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'Concrete Freedom': C.L.R. James on Culture and Black Politics

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Abstract: This article aims to provide a synoptic account of the cultural writings of the West Indian intellectual and activist C.L.R. James. I aim to make a case for greater recognition of his work among cultural sociologists. I go on to show how James' original, historicising account of cultural forms relates closely to his wider political interventions including, specifically, his ground-breaking discussion of mid-twentieth century black politics in America.

Introduction.<superscript>i</superscript>

This essay deals with the intellectual legacy of the West Indian writer and activist C.L.R. James. Recognition of the significance of James' work is somewhat uneven. In postcolonial and cultural studies, in the sociology of sport, and in historical work concerned with socialist, anti-imperial and anti-racist struggles, it is a long time since his ideas required an introduction. Moreover, as was the case during his life, he continues to attract a dedicated non-academic readership among those concerned with these same issues. In mainstream sociology, however, and even among sociologists of culture, James' work is not nearly such an established point of reference. He remains, for example, a figure notable by his absence from most textbooks of social theory (with some honourable exceptions: e.g. Lemert 2004). As a result, writing about James in the context of a journal of cultural sociology, one feels that one way or another one is headed for a faux-pas, either by naively introducing a writer who is already well-known, or by omitting the introduction that was in order.

However, there is perhaps an opportunity here to serve two purposes at once. If James' contributions are well-recognised in some areas, but less surely so in others, this is partly a reflection of the extraordinary diversity of his interests, which took in pioneering historical research, sports reporting, artistic and literary criticism, fictional writing and political polemic, among many other things. It is also a reflection, however, of the fact that subsequent commentary on James' work has not always sought to establish the continuities and inter-relationships between these different aspects of his work as clearly as it might have. As a number of those most responsible for bringing his work to the attention of a wider audience have argued, there is need to recognise the breadth, but also the conceptual unity, of James' concerns. A need, in

other words, to resist a 'fragmentation' of his intellectual legacy (Grimshaw 1992: introduction; Buhle 1986: introduction; c.f. Young 1999). One should be in solidarity with such efforts, it seems to me, not because James' thinking is perfectly of a piece or free of contradiction but because they are obviously true to what mattered most to him. He was a thinker who, as Neil Lazarus (1999: chapter 3) concludes, never stopped reaching for some kind of totality. In this respects, then, it does seem important to celebrate and defend that longing for 'integration', that desire to uncover 'correspondence' (to use two of his favourite words), which is such a clear and attractive part of the experience of reading James.

My intention in this essay, therefore, is to do two things. Firstly, to provide a short, synoptic account of what might justifiably be called James' cultural sociology. This will serve, I hope, as something of an introduction for a wider audience. I will suggest why his writing warrants the attention of anyone interested in thinking about the relationship between cultural practices, on the one hand, and wider socio-historical contexts, on the other. However, I also want to show how James' cultural writing bears on and is, indeed, inextricably connected with another of his central intellectual and political concerns: the nature and direction of black political struggle. Here, perhaps, a few words of further introduction are in order.

According to Scott McLemee, between 1938, when C.L.R. James published his ground-breaking study of the Haitian revolution, *The Black Jacobins,* and 1963, when he published *Beyond a Boundary,* his equally ground-breaking account of the politics of sport in the colonial world, 'a shadow falls' (1996: vii). In saying this, I presume, McLemee is referring to the relative lack of scholarly interest in James' work during the intervening period, during which time he was for the most part an expatriate in America, involved in grass-roots political organizing with both socialist

and black political movements. McLemee's assiduous research has certainly done much to shed light on that previously hidden period of James' career and has recovered many of the often pseudonymous writings that he produced in journals and party papers of the period. At the same time, I find the comment striking in more than one sense because *The Black Jacobins* and *Beyond a Boundary* are not only the major works which book-end James' sojourn in the United States. They are also emblematic of two distinct strands in his intellectual project: a concern, on the one hand, with understanding the nature of 'black' political action and a concern, already mentioned, with the sociological and historical analysis of culture. And between these two concerns, a shadow has also tended to fall.

My interest in this essay, then, is to provide an account of James' theory of cultural practices, but also to show how that account is coupled to his conception of black political struggle. It is, I will argue, by understanding James' theory of cultural form that we can better understand the groundbreaking position which he adopted with regard to that particular form of politics.[ii]

'The first and most important thing'.

