderson had forbidden.⁸¹

The pamphlet raised the race issue next. Given that the subscript on the pamphlet's title page read 'White and Colored Together'—and that the next page declared, in bold, 'Black and White Unite and Fight!'—confronting this was inevitable. A section entitled 'To the White Workers Especially' called for white farm laborers to join forces with their black brethren. It stated:

Brothers, you are workers just like we are. The landlords tell you not to join because we are Black. What we want is to unite with you in the union. Don't you want 30c an hour just like us? You want it as much as we want it. If we only join together and fight the landlords together, they will have to pay.⁸²

As contemptuous as he was of the UCAPAWA's Stalinist strains, James appreciated its integrationist efforts. The increasingly hawkish—and therefore complaisant—CIO was not capable of leading the sharecropper protest movement. Since its inception in 1935, however, it had demonstrated that it was willing—more than any other labor movement, at least—to join white and black Americans in a strong, integrated workers' coalition.⁸³ James had foreseen the importance of this solidarity in his meeting with Trotsky, even though the Russian revolutionary remained skeptical of white workers in the U.S. The

⁸¹ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 166-67.

⁸² "Down with the Starvation Wages in South-East Missouri"

⁸³ Ira Katzelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*, 175.

Roll also indicates that the STFU was not as racially progressive as the CIO (120).

pamphlet, in the spirit of Trotsky, placed the burden of unification on the African American sharecroppers. It was the black proletariat—not the white—that had to agitate for transracial solidarity.

This was not the first time that black farmers implored whites to join them in their common cause against the landowners. As little credit as James gave to Whitfield, the pastor had, four years earlier, told poor whites “you and I must unite for a higher standard of living through collective efforts and we can better our condition.”⁸⁴ On this point of class solidarity, James would have agreed with him.

Recalling Mexico

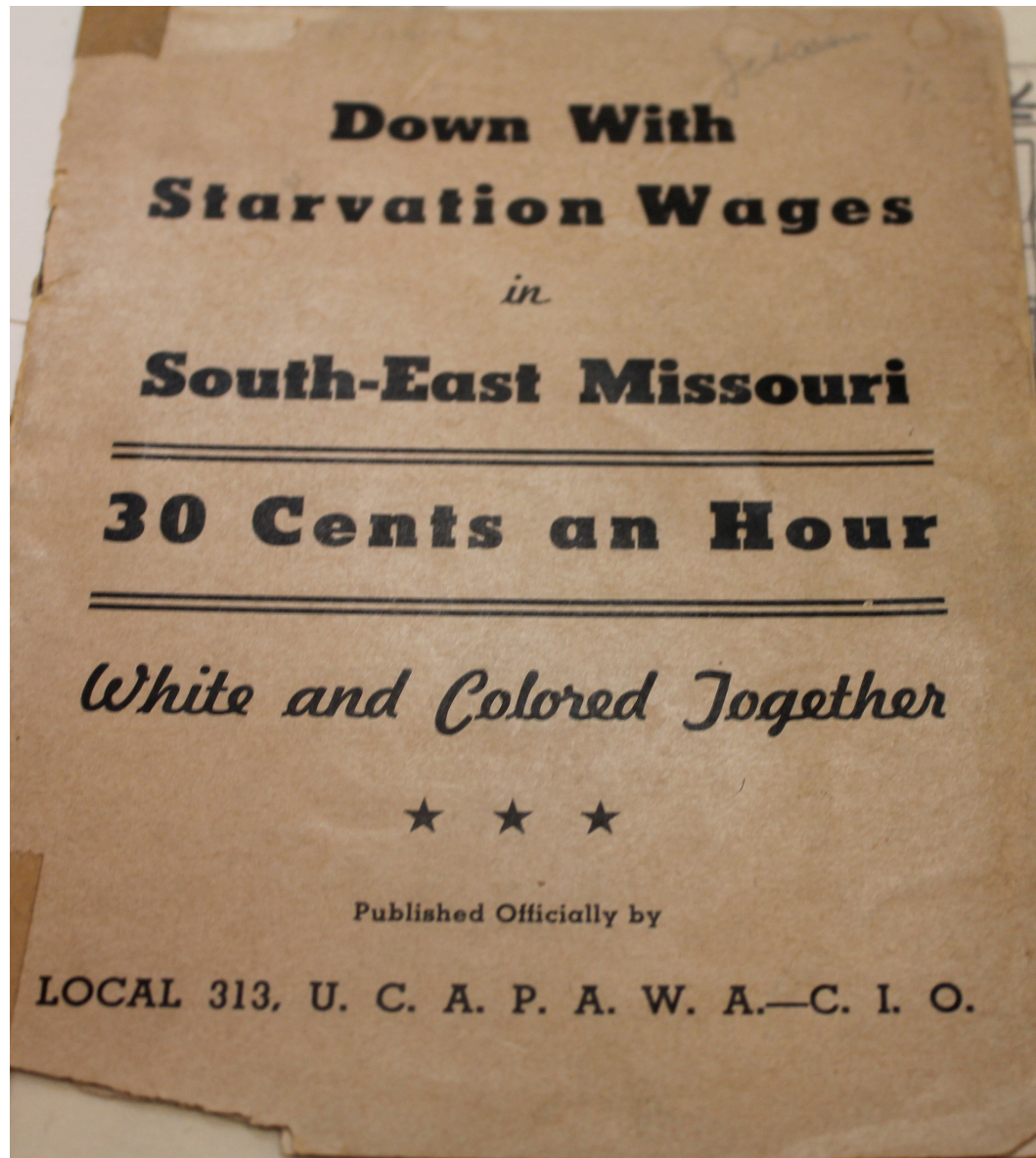
In his brief discussion of James’ stay in southeastern Missouri, Paul Buhle, a preeminent historian of American Marxism and James scholar, calls James’ views of the peasantry—referring to the sharecroppers—“unusual”.⁸⁵ Yet, James’ interest in black sharecroppers, and his decision to travel to Missouri to engage with them, follows naturally from his discussions with Trotsky in Mexico. James had said:

The danger of our advocating and injecting a policy of self-determination is that it is the surest way to divide and confuse the workers in the South. The white workers have centuries of prejudice to overcome, but at the present time many of them are working with the Negroes in the Southern sharecroppers’ union and with the rise of the struggle there is every possibility that they will overcome their age-long prejudices. But for us to propose that the Negro have this black state for

⁸⁴ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 121.

⁸⁵ Paul Buhle, *C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary*, 82.

himself is asking too much from the white workers, especially when the Negro himself is not making the same demand.⁸⁶



(C.L.R. James Papers, Columbia University Rare Book & Manuscript Collections)

⁸⁶ George Breitman, *Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination*, 26.

As early as April 1939, James recognized the revolutionary potential of southern sharecroppers. In order to fulfill this potential, he believed it was necessary for whites and blacks to work together, and although he ultimately supported the right to black self-determination, he thought it would be counterproductive if African Americans did not seek it themselves. They could, instead, serve a more important role within an integrated culture by inciting whites to work alongside them along class lines. This is precisely what, in May 1942, he helped the black Bootheel sharecroppers articulate in their pamphlet.

Another important contribution James made at the meeting in Mexico resurfaced in his advocacy in Missouri. He had told Trotsky,

In regard to the question of socialism in the agitational organ, it is my view that the organization should definitely establish itself as doing the day-to-day work of the Negroes in such a way that the masses of Negroes can take part in it before involving itself in discussions about socialism.⁸⁷

H.L. Mitchell had distinguished James as a “Trotskyite communist,” but James’ brand of socialism is not actually apparent in the pamphlet. Portions of the pamphlet even demonstrate that he was willing to undermine certain tenets of Marxism-Leninism in order to most accurately capture the tone of the local unionists.⁸⁸ The pamphlet, for example, devoted a section entirely to local preachers. It stated:

⁸⁷ *Ibid* 45

⁸⁸ James later recalled: “When it came time for us to have the strike, I called some of the leaders together and said, ‘We have to publish something, for everybody to read 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 know.’ I said, ‘I know nothing. This is your strike. You all are doing it, you have to go through it. I have helped you, but this pamphlet has to state what you have to say’” (C.L.R. James, *The Future in the Present: Selected Writings* [Westport, CT: L. Hill, 1977], 89).

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. We are worthy of 30c an hour. God helps those who help themselves. That is Scripture too. Solidarity in the Union, that is the way to get the Kingdom of Heaven upon Earth.⁸⁹

At first glance, it seems impossible that a true Marxist-Leninist would have written these words. There are two explanations for this, however. First, the pamphlet was not about proselytizing on behalf of Marxism. Instead, it was a fulfillment of James' idea that to gain African Americans' trust, Trotskyists had to assist them without demanding a strict adherence to Marxist-Leninist doctrine. (As if to further justify James' approach, Donald Henderson effectively alienated the unionists precisely because they suspected that he had prioritized the Communist line instead of the strikers' interests.⁹⁰) Second, James had acknowledged in his discussions with Trotsky that the SWP 'Negro Organization' should ally itself with any organization that had an authentic interest in black empowerment. Under "Practical Steps" of "Plans for the Negro Organization," James first declared that the SWP would "Mobilize a national campaign with every conceivable means of united front: AFL, CIO, SP, SWP, Negro churches, bourgeois organizations and all."⁹¹ This, of course, did not mean that the black vanguard would sacrifice its goals in order to appease religious organizations. It should, however, be willing to bring them into the movement provided they appear willing and able to learn from and assist the proletariat.

⁸⁹ "Down with the Starvation Wages in South-East Missouri"

⁹⁰ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 169.

⁹¹ Breitman, *Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination* 58.

Conclusion

Following the meeting in May, 8,000 laborers went on strike. Despite Henderson's denunciations of the strike leaders, they proceeded with the support of the St. Louis CIO Industrial Union Council. In July, the strikers won their demands.⁹² Furthermore, although the majority of the strikers were black, some local white farm laborers had joined the cause.⁹³ James was not single-handedly responsible for this victory, but his own contribution seemed to legitimize the tactics he proposed to Trotsky in April 1939. African Americans, together with an unrelenting local union, had called for and organized a successful strike against the white capitalist elite, and had enlisted white farm laborers to cooperate along class lines.

Still—and especially in light of his later criticisms of the CIO, discussed in the following chapter—one must ask whether the strike was truly revolutionary, and if James held himself to the same standard that he held A. Philip Randolph, and later, the CIO's leaders. Before the strike, farm workers in the Bootheel earned \$1.25 daily, and by strike's end, they had negotiated a daily wage between two and three dollars. This wage increase probably made a noticeable change in the day-to-day lives of the farm workers. It did not, however, offer a revolutionary answer to a farm labor landscape that saw tenants turn increasingly into wage laborers. James nevertheless concluded a year later: “[In Missouri] we could actually affect the lives of the workers. Since the strike in 1942, every worker in Missouri works ten hours a day and then goes home. Nothing will make

⁹² Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 168-70.

⁹³ Kent Worcester, *C.L.R. James: A Political Biography* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 72

him work longer.”⁹⁴ Unfortunately, James did not stick around long enough to see Orville Zimmerman—the same Congressman to whom Henderson had suggested the farm workers bring their grievances—gut the funding that the Farm Security Administration had provided for homes for Bootheel farmers in 1943 and 1944. In May 1944, one Southeast Missourian wrote to *Labor Action*, “Things haven’t changed very much on the farms today.”⁹⁵

James’ work in Southeast Missouri is important for at least one other reason. Nowhere on the pamphlet did the sharecroppers, through James, make any reference to the Workers Party. Furthermore, James was known among the sharecroppers as ‘Brother Williams’; he did not go by his name or any one of his many journalistic pseudonyms. These are not signs of a party or a revolutionary leader who saw themselves in a top-down, centralized, ‘vanguard party’. At first glance, this would seem to vindicate the common argument that James resented—or, at least, ignored—the legacy of strong organization both in Leninist and Trotskyist thought. James did, however, understand the value—and even vitality—of organization, the proof of which lies in his cooperation with and promotion of the Local 313. It just did not need to come from the ‘party’. Moreover, the Workers Party remained equally aware of organization’s role, while simultaneously not usurping power and posterity for itself. A *Labor Action* report from July 13, 1942 stated, “This is a landmark in the history of Missouri, and Local 313, which has led the whole fight, deserves above all to receive the rewards of their courage, their

⁹⁴ J.R. Johnson, “Education, Propaganda, Agitation: Postwar America and Bolshevism,” in *Marxism for Our Times: C.L.R. James on Revolutionary Organization*, ed. Martin Glaberman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 6.