In 1968, in the pages of the African literary studies journal *Transition* (also the context for other important debates over culture and politics: e.g. Wali 1963 and Okara 1963; Soyinka 1975 and Chinweizu et al 1975), James published his only public statement on the so-called d'Oliveira affair. The affair revolved around the initial failure of the MCC, English cricket's decision making body, to select Basil d'Oliveira for the English touring party due to leave for South Africa in 1968. The significance of the decision hinged on the fact that d'Oliveira was himself born in

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South Africa and was designated by the regime as 'coloured'. He had moved to England in 1960 and had proved his talent as a player at league and county levels and subsequently as a member of the English test side. His inclusion in the squad would have placed the South African government in a politically impossible position, requiring them to recognise both the presence and the ability of a player previously disqualified from the national stage on 'racial' grounds. The initial decision not to play him, despite a famous century against the touring Australians at the end of the 1968 season, was widely seen as being motivated, if not by outright racism, then by a desire on the part of members of the British establishment to retain cordial relations with Vorster's regime. The grubby details of the MCC's entanglement with the South African government is made clear in Peter Oborne's account of the events (2004).

What is striking, but absolutely typical, about James' response is that he begins his analysis not with a discussion of apartheid, nor of sport's political potential, but by stating unequivocally: 'The first and most important thing is to prove his [d'Oliveira's] status on the field of play' (1968: 37). James follows this with a long and equally typical tunnelling through the relevant cricketing statistics, analysing d'Oliveira's performances in detail and focussing on the character of his play, central to which is James' sense that he has proved himself 'the man to seize an occasion' (37). Only having done this, only having spent the majority of the article getting to grips with d'Oliveira's form (both in the sense of a record of achievement and in the sense of a distinctive style) does James move to the conclusion that his non-selection is unjustified and therefore 'a political demonstration [….] equivalent to an endorsement of the South African regime' (38). He ends by calling for the resignation of the selectors involved.

It is easy to overlook the fact that James' writings on culture almost always begin in this way, with close formal analysis of the game or text that is at hand. In *Beyond a* Boundary he asks the famous rhetorical question: 'What do they know of cricket that only cricket know'. This has become a well-thumbed motif and one which reflects a growing awareness of the lessons to be learned from James' sociological and historical interpretation of culture. Yet this motif threatens to conceal another, one which James repeated far more often: 'eyes on the ball'. That is to say, his insistence that the sociological interpretation of culture could only proceed *through* careful attention to cultural forms in themselves, and in their own terms. One could cite many examples here, but none is clearer that James' imperative opening to his essay on another great cricketer: Rohan Kanhai:

> The investigation […of…] any great cricketer should deal with his actual cricket, the way he bats and bowls and fields, does all or any of these. You may wander far from where you started, but unless you have your eyes constantly on the ball, in fact never take your eyes off it, you are soon writing not about cricket, but about yourself (or other people) and psychological or literary responses to the game. This can be and has been done quite brilliantly, adding a little something to literature but practically nothing to cricket, as little as the story of Jack and the Beanstalk (a great tale) adds to our knowledge of agriculture (1984 [1966]: 165).

The first lesson of James' discussion of culture, in other words, is that we can say nothing of value about cultural practices or indeed about their politicisation, if we begin with *a priori* assumptions. I have argued elsewhere that this is the basis of James' seemingly surprising embrace of cricket's ethic of otherworldly detachment from power and politics (Smith 2006). Culture can 'speak' socially or politically only insofar as it speaks successfully through the forms which it establishes. And James was true to his own injunction. As is often noted (e.g. Renton 2007: 129-130), his orchestration of the ultimately successful campaign to instate Frank Worrell as the

first black West Indian captain was marked by a careful refusal to summon up the racial politics which all parties knew were involved in the situation. Farrukh Dhondy charges James with disingenuousness in this respect (2001: 138), but read in the context of his wider work, including his response to the d'Oliveira affair, it is clear that his actions were motivated by his assumption that respect for the integrity of cultural practices was the precondition of their wider significance.

Further evidence of this is not hard to come by in James' writing, nor is the point limited to his discussion of sport. There is, for example, his analogous statement with regard to Walt Whitman that an adequate appreciation of his work must 'depend entirely upon his literature as literature. We shall have to watch *that* and by watching *that,* we shall be able to reconstruct the real Whitman' (1993: 51). James' reading of Whitman's form, at least of the long, liturgical lists of *Salut au Monde,* treats his poetry as an expressive failure. Whitman's repetitive hailing of the social world reveals, he says, a thwarted longing, the desire to reconcile a romantic individualism with a greater sociality. This was, in many respects, what James saw as the essential contradiction of American modernity in general. But James arrives at this conclusion only because he first interprets *Salut au Monde* as a failure in its own terms: it is the fact that it is 'ridiculous as poetry' (56) which provides the thread by which a sociological interpretation finds its way through a larger hermeneutic maze.