⁹⁵ Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 173; “Missouri Farm Laborers Face Eviction,” *Labor Action*, 15 May 1944, 1.

determination and their splendid leadership.”⁹⁶ James would later qualify this by suggesting that both “Local 313 and the Trotskyites have credit for this,” but he wrote this for a specifically Trotskyist audience.⁹⁷ By this stage, it seems, James had already resigned himself to the idea that neither he nor the Workers Party lead the revolution. Instead, he would leave this task to African Americans and organized labor.

⁹⁶ “Lilbourn Project Croppers Win 30c Wage Scale,” *Labor Action*, 13 July 1942, 1.

⁹⁷ J.R. Johnson, “Education, Propaganda, Agitation: Postwar America and Bolshevism,” 6.

Chapter 3: The Portent of Motor City

“The backwardness and humiliation of the Negroes that shoved them into these industries, is the very thing which today is bringing them forward, and they are in the very vanguard of the proletarian movement from the very nature of the proletarian struggle itself. Now, how does this complicated interrelationship, this ‘Leninist’ interrelationship express itself? Henry Ford could write a very good thesis on that if he were so inclined.”

—C.L.R. James, “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States,” 1948

Detroit was thriving. The war, which James had ceaselessly condemned, continued to elevate the city to prosperous heights. Unions, it seemed, commanded at last the respect and clout they deserved, and thousands of migrant African Americans were finding better employment and housing than they had previously known in the South. This was the Detroit that many mid-century Americans saw through their rose-colored glasses. James was not among them.

As early as April 1941—even before trumpeting the MOWM’s virtues and embarking for Missouri—James began to grasp the importance of the Motor City. Detroit was, on one hand, home to the nation’s robust automobile companies. On the other, it generated some of the most combustible racial tension in the United States. While he waited for America to realize its revolutionary potential, James turned to Detroit both for an example of the Roosevelt administration’s most acute failures and for evidence of the revolutionary movement’s progress in spite of these failures. Although James found the outbreaks of violence against African Americans abhorrent, he reveled in the belief that they foretold revolution. In James’ view, the state-sponsored violence against blacks, epitomized in the 1943 riots, was approaching a level of oppression so overtly hypocritical—in light of America’s war against German racial supremacy—that African

Americans would be pushed further into the vanguard. Conversely, the 1940s labor landscape in Detroit forced James to confront the increasingly enervate nature the CIO. Between 1943 and 1953, when the U.S. finally deported him, James found in Detroit both a portrait of America's past and present and a herald of its future.

Bolstering the UAW-CIO

As A. Philip Randolph was preparing to bring his mass movement to FDR's doorstep, the United Auto Workers (UAW) was beginning to wage its own proletarian battle 500 miles away in Detroit. Aware of its still tenuous negotiating power with Detroit's auto companies, the union grasped the urgency of securing collective bargaining rights, which were anathema to Ford. The UAW-CIO was also aware that it needed the allegiance of black workers in order to launch a successful strike in the hopes of obtaining these rights. Now, the union had only to convince them that their fates were intertwined.⁹⁸

Like many radicals, James had long known this. He was, however, was unusually ambivalent about who would lead the charge against the capitalist oppressor, represented in this case by Ford. Both in Missouri and throughout the country, blacks were—and knew themselves to be—the most exploited class of the population. Therefore they had, according to James, the most revolutionary potential. In the Ford plants, however, this was not so obvious.

In the wake of World War I, Henry Ford revolutionized American industry. He had already established himself as a leader in American automobile manufacturing, but as

⁹⁸ August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York: Oxford University Press), 71.

early as the 1920s, he began to dissolve traditional racial divides in industry and became one of the largest employers of African Americans in the United States. Ford made a tacit compact—a “bond of interdependency,” as Beth Tompkins Bates calls it—with black Detroit. By 1940, African Americans comprised almost 12 percent of Ford employees and half of all black laborers in the automobile industry nationwide worked for Ford.⁹⁹

Henry Ford’s stature did not elude James. In *American Civilization*, he would write that the age of Ford represented the second of two globally significant epochs of American history. “Washington and Henry Ford,” he wrote, “are the symbols of American civilization.”¹⁰⁰ Moreover, James was acutely aware of Ford’s appeal among African Americans. He understood the persuasive force of Donald Marshall and other black ministers like Father Everard W. Daniel, who served Ford in black communities almost as faithfully as they served God. Daniel, for example, in response to an anti-Ford speech given by A. Philip Randolph, asked if anyone could “show him an industrialist who has done more for colored labor than Henry Ford.”¹⁰¹ While James found this line of argument only superficially sound, it did not prevent him from seething that “Ford is one of the most dangerous enemies of labor who exist in this country.”¹⁰² He knew that Ford’s roots were firmly planted in black Detroit, which would make it all the more difficult to tear them out of American society.

The UAW, by contrast, had failed to endear itself to Detroit’s black proletariat.

Theoretically and rhetorically, the union did not discriminate against African Americans,

⁹⁹ Beth Tompkins Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press), 4; Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 25.

¹⁰⁰ C.L.R. James, *American Civilization*, eds. Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers), 28.

¹⁰¹ Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford*, 221

¹⁰² J.R. Johnson, “Guard Against the Trap Set by Henry Ford,” *Labor Action*, April 14, 1941, 4.

but its actions, throughout the latter half of the 1930s, often spoke louder than its words. As August Meier points out, the UAW did little to mitigate racial discrimination in the auto plants, and it promoted a negligible number of black workers to elective and staff positions.¹⁰³

Beth Tompkins Bates further underlines a residual apprehension among African Americans toward unions on account of the AFL's discriminatory past. Compared to the AFL, the CIO and its affiliate, the UAW, were still young and less prominent. Bates suggests that blacks, therefore, considered the UAW "guilty of racism until it could prove itself innocent through new practices." This explains, then, why many black workers were initially hesitant to join the UAW's mission to organize Ford in 1940 and 1941.¹⁰⁴

Trotsky would have been sympathetic to this view. "But today," he told his American colleague Arne Swabeck in 1933, "the white workers in relation to the Negroes are the oppressors, scoundrels, who persecute the black and the yellow, hold them in contempt and lynch them." He continued, "I am absolutely sure that [the Negroes] will in any case fight better than the white workers."¹⁰⁵ James was more conciliatory toward the white labor class. He believed that whatever hostility white workers had shown toward black workers was not rooted in some innate chauvinism. Instead, factory owners or landowners had turned white and black laborers against one another in order to maintain a weak labor opposition. By using different wage scales for different races, capitalists reinforced the notion of white superiority among the workers. James believed that the role of the Trotskyists was to open both white and black workers' eyes to these tactics.

¹⁰³ Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, 72.

¹⁰⁴ Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford*, 208.

¹⁰⁵ George Breitman, *Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination*, 25.

Unified, they could both earn more even than white workers had until now “or overthrow the system altogether.”¹⁰⁶

Another possible explanation for this difference between Trotsky and James is that James began to form his ideas about the American revolutionary movement in 1938, after the CIO split from the AFL. The CIO, unlike the AFL, had taken steps to integrate the labor movement. Trotsky, in 1933, only had the AFL by which to assess the labor landscape in the United States.

Still, James grew impatient with black Ford employees for their hesitation. Like many black UAW organizers, James failed to understand how African Americans could pass up the chance to join a robust, working class movement:

The Negroes, despite their grievances, must take sides instantaneously with the union against Ford. Any Negro who attempts to scab will deserve all he gets.

This is no time for counting and rehashing what has been done and what ought to have been brought in.¹⁰⁷

James was equally firm with the UAW-CIO, however. He understood that the black workers at FMC were “anti-union” because their conditions at the company seemed better than anything the union could offer them. The unions, James wrote, “must see to it not only that Negroes are invited to join the union. That is not enough. They must convince the Negroes that they can look to the union for active concern about jobs for Negroes.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ J.R. Johnson, “The Negro Question,” *Socialist Appeal*, November 3, 1939, 3.

¹⁰⁷ Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, 77; Johnson, “Guard Against the Trap Set by Henry Ford,” 4.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson, “Guard Against the Trap Set by Henry Ford,” 4.

The successful UAW-organized strike in April 1941 ultimately proved the strength of a symbiotic relationship between black workers and organized labor. Since the fall of 1940, leaders of the National Negro Congress (NNC) and the NAACP had begun to advocate on behalf of the UAW in Detroit, despite the fact that the UAW had only half-heartedly advocated on behalf of black workers.¹⁰⁹ August Meier and Elliott Rudwick reaffirm this by writing that the UAW's president R.J. Thomas told the union's annual convention that they owed Detroit's black leaders a "great debt" for joining the black workers with the UAW, a solidarity which was crucial to the strike's success.¹¹⁰

The Sojourner Truth Conflict and its Aftermath

James had more than just unions on his mind, for he understood that more afflicted African Americans than what they experienced on the factory floor. On February 28, 1942, several black families moved into the newly opened Sojourner Truth housing project in the Seven Mile-Fenelon neighborhood of northeast Detroit. The Detroit Housing Commission and the United States Housing Association had drawn up plans for the two-hundred-unit housing project the previous year, and in doing so, incited deep resentment among the white residents of the Seven Mile-Fenelon neighborhood. Following a series of protests, federal officials and the Detroit Housing Commission briefly decided to place white residents in the Sojourner Truth project, before finally designating it a home for black war workers. When, in February 1942, these black families moved in, fights broke out between the black and white crowds that had gathered

¹⁰⁹ Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford*, 238-246.

¹¹⁰ Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, 102-3.

outside of the project. This altercation resulted in forty people injured, 220 arrested, and 109 in custody awaiting trial. The vast majority of these were black.¹¹¹

A little over a year after the Sojourner Truth clash, Detroit experienced what Thomas Sugrue calls “one of the worst riots in twentieth-century America.”¹¹² For three days, beginning on June 20, whites and blacks clashed, resulting in 34 deaths, 433 injuries, two million dollars worth of property damage, and the loss of one million war production hours.¹¹³ Black belligerents undeniably fought back as fiercely as their white counterparts.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, they suffered disproportionate casualties. Of the thirty-four who died, twenty-five were African American. Out of these, the police were responsible for seventeen.¹¹⁵ James criticized the policemen for firing their weapons, but he condemned more vehemently the Roosevelt Administration:

By the government’s action over the Sojourner Truth riots, by its refusal to take one single step to avert a crisis which everybody, and particularly the police, knew was on the way, the government had given the police a clear direction as to where the guns were to be pointed.¹¹⁶

Sugrue’s analysis largely vindicates James. Pointing out that the Detroit Housing Commission perpetuated segregation in public housing following the Sojourner Truth riot, Sugrue concludes that “white community groups learned to use the threat of

¹¹¹ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 73-74.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 29

¹¹³ Dominic J. Capreci and Martha Wilkerson, “The Detroit Rioters of 1943: A Reinterpretation,” *Michigan Historical Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Spring 1990, 52-53.

¹¹⁴ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010), 131.

¹¹⁵ Harvard Sitkoff, *Toward Freedom Land: The Long Struggle for Racial Equality in America* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 2010).