In many ways, of course, James' attentive attitude to art and literature, let alone spectator sports, was rather out of sync with in the milieu in which he moved, particularly in the forties and fifties. At times it placed his writings on culture in a somewhat tense relationship to the exigencies of political struggle. This emerges with particular clarity with regard to popular film. During his time in America, for example, James was instrumental in the formation of National Negro department of

the Socialist Workers' Party, and therefore presumably central to their efforts to campaign against the film *Gone With the Wind.* In an issue of *Socialist Appeal* from the end of 1939 the department – for which, probably, we can read 'James' – condemns the film as 'false from beginning to end', and 'as likely to stimulate old prejudices and hatreds which were the natural outcome of chattel slavery and which must continue on the basis of the sharecropping system today' (30th December, 1939).[iii] In a later statement James, writing under his pseudonym J.R. Johnson, specifically describes the film as 'dangerous' and deserving of a boycott (13th Jan, 1940). In the same article he goes on to castigate the Communist Party for their attempts to harness black discontent in various abortive film projects, a number of which involved Langston Hughes. Yet this is the same James that Dhondy reports as 'loving' *Gone With the Wind* (2001: 85) and who wrote to Constance Webb a few years later in 1943 that 'the rubbish I look at would astonish you. I can sit through almost anything. When it is very bad I see why it is bad […] The movies, even the most absurd Hollywood movies, are an expression of life, and being made for people who pay money, they express what the people need – that is, what the people miss in their own lives' (Grimshaw 1992: 128-9).

The key to this apparent contradiction, it seems to me, is there in James' early critique of the Communist Party attitude to culture in January 1940. Aware as he certainly was of the role played by cultural production in reproducing racism and other prejudices, James refused to see culture as a mere cipher for the political in a way that Stalinist criticism suggested. The contradictory messages that could be discovered in popular cultural forms, he would go on to argue, made those forms more truly political than any propaganda. Hence, while James recognised the reactionary content of a film like *Birth of a Nation,* his analysis concentrated far more

on Griffith's innovations in cinematic technique and particularly the development of panoramic shots, on the one hand, and close-ups, on the other (James 1990 [1954]). These, alongside the use of flashback and cross-cutting are read by James as formal expressions that speak to a wider desire among the film's audience for a reconciliation between individuality and society. In other words, James' emphasis on 'form' is precisely a means of thinking about cultural practices and objects in a way that understands their meaningfulness as something more than the settled effect of their content. The meaning of cultural forms, for James, is a product of particular contexts, of a relationship to an audience and, therefore, something which exceeds authorial or directorial intention. Dhondy's anecdote, in which James tells a young activist to attend a viewing of *Birth of a Nation* in the morning and then picket it in the afternoon (Dhondy 2001: 136), encapsulates a tension he had spent much of his life working through.

Any attempt to relate James' discussion of culture to his discussion of black politics cannot begin, thus, from assumptions about the role of movies or books, sport or music, in either propagating or destabilising racism. This would be exactly the kind of reading against which he continually positioned himself. James, we might say, kept culture and politics apart, only in order to better understand their interleaving. As soon as culture is considered 'a mere mould into which something is poured' (James in Grimshaw 1992: 232), it becomes a fatal vessel for whatever that 'something' might be. When Richard Wright, for example, grants one of his characters in *Native Son* a 'long, bad and tiresome speech' (James in McLemee 1996 [1940]: 57) in order to explicate the theme of his novel, he runs the risk of treating literary form in precisely this way: as simply the container of a political meaning. By doing so, James suggests, he threatens to spoil what the 'book had already very clearly and powerfully

said' (57). The 'first and most important' principle for James, in other words, is that an adequate sociology of culture can only begin with *what is*, from the cultural objects which are in front of us: there can be no pre-emptive interpretation of culture and no collapsing of text into context. Both the Stalinist assumption that there is some necessary or true alignment between art and class location, and the comparable dismissal of mass culture by elitist critics, are indicted in this respect.

'Projections from a harsh reality'.