¹¹⁶ W.F. Carlton, “The Race Pogroms and the Negro,” *New International*, July 1943, 202.

imminent violence as a political tool to gain leverage in housing debates.”¹¹⁷ The government had genuflected before—however briefly—in the face of violent threats made by angry white Detroiters. Having set this precedent, why would it not do so again? Moreover, for those who, like James, believed that the capitalist class who systemically attempted to divide and conquer the lower classes, the government’s decision to allow the violence between white and black Detroiters to flare for three days without intervention only exacerbated this suspicion.

While James deplored the government’s response to the 1943 riot, he did not find African American participation in the riot reprehensible. Blacks had finally refused to submit before whites’ racial antagonism. Where Randolph and White had, in James’ view, proven weak and conciliatory, black Detroiters were courageous. Calling “his political line...impeccable,” James quoted an address given by Reverend Reverdy Ransom at the African Methodist Episcopal Church in New York two weeks before the Detroit riot: “I am tired of lying and compromising; we praise William Lloyd Garrison – he was a white man who died for the Negro – but Negroes must learn to die for themselves!”¹¹⁸ It seemed that gradualism had gotten African Americans nowhere. They remained segregated in the military; the efficacy of the Fair Employment Practices Commission—FDR’s main concession in his 1941 meeting with Randolph—was inconsistent; and police across the U.S. continued to arrest African Americans disproportionately compared to whites. Furthermore, violence was embedded in Marxism-

¹¹⁷ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 75; Although Sugrue mentions specifically the DHC here, he previously indicated that the USHA, together with the DHC, had wavered on this point even prior to the establishment of the Sojourner Truth projects.

¹¹⁸ Carlton, “The Race Pogroms and the Negro,” 203; Given that Garrison died of kidney disease in 1879, it is more likely that Ransom meant John Brown.

Leninism's DNA. James' foremost political model, Vladimir Lenin, had written in the midst of the Russian Civil War: "Marxists have never forgotten that violence must inevitably accompany the collapse of capitalism in its entirety and the birth of socialist society."¹¹⁹

Most important, however, the blatantly unjust system of control and adjudication would continue to push African Americans into the vanguard. Housing systems, both public and private were not excluding white workers. The police were not disproportionately arresting and killing white workers. The municipal and federal governments were not neglecting to intervene on behalf of white workers. This applied predominantly to blacks, and therefore it was up to them to overthrow the system that continued to oppress them. "If Negroes," James wrote,

depend upon the government, they are going to be dragged from trolleys and beaten up, they and their wives and children will be shot down by rioters and police, and their homes will be wrecked and burned. Furthermore, these riots are no passing phase. It even by some miracle they are held in check during the war, when the war is over they will burst forth with tenfold intensity.¹²⁰

The time had come to cease depending on the government. No one understood this better than black Americans, and thus they were in the best position to overthrow American capitalist governance.

¹¹⁹ Lenin, Extraordinary Seventh Congress of the R.C.P.: Section Nine, 1918 (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/7thcong/index.htm>)

¹²⁰ Carlton, "The Race Pogroms and the Negro," 203.

Consciousness and Spontaneity

As late as 1946, James continued to hold the CIO and the UAW in high esteem, despite occasional inconsistencies in their promise of equal assimilation of African Americans into the labor movement. Charged with counterbalancing the Goliaths that were the Ford Motor Company and General Motors, the UAW was especially important to the labor landscape in Detroit during the war. For this reason, James was intent on dispelling any fears among African Americans that the racially-based violence of the 1943 riots proved that all whites hated blacks. Following the riots, he wrote:

Some of these cowards and hangers-on to the Roosevelt government whisper that ‘we Negroes cannot fight the whole white population.’ The statement is a gross slander against tens of millions of white people in America and, above all, a slander against the CIO.¹²¹

Perpetuating this racial division within the working class was exactly what the capitalist race-baiters wanted, and James refused to grant them their pernicious wish. Furthermore, the CIO had proven itself a largely faithful ally to black workers for nearly a decade. James was not blind to the occasional instances of racial antagonism within the CIO, but the organization was a haven of solidarity much more often than not.¹²² Moreover, James knew that black workers would not be able to carry out a large-scale revolution without the assistance of a robust, national labor force like the CIO. They were in the revolutionary forefront, but primarily as a spontaneous segment. An organized coalition was also required to give structure to their deep, but presumably disorganized revolutionary energy. “The Negro activity,” James wrote in 1945, “will have only

¹²¹ *Ibid*, 204.

¹²² *Ibid*

incidental and unsatisfactory results if it does not finally stimulate the labor movement to enter into the struggle without reservations on all fronts.”¹²³ In a sense, by 1945, the CIO was as close to a Bolshevik Party equivalent as the United States had thus far seen. Just as the Bolshevik Party had been necessary to the 1917 Revolution, because it was capable of absorbing the masses’ energy and releasing it in a concerted way, the CIO was also vital to the socialist movement in America for similar reasons. Organization, in James’ view, was crucial to the success of the working class.

At the same time, James started to call for the creation of a Labor Party. Although he did not really explain why, all of a sudden, a new party distinct from the Workers Party was favorable—and even necessary—he had hinted at the reason two years earlier. Reflecting on the Bolshevik Party’s success in 1917, James concluded that it was

Rooted in the economic and social life, history and traditions of the nation. Its own class ideology is cast in the national mold and is an integral part of the national social structure...The Workers Party is not that. It is a long, long way from that.¹²⁴

This still does not illuminate the role that the Workers Party was to play in James’ revolutionary program. In that same essay, he wrote—conveniently for him, and unfortunately for us—that the articulation of this task was imminent.¹²⁵ The fact, however, that he believed there was a large political void to be filled by an independent Labor Party suggests that James understood how marginal the Workers Party was—and would continue to be. It would take care of socialist theory, which James saw as no small

¹²³ J.R. Johnson, “One-Tenth of the Nation,” *Labor Action*, August 13, 1945, 3.

¹²⁴ James, “Education, Propaganda, Agitation,” 16.