Yet one needs to move carefully here because James' position can be, and has been, misunderstood. In 1940 'J.R. Johnson' and his closest collaborators left the Socialist Workers' Party. The break reflected a growing suspicion of the 'politics of the vanguard party' among the group of which James was a central figure. At the time he was accused by Joseph Hansen, in a score-settling article in *Fourth International,* of being an 'unconscious empiricist and formalist' (1940: 166). James had first arrived in America en route to Mexico, where he held discussions with the exiled Leon Trotsky over Russian revolutionary history and party strategy with regard to 'the negro question'. Hansen, who had also attended this meeting, was thus able to add weight to his criticisms by reporting at first-hand that Trotsky has also expressed concerns over James/Johnson's formalist approach.[iv] Whether or not Hansen/Trotsky's judgement was accurate at the time – it has been reiterated rather reverentially by Renton more recently (2007: 165-6) – James' slowly worked out approach to culture was certainly not, even by the end of the nineteen-forties, 'formalist' in any simplistic sense. The fact that he rejected a crassly determinist reading of culture, along with attempts to substitute 'literature as a vehicle for the propagation of [an] economic and

political programme' (James in Grimshaw 192: 257), does not mean that he promoted a self-absorbed concern with form for its own sake. He was absolutely 'conscious' of the fact that conventional literary criticism responded to historicising or sociological readings of culture with a flight 'back to the thing of value in itself' (258). That is to say, back to the veneration of cultural objects as artefacts possessed of some intrinsic potency or aura. And James is scathing of such a move: this conservative retrenchment, he says, is what gives us 'the magists, the textualists, the metaphoricals, the cultists of ambiguity and the whole formalist school. In seeking, however, to defend the work itself from all alien influences, they isolate it from the social movement and they end up destroying it' (258). For James 'form' is a term used precisely in opposition to 'mere formalism'; it is about properly understanding the conditions for the social life, the political meaningfulness, of cultural objects.

Later, in *Beyond a Boundary*, James talks famously about 'significant form' (1963: 202). In doing so he is urging the recognition of the historically determinate nature of cultural objects, but in a way that refuses to see those objects as simply the vessels for political content. Cultural practices and objects are mediated expressions of particular social circumstances, as opposed to immediate reflections of those circumstances (this he dismissed this as the 'stand and deliver' theory of culture (1980 [1950]: 112). They offer us, therefore, a refraction of those circumstances in their forms, both in terms of what they open up to us and in what they foreclose. An interesting example here is provided by his interpretation of the forms of war in an article from 1944. War is not, of course, 'cultural' in the sense that the term is being used in this context, but James does present his essay as a lesson in the 'method of judgment' (1944 n.p.) appropriate to a materialist analysis of society. Hence, to extract one detail from an extended argument, he 'reads' the Maginot line as an

exemplary product of early-twentieth century French and British societies, combining in itself *both* the destructive drive of European capitalist imperialism *and* the recalcitrance of popular forces being dragged towards a state of perpetual and un-heroic conflict. The line is the literally concrete form of a historical contradiction, of democratic societies 'torn' (1944 n.p.) between the ruinous economic imperatives that drive their elites, and the resistance of their citizenry.

There is a reminder of an important qualification here. Unlike many of his contemporaries James always found in cultural objects evidence of the agency of popular forces. Hence, in a similar way but in a very different context, James described American popular culture as expressing a kind of 'armed neutrality' (James 1993: 123) or an 'armed truce' (James in Grimshaw 1992: 225; see Larsen 1996 for a helpful discussion). In American in particular, he argued, the demands of a popular audience face off against the strictures imposed on cultural production by its financiers. The results are films that express the longings and frustrations of the former, without ever explicitly foregoing the political imperatives of the latter. In this sense, the gangster movies of the thirties were a kind of celluloid Maginot line. In them the hopes of a mass audience found thwarted expression in the bloody, misdirected and ultimately doomed rebellions of bank-robbers and other renegades from state authority.

There is an obvious difference here from the position of, say, Theodor Adorno (see Alleyne 1999) and even from that of Gramsci. It can be argued, certainly, that James lacks a theory of popular culture's hegemonic qualities. On the other hand, reading him alongside Gramsci might help remind us of the emphasis on contested cultural meanings in the latter's work. One thinks, for example, of Gramsci's discussion of adventure stories, and his recognition that these spoke to a longing for

justice among their readership, even as they served to misdirect that longing in certain respects (e.g. Gramsci 1985: 328). But there is also a difference with relation to a major strand in Marxist cultural criticism more generally that has tended to place its emphasis on the determining effects of the conditions of cultural production. James was, of course, interested in how the stuff of culture got made, and in the consequences of the arrangement of that production. For example, he notes in *American Civilization* - the text which contains his most fully developed reflections on American popular culture - that the capturing of the film studios by the big banks ended a period of heroic, experimental and truly popular movie-making and replaced it with something far grimmer, far more compromised. Yet it is clear that for James such readings come perilously close to denying the incomplete but nevertheless significant agency of the audience in determining the meaning of a book, a film or an innings, as well as the degree to which audience response necessarily impacts on what books and films get made in the future. In a more general sense, then, it is implicit in James' account of culture that art is not a realm of absolute free creativity. What can be convincingly achieved or plausibly said through creative acts depends on a historical and social context which delimits the conditions of the plausible or the achievable. Even Chaplin, he notes, who was sufficiently successful to bankroll his own films, made movies which were bleaker and less successful in the wake of the Great Depression. In other words, it is the reflection of a wider social crisis, feeding back and forth dialectically between audience and artist, which explains the changing tenor of the American movie mid-century, not simply the tightening of elite control over the processes of film production. Here, as in other respects, James' historicising readings of culture recall, and in some respects precedes, the more well-known analysis of Raymond Williams (of whose work he was sympathetically critical, see

James 1980 [1962]), or Franco Morretti, just as his emphasis on the politics of popular culture shares ground with E.P Thompson and pre-empts the early work of Stuart Hall.

James' argument regarding the emergence of a glamorised, overtly sexualised representation of women in mid-century America is similar. Although he admits that such representations are most obviously perpetuated by advertisers and by Hollywood, he insists that their purchase in the popular imagination should not be read as evidence of some kind of mass duping. Rather, these 'synthetic constructions' take hold because they offer some means of papering over the gap between modernity's promise of liberation and the iron cage of its lived reality. The 'cult of women as women', as he called it, is thus like 'the welfare state, Voice of American paeans to democracy, labor bureaucracy, gangster films, films stars':

> All these, varied as they are, are projections from a harsh reality and an attempt to overcome that reality without touching fundamental relations. It is a substitute that does not fall from the sky but springs organically from below, from the reality itself. It finally ends in becoming an iron barrier to the very needs it sought to satisfy, if even partially (James 1993: 222).

James is not blaming the victim here, nor is he oblivious to the real control over the forces of mass communication and representation that capitalist elites exercise. A careful reading of *American Civilization* reveals far more echoes of Thedor Adorno than might be expected in this respect. In the end, however, he insists on considering cultural form as an essentially contested territory; the context in which popular audiences 'grapple with the inner logic of their existence', as Bogues puts it (1997: 142). What popular culture is not, is a container into which the powerful pour analgesics and narcotics for a pliant workforce.

'Concrete freedom'.

And for James, as this last example makes clear, the particular contest which cultural forms express above all is that between 'what is' and 'what might be'. It was in cricket that he found this contest most clearly and wonderfully figured. If the sport introduced James to politics before he realised it (as he recalls in *Beyond a Boundary*), it also introduced him to Hegel, or at least to a kind of Hegelian understanding of things. The sport, after all, is based around a continual confrontation between the bowler, trying to dismiss his opponent, and the batsman, trying to assert him or herself by scoring runs. Its symbolic structure is precisely one in which a principle of negation wrestles with a principle of affirmation, and it was that potential affirmation which he so treasured in the game and in cultural expression more generally. That is what the great players (or writers, painters, singers, film-makers) achieve, and it is an achievement that necessarily entails risk. The triumph of it, when it occurs, is that it demonstrates to the watching world for a moment something of the possibilities inherent in human creativity, something of the human ability to transfigure and transform circumstance.

Consider, as an example in negative, his account of the fourth test match of the Australia-England series of 1938. James had not long been in Britain at this point, having arrived initially as ghost-writer and companion for Learie Constantine, one of the first West Indian cricketers to be employed as an overseas professional player. James, for his part, aside from becoming involved in the politics of the independent left, and of the African diaspora in London, was working as a cricket correspondent for various national papers. It was in this capacity that he reports on the game in question, producing an account which is significantly more than just a piece of sports

journalism. England had lost the match, capitulating to Australia on a badly worn pitch, where the unpredictable bounce and deviation of the ball made batting increasingly difficult. In purely cricketing terms, James concludes, England failed because their batsmen refused 'to use their feet' (1938: 17):[v]

> I saw every ball from 11.30 on Monday to 1.20 and not a single English batsman left his crease […] They stood as if chained […] One simply ached to see the batsman come out and play with the resolution that the situation demanded [instead, they] went down without one batsman playing for death or glory […] all heads were bowed meekly to the slaughter.