¹²⁵ *Ibid* 38.

task. He knew without a doubt, however, that this was insufficient for a truly revolutionary party. Therefore, the most prudent action that the black proletariat could take would be to “declare for a Labor Party and a workers’ government to be formed by organized labor.”¹²⁶

This explains, at least in part, why much scholarship has asserted James’ abandonment of the vanguard party. This is true insofar as James did not see the Workers Party as an equivalent to the Bolshevik Party. He did, however, grasp the crucial nature of an organized, robust, working class party that was capable of assimilating the most oppressed, spontaneous, and therefore revolutionary masses.

Losing Faith in the UAW

Towards the end of the decade, James’ impressions of the UAW finally began to sour. Any faith James initially had in the union’s ability to lead the working class to revolution had all but dissipated. As late as 1943, following the riots, he had seen Walter Reuther—and to a lesser extent, his boss, R.J. Thomas—as powerful allies for black workers.¹²⁷ Nevertheless, by the latter half of the decade, James had become increasingly critical of Reuther’s tenure.

In 1946, Walter Reuther defeated the UAW’s former president R.J. Thomas to become the union’s new leader, a transition James should have welcomed based on his earlier perceptions of the two men. From James’ perspective, however, Reuther was

¹²⁶ J.R. Johnson, “One-Tenth of the Nation,” *Labor Action*, January 8, 1945; “One-Tenth of the Nation,” *Labor Action*, September 24, 1945, 3.

¹²⁷ Carlton, “The Race Pogroms and the Negro,” 204.

allowing the UAW to degenerate into a toxic bureaucracy, which resulted in a feebler negotiating force between the workers and the industrialists.

Shortly after he assumed the UAW's presidency, for example, Reuther failed to secure an anti-discrimination clause in the workers' contract with General Motors. At the time, onlookers like George Crockett, who led the union's Fair Practices Department, thought Reuther had not been relentless enough on this point in his negotiations with GM. His union colleagues were not alone in their dismay. Black workers felt a palpable neglect on Reuther's part to advocate on their behalf.¹²⁸ Charles Denby, a black UAW member, recalled:

In the early days there was rarely a meeting that didn't mention something about our Negro brothers and sisters...Now, there is no such thing as our union leader bringing a problem facing our Negro brothers and sisters before the members as a whole to be discussed.¹²⁹

What had enervated the UAW to the point that it no longer fought as vigorously for black workers as it had promised to do in 1941? There is no definitive answer to this, but James diagnosed a deeper problem within the union, of which its weakened support for African Americans may have been a symptom.

In *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, James, along with his colleagues Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee, argued that because the CIO had not yet carried out its revolutionary potential, the proletariat risked forfeiting the clout it had begun to amass in

¹²⁸ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 102.

¹²⁹ Charles Denby, *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 146-7. Denby later joined *Correspondence*, the group formed by James and his colleagues Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee.

the 1930s. Due, in part, to the kind of bureaucratization that was swelling in the UAW, workers had once again lost their momentum. “The bureaucracy,” they wrote,

inevitably must substitute the struggle over consumption, higher wages, pensions, education, etc., for a struggle in production. This is the basis of the welfare state, the attempt to appease the workers with the fruit of labor when they seek the satisfaction in the work itself.¹³⁰

The subordination of “the satisfaction of work” to the “fruit of labor,” in other words, serves to numb the proletariat’s revolutionary fervor. James’ argument has its roots faithfully and firmly planted in Marx. In his “Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League,” the German theoretician affirmed that, by negotiating primarily for welfare measures, the petty bourgeois hopes “to bribe the workers with a more or less disguised form of alms and to break their revolutionary strength by temporarily rendering their situation tolerable.” The true revolutionary’s aim, Marx asserted, was not merely to “improve the existing society but to found a new one.”¹³¹ Even if Reuther might have argued that the UAW’s and the CIO’s tactics were slowly revolutionizing the United States, James had already shown that he was not interested in gradual change.

¹³⁰ C.L.R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee, *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013), 33.

¹³¹ Karl Marx, ‘Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League,’ March 1950 (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm>)



(From Left to Right: Grace Lee, C.L.R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya [undated];
C.L.R. James Papers, Columbia University Rare Book & Manuscript Collections)

Even so, their assessment of the UAW's decline was not entirely fair. Beginning in 1945, Reuther attempted to extract a deal from General Motors that would have forced them to open their books and increase workers' wages by 30 percent. Because GM received tax deductions from the government in the event of a strike, it could afford to withstand a workers' strike, and therefore had significant negotiating leverage. Even in spite of this, Reuther eventually forced a raise of 18.5 cents/hour, overtime pay, a more robust seniority clause, and paid vacations. He and GM negotiated an additional wage

provision in 1948 that accounted for cost of living adjustment. Reuther was not, after all, entirely impotent—but nor was he a revolutionary.¹³²

It was Walter Reuther's apparent capitulation in 1949 that most disturbed James. By this time, the Cold War had begun to occupy James' thoughts. The spread of Stalinism, he believed, threatened the American working class as much as it threatened American capital, but "that makes for no solidarity between American capital and American labor on this issue."¹³³ Were the Soviet Union to defeat overcome the U.S., it would only subjugate the American working class for its own imperialist aims. The spread of American capitalism was hardly preferable. This made it all the more important for American workers to maintain their strength and opposition to both oppressive regimes. "Don't be deceived or bought off," James wrote in 1949, "by the picayune concessions and hypocritical gestures being made by the American capitalists so that they can have a free hand for the cold war abroad."¹³⁴

In negotiations with Ford Motor Company representatives, Walter Reuther secured a more generous pension clause in the workers' contract. What he had neglected to address, however, were the workers' right to strike and labor standards. He had not made any effort to reverse the institutional damage done by the Taft-Hartley Act to labor. Instead, he was reinforcing the capitalist system by focusing on the least systemic concessions like pensions.¹³⁵ James compared the bureaucratization that followed from FMC's dominance to the bureaucratization that Stalin had nurtured in the Soviet Union.

¹³² John Barnard, *American Vanguard: The United Auto Workers During the Reuther Years, 1935-1970* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 212-219.

¹³³ J.R. Johnson, "The Stalinist Menace to World Labor," *Labor Action*, April 1, 1946, 3-M.