Beyond the cricketing judgement, however, James makes clear the wider resonance of what is at stake by introducing a framing device: his report is filtered through the eyes of 'three men who lived in a far country' and who have left their 'remote islands' with the intention of seeing the best spectacle that the heartlands of the game can offer. The 'far country' in question is clearly Trinidad, or the West Indies at least, because after the match these three expatriates meet their compatriot, James:

> He had heard of their long and hopeful journey and congratulated them on their good fortune at seeing so interesting a day's cricket. But to his surprise – which, however, was only immediate – they broke out in remonstrance, which came near to imprecation. They said they had hoped to see some great batting, some fine strokes and resource, such as they had never seen and did not hope to see in their restricted sphere; but that instead they had seen such scratching and poking as made them regret their great Odyssey […] The expert had to uneasily shift his ground, as is the way of experts, and agree that there was much to be said on both sides. The above is a true tale.

In this 'true tale' three colonial migrants, whose arduous journey James describes in detail at the start of the article, are deliberately juxtaposed with a line-up of English batsmen unwilling to venture one inch beyond the point of safety. James thus allows voices from the 'periphery', not only to unsettle his own 'expert' judgement, but to

'read' the cricketing form back to its own implied audience; to make clear to British readers what the 'scratching and poking' of supposedly great English players reveals in social terms. Here, very obviously, are the defenders of 'what is' at play, a cricketing 'theory of the defensive' to match that given form in the Maginot line. And this failure of imagination, this acceptance of formal constraint, is witnessed by astonished figures who know only too well the ways in which, in their own 'restricted spheres', the same cultural practice was coming to express the hopes of 'what might be'. The historical irony is nailed by James' description of the English batsmen 'standing as if chained', a phrase drawn directly from the archives of slavery and slave revolt in which he was then so deeply immersed as he prepared to write *The Black Jacobins.*

Here again, the point is not limited to cricket. By the time of his letters to Constance Webb in 1943 he was arguing explicitly that 'like all art, but more than most, the movies are not merely a reflection, but an extension of the actual – an extension along the lines which people feel are lacking and possible in the actual' (James in Grimshaw 1992: 129). Hence it is that truly great innovations in culture – the characters of the crew in Melville's *Moby Dick* (James 1985)*,* the Mighty Sparrow's calypso (James 1977 [1961/2]: 191-201), the pictures of Jackson Pollock (James in Grimshaw 1992: 405-410) or Learie Constantine's batting (James 1980 [1969]: chapter 17) – represent something truly new in the world. Newness for James is understood as the transcendence of old forms through themselves. This is why, in a sense, the overt political content of culture is not the point of emphasis for his cultural sociology. Cultural forms not only encapsulate current tensions, but the possibility of their overcoming, at least at certain pivotal historical moments when 'what is' becomes the means of glimpsing 'what might be'. It is what he called, in a felicitous

phrase, 'concrete freedom' (1977 [1959]: 187): freedom not as a flight of idealism, but as the moment when conditions of constraint are turned into conditions of possibility. This is also, of course, why James rejected the reverence paid to cultural forms 'in themselves' by the 'the magists, the textualists' and 'the whole formalist school'. Detached from the historical moment, and the political tensions, contradictions and possibilities of that moment, form becomes something reified and, like all fetishes, fundamentally inert.

We can summarise all of the foregoing, then, by saying that James believed that the interpretation of cultural forms begins once those forms are placed 'in motion', once they are put back into the flow of history. Form can only be adequately understood as something that is live, a product of grappling with real conditions of possible expression by an individual artist or player, but thereby inescapably a part of the political moment, speaking of and to a wider audience about its own conditions of existence. Where, in American popular culture, Theodor Adorno saw a machine churning out plastic novelty at an accelerating rate, James saw something exhilarating: the indefatigable search of the people for an expressive form adequate to their energies and desires. Culture, in other words, cannot be reduced to some mystical or ahistorical 'quality' but nor can it be reduced to the question of its political 'utility'. It is itself something made in, and expressive of, the dynamic processes of social change. 'You know', he wrote to Constance Webb, 'history does move. The thing is to see it' (James in Grimshaw 1992: 147). And it was in cultural forms, as in Perseus' polished shield, that one could see, not just the petrifying face of capitalist society, but something more, glimmering in the distance over the shoulder of the Gorgon.

'More than an episodic value'.

My argument from this point is a straightforward one. If this is how James came to understand or think about 'cultural' forms, an understanding whose principles were certainly in place by the late nineteen-forties, this understanding is no less central to the account of black politics which he had come to develop in the same period. I would reiterate that I have no intention of implying a particular priority or a cause-effect relationship here: James' response to culture was always inextricably a part of his politics (Grimshaw 1992: 4). So it is in no sense demeaning nor is it a surrender to the 'cultural turn' to suggest that at the heart of James' revolutionary answer to the 'Negro Question' was his attempt to think of black politics as a 'form' with all the implications of the term laid out above.

James' distinctive contribution in this respect begins with his insistence on the integrity of the modes of resistance and the political organisations developed by African Americans. In discussing this aspect of his work, most commentators have focussed on the writing he produced in America around the nineteen-forties, as he grappled with the experience of a racism that was more overt and thorough-going than any he had previously encountered. There is usually seen as being a gradual evolution of his position here over the course of a decade, beginning with the briefing paper he prepared in advance of his discussion with Trotsky and culminating in his 1948 conference speech entitled 'The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro problem in the USA'.[vi] It is true that James' position developed between these points. In the later, synoptic statement, for example, he insisted that black men and women 'approach the conclusions of socialism' (James in McLemee 1996 [1948]: 140) 'on the basis of their own experiences'. This is certainly different from the note struck in the 'Preliminary

Notes' in which he argues that 'The Negro must be won for socialism' (James in McLemee 1996 [1939]: 8). Yet the shift is perhaps more rhetorical than substantial, because the sentence in this earlier document is immediately qualified by another: 'But he must be won on the basis of his own experience and his own activity'. Very clearly then James was suggesting from early on that the political forms that developed from African-American experience were not predetermined, nor could they be manipulated in the name of socialism or otherwise: 'The basis of the organization must be the struggle for the day-to-day demands of the Negro […] support of a Negro mass movement must not be conditional upon whether it is or soon will be socialist or not' (10). In other words, just as it was in his discussion of cultural forms, the 'first and most important thing' for James is that a response to black politics cannot begin from *a priori* judgements about the underlying 'truth', or about the necessary results of that politics.

> What the Party must avoid at all costs is looking upon such a movement as a recruiting ground for party members, something to be 'captured' or manipulated for the aims of the party, or something which it supports spasmodically at the time it needs something in return (9).

Black political organisation and action could be effective only insofar as it is was formed in and responded to the experiences of black men and women in American society. It did not, as it were, await some other meaning outside of itself. The famous quote from the 'Revolutionary Answer' speech in which James refutes the view that 'the independent struggles of the Negro people' have a merely 'episodic value', and in which he insists instead that this struggle 'has a vitality and validity of its own […] deep historical roots in the past of America and in present struggles […and…] an

organic political perspective' (James in McLemee 1996 [1948]: 139), thus reiterates a principle which seems to have been relatively clear in his mind a decade before.

In short: just as James argued that those who wish to read culture properly must keep their eyes on the ball, so he insisted that anyone wishing to understand contemporary politics must put aside deductive general principles, and must begin from the effort to make sense of social situations as they were. In condemning the 'judicial or explanatory' (in McLemee 1996 [1943] 82) approach to 'the Negro question', James and his collaborators were contesting the tendency to interpret black politics in terms of some higher historical logic[vii] as well as the instrumental or strategic manipulation of its organisational forms which was the cynical corollary of this view. James came to this position, of course, precisely because he had had his eyes fixed on this particular historical ball for some time. In London in the thirties, for example, he begun a collaboration with his fellow Trinidadian George Padmore. Padmore had been a key mouthpiece of the Soviet state but he had become disaffected with his position precisely because of the Kremlin's attempts to dissolve anti-imperialist struggles into the compromises of the Popular Front from 1934-5. The International African Friends of Ethiopia and its successor International African Service Bureau, organisations which Padmore and James established to develop anti-imperialist sentiment among the colonial diaspora in London, were thus born directly out of their sense of the 'vitality and validity' of black politics in its own right. Such organisations contested not only the Communist Party's puppeteering but also what James described as the widespread assumption among English socialists of all stripes that 'the African is […] the revolutionary white man's burden' (1939: 3), incapable of independent political action. Similarly, in the particular context of American politics, James' point is aimed at the 'cringing, crawling, whining Uncle Toms' (James in