¹³⁴ J. Blake, "War and the Negro People," *Labor Action*, December 26, 1949, 3.

¹³⁵ James, *American Civilization*, 189-93

He concluded that the “Stalinist bureaucracy is the American bureaucracy carried to its ultimate and logical conclusion, both of them products of capitalist production in the epoch of state-capitalism.”¹³⁶

Trotsky had also deplored the kind of bureaucracy that Stalin embedded in the Soviet Union. First, it stunted the revolutionary progress made by the Bolsheviks. Second, and more important, it was “characterized by the suppression of the proletarian vanguard and the smashing of revolutionary internationalists.”¹³⁷ This illuminates Charles Denby’s claim that the UAW no longer sought to address black workers’ grievances as it once had. Using Trotsky’s framework, the UAW adopted the Stalinist bureaucracy, which hindered the black workers, who represented the spontaneous proletarian vanguard.

The Path of the Black Vanguard

By 1948, James had arrived at an important conclusion, one which has shaped much of the scholarship that addresses his ideas regarding organization. In his address to the Thirteenth Convention of the Socialist Workers Party, James declared:

We say, number 2, that this independent Negro movement is able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation, despite the face 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.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ James, *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, 35

¹³⁷ Leon Trotsky, “The Soviet Union Today,” *New International*, 1 February 1935. (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1935/02/ws-term-bon.htm>)

¹³⁸ J. Meyer, “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in U.S.,” *Fourth International*, December 1948, 243.

This seems to contradict his 1945 statement that black workers would not successfully overcome capitalist oppression if they failed to join forces with organized labor.¹³⁹ One cannot help but infer that this evolution in thought derives from James' disappointment in the UAW. Now that the union had proven itself too timid in its revolutionary progress, James saw no other alternative but to promote the forward motion of African Americans, regardless of whether or not this meant leaving organized labor behind. The latter would simply have to catch up. James proceeded, however, to add a crucial supplementary notion to this, one which, it seems, pundits have paid less attention to. Considering the relationship between African Americans and organized labor in Detroit during the war, James said,

If we can reflect on that, if we can constantly be on the alert to see these possibilities, the leadership, the fundamental leadership that organized labor can give to the Negro movement, the basic dependence of the Negro movement upon organized labor; but we can at the same time see the kind of leadership, the kind of stimulus, the kind of impetus, the kind of anticipation that *the Negro movement can give* to organized labor, then we shall be able to deal with all problems, not only the general problems outside, but the specific problems that the party will have to face.¹⁴⁰

How, in James' view, was the black worker supposed to move forward despite the lagging behind of bureaucratized labor? In *American Civilization*, he surprisingly neglected to prescribe any course of action for the black proletariat. In an

¹³⁹ See page 10 of this chapter (will be a different page when all are compiled)

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 247-248.

uncharacteristically staid reflection, he concluded that African Americans had already done much to change the American landscape. Notwithstanding this ultimate analysis, devoid of his typically polemical flair, his application of Marxism-Leninism to the black struggle did not subside in his last American years. James still believed that African Americans occupied strong position in the vanguard. In his 1949 essay “Road Ahead for the Negro Struggle,” James argued that by taking on accommodationists and joining forces with other workers, African Americans “can have a great future before them...and best of all, they can stimulate the proletariat to enter upon the scene once more and resume the struggle on a far higher plane than in the great days of the CIO to which we referred earlier.”¹⁴¹ How could they do this? Like many Marxist theoreticians before him, James would leave its interpretation to his heirs.

¹⁴¹ James, “Road Ahead in the Negro Struggle,” *Fourth International*, Vol. X No. 6, June 1949.

Conclusion

“One of my most important and pregnant experiences is my experience both personal and otherwise of West Indians and people of West Indian origin who have made their way on the broad stage of Western civilization...One of the tasks I have set myself is to make people understand what these men have done and their significance in world politics. In a substantial respect I am one of them, although I have not played the concrete role that they have played: I say that I am one of them because it means that I understand the type very well. And you are one.”

—C.L.R. James to Stokely Carmichael, 1967

In the fall of 1953, following his arrest for “passport violations” and a rejected application for citizenship, C.L.R. James was forced to leave the United States. He used the time between his arrest and his deportation to reflect on the totalitarian similarities between Captain Ahab and Joseph Stalin, the sum of which he published in *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*. He would later claim—surely in his typical, biting tone—that “Anyone who understands Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* cannot be considered un-American.” Apparently, the United States government did not agree.¹⁴²

In 1968, James was finally allowed to reenter the U.S., and he must have realized the irony that this year, together with 1953, bracketed what is arguably the height of black mobilization in American history. Still, if James was bitter that he missed the proliferation of civil rights victories and black radical groups, he did not show it. When he returned, he seemed content simply to, once again, insinuate himself among small, black radical groups and to lecture at universities across the country.¹⁴³

One of these groups owed its existence largely—albeit indirectly—to James. Based in Detroit, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers consisted of African

¹⁴² Kimathi Mohammed, “C.L.R. James’s Influence on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers,” in *The Theory of the Vanguard Party and its Application to the Black Movement in the U.S. Today* (Atlanta, GA: On Our Own Authority! Publishing, 2013), 79.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 96.

American auto workers, many of whom had read James' work and moved in the same circles as his disciples Grace Lee Boggs and Martin Glaberman. As early as 1974, Kimathi Mohammed, a black radical from Detroit, wrote: "Even though the national impact of the Black Panther Party was much greater than the League's impact, the potential of the League was much greater than the Panther's potential." The League's members, as auto workers, did not have to resort to "militaristic intimidation," but could instead employ what Kimathi deemed the "most powerful weapon" available to black workers: the strike.¹⁴⁴

Although he seemed to direct his critique at the militant tactics of Black Power groups, Mohammed repeatedly suggested that there was another, more substantial obstacle that hindered their nationwide success. Citing Huey Newton's desire to turn the Black Panthers into a "vanguard party," Mohammad noted that

instead of moving away from the notion of building a Marxist-Leninist Party, the Black Panthers sunk deeper into it. After memorizing these clichés, these upstarts went in the Black Panther Party went around quoting Marx and Lenin without understanding Marxist-Leninism, particularly its application to the Black movement in the United States.¹⁴⁵

The strength of black movements, Kimathi argued, lay in their spontaneity and once they began to replace this with a centralized organization—which he asserted was inextricably

¹⁴⁴ Kimathi Mohammed, "Organization and Spontaneity: The Theory of the Vanguard Party and its Application to the Black Movement in the U.S. today," in *The Theory of the Vanguard Party and its Application to the Black Movement in the U.S. Today* (Atlanta, GA: On Our Own Authority! Publishing, 2013), 55.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

bound to a “party ‘line’”—they were doomed to fail. For this reason, Kimathi resented what he believed was the legacy of the Leninist vanguard.¹⁴⁶

James believed that the Black Power movement was flawed, but for different reasons. He did not agree, for example, with the notion put forward by his compatriot Stokely Carmichael that black radicals could not work directly with the white working class.¹⁴⁷ In spite of this, James, reflecting on Carmichael in 1967, would proclaim that

[Black Power] represents the high peak of thought on the Negro question which has been going on for over half a century...The kind of impact the Negroes are making is due to the fact that they constitute a vanguard not only to the Third World, but constitute also that section of the United States which is most politically advanced.¹⁴⁸

When James, over the course of his first decade in the U.S., repeatedly used the “vanguard” to describe black Americans’ role in the overthrow of capitalism, he had a different definition in mind than Kimathi’s. This definition, furthermore, remained aligned with one of Lenin’s two principal notions of the vanguard, for despite the conclusions of Kimathi and other pundits, even the father of the Russian Revolution did not subscribe to a rigid, singular view of the vanguard. Instead, as the Indian political scientist Achin Vanaik persuasively argues, Lenin’s “vanguard” was polysemous. On one hand, it referred to the Party that would be responsible for educating the masses of workers. On the other, it signified the most advanced section of the workers

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 54.

¹⁴⁷ R.E.R. Bunce, “Obi B. Egbuna, C.L.R. James and the Birth of Black Power in Britain: Black Radicalism in Britain 1967-72,” *Twentieth Century British History*, November 9, 2010, 10-11.

¹⁴⁸ C.L.R. James, “Black Power,” in *The C.L.R. James Reader*, ed. Anna Grimshaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 367-8.

themselves.¹⁴⁹ In 1919, for example, Lenin wrote, “The Bolsheviks were victorious, first of all, because they had behind them the vast majority of the proletariat, which included the most class-conscious, energetic and revolutionary section, the real vanguard, of that class.”¹⁵⁰ The vanguard, for Lenin, described both the most organized and the most spontaneous elements of the revolutionary movement, and while he argued that the second occupied a subordinate role to the first, the two would nevertheless galvanize one another.

Following his departure from the U.S. in 1953, James felt compelled to address the legacy of a centralized, top-down party in Marxism-Leninism. Although he had never used the term in this way, for many disillusioned heirs of Leninism, the vanguard had come to represent the elitism that characterized the Bolshevik Party following the October Revolution. In 1963, James wrote,

The theory and practice of the vanguard party, of the one-party state, is not (repeat not) the central doctrine of Leninism. It is not the central doctrine, it is not even a special doctrine. It is not and it never was. In forty years it would be as easy to prove (and be equally wrong) that the United States of Europe had always been the central doctrine, or became a special doctrine, of the Tory party.¹⁵¹

Regardless of the extent to which this is revisionist, it is evident that James was not interested in a rigid, top-down vanguard party.¹⁵² He never had been. Even as early as

¹⁴⁹ Achin Vanaik, “In Defence of Leninism,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 13, 1986, 1640.

¹⁵⁰ V.I. Lenin, ‘The Constituent Assembly Elections and The Dictatorship of the Proletariat,’ 16 December 1919, *Collected Works, Volume 30*, 257.

¹⁵¹ C.L.R. James, “Lenin and the Vanguard Party,” *Controversy*, Vol. 1, No.3, Spring, 1963.

¹⁵² Matthew Quest asserts that this is entirely revisionist, but there is ample scholarship that would agree, at least in part, with James. See Quest: “Silences on the Suppression of Workers Self-Emancipation: Historical Problems with CLR James’s Interpretation of V.I. Lenin,” *Insurgent Notes*, 15 October 2012.

1944, he did not see the Workers Party as an American equivalent to the Bolshevik Party, and was content to watch from the sidelines as African Americans and members of the CIO led the proletariat forward. He did, however, seize the other notion of the “vanguard” that Lenin bequeathed to those among his heirs who still believed that some segments of the working class were more capable of igniting a revolutionary spark than others. For James, this would be comprised of African Americans, and especially the black proletariat.

James, like the Black Power movement, stood opposite a government which was not ready for radical ideas, and which had the force necessary to crush them. It is possible that even had James produced immaculately clear and consistent revolutionary theory he would have been suppressed by a larger American public, which has thus far proven itself opposed to change that is not gradual. Nevertheless, part of his inability to move American masses toward socialism can, without a doubt, be attributed to his own flaws. First, even before he arrived in America, he had failed to secure a visa that lasted longer than six months—and he failed to extend it. In the increasingly rabid anti-Communist politics—that seemed to catch in its net all iterations of Marxism—he would be forced to go underground or else face deportation. This was problematic for someone who was, it seems, a more convincing speaker than writer. Moreover, even though he did write several incisive critiques of American capitalism, there remained two problems. First, he was often inconsistent and abstract. His deductions often rested on assumptions, which were unclear, and which he did not care to thoroughly explain. It should go without saying that the most successful intellectuals are those who can explain their ideas clearly.

Second, he wrote for a series of small socialist publications, and he never published a work in America on par with *The Souls of Black Folk* or *The Fire Next Time*. Instead, he decided to pursue an lengthy, obscure analysis of Hegel. James was, it seems, content to remain on the periphery, and on the periphery is where he will likely remain.

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