McLemee 1996 [1943]: 42) who vacillated and conciliated in response to events like the Detroit riots of 1943, in which 25 black citizens were killed. Writing in the immediate aftermath of this event James reiterated the zero-point principle which underlay his emphasis on black self-organization: 'If the Negroes do not defend themselves, it is certain nobody else will' (46). In this respect, James was often fiercely critical of the role played by the 'talented tenth', that part of the black leadership in America whose 'control of the Negro masses is the slender barrier between the present turgid situation and bloody outbursts' (James 1949a; see also articles in *Socialist Appeal* such as December 16th and 23rd 1939 and 20th January 1940). In trading compromise and containment for high-profile appointments, the petit-bourgeois leadership was guilty of an appropriation of their own, one that traded the energies of popular black struggle for a self-serving class advancement.

'*In* the very vanguard'.

None of this should be taken to mean that James wished to reify black struggle as something sufficient in its own right. In his cultural analysis, it will be remembered, his concern was with the historical specificity and expressivity of cultural objects and practices. It was this historicising imagination, rather than a self-indulgent *l'art pour l'art* sensibility that was the basis of his interpretive approach. In exactly the same way, James insisted on a respectful recognition of the particular insights and possibilities that were the consequence of the historical experiences of racialized groups without for one moment celebrating the idea of separatism or black chauvinism as an ultimately sufficient response. If it can be said that James' cultural analysis sought to steer between a particular Scylla (the reduction of culture to an

economic truth) and a particular Charybdis (the 'magist' celebration of cultural forms in their own right), then his account of black struggle navigates between exactly equivalent dangers. In seeking to provide recognition of the historically determinate forms of black political expression, he consistently rejected *both* the idea that those forms were only a superficial gloss on an underlying class reality *and* the idea that 'blackness' was a political or ethical 'good' in itself.

Here too James' understanding seems to have been clear from early on in his time in America. The resolutions drafted and passed at the 1939 SWP congress, for example, are revealing in this respect. 'The Right of Self-Determination and the Negro in the United States of North America' was an important intervention in its context precisely because it so bluntly challenged prevailing assumptions within the largely white SWP regarding the relation between black struggle and class politics. The text explicitly rejects the 'too facile acceptance of the Negroes as merely a more than usually oppressed section of the American workers and farmers' (*SWP Conference Resolutions,* 1939). At the heart of the resolution was an insistence on the historically specific experience of racism and the political responses which that experience might engender. As so often in his work James is at pains to make clear that those who are seemingly most downtrodden are often those who actually possess the most illuminating insight into the nature of social relations and processes. In later writing he develops this argument more clearly, arguing – as did du Bois – that for black men and women in America the goals of social struggle have a clarity and tangibility which they may not have for middle-class white socialists (McLemee 1996 [1941]: 22-34). Hence he argued, for example, that those who had been subject to the brutalities of racism were less likely to fall for the swindle of the welfare settlement (McLemee 1996 [1950]: 134-137) or for nationalist tub-thumping in the lead up to

America's entry into the second World War (McLemee 1996 [1940]: 17-22; see also his pamphlet 'Negroes and the War', serialised in *Socialist Appeal* between September and October 1939). If racism relies on the assumption that a certain kind of social power can be seen at first glance then it makes the operations of social power correspondingly visible and explicit to its victims. This was an instance of what he called, later and half-jokingly, the law of historical compensation (1980 [1948]: 136), and it is the basis of the claim, in the second 1939 resolution ('The SWP and Negro Work'), that the black population of America,

> for centuries the most oppressed section of American society and the most discriminated against, are potentially the most revolutionary elements of the population. They are designated by their whole historical past to be, under adequate leadership, the very vanguard of the proletarian revolution (reported in *Socialist Appeal*, July 11th 1939).

In his articles in the *Socialist Appeal* following the conference, one sees James beginning to steer his perilous course between the two equally dangerous simplifications that threaten this position. First of all one notes how pointedly, in a column written immediately following the conference, he discusses the key role played by black forces in the Civil War, citing Trotsky in order to parallel this to the role played by the *sansculottes* in the French Revolution (August 22nd 1939). Over the next decade, he would repeatedly return to this point, reconsidering numerous historical instances of black insurrections and making clear how those actions, while motivated by desire for freedom of a specific kind, became an integral part of wider social conflicts and drove those conflicts towards more progressive outcomes. James' recovery of the history of self-organised black revolt would become central to the more fully developed argument of 'the revolutionary answer', and was clearly part of

what led him, over the longer term, to reject vanguardist politics as such. Even here, in August 1939, it seems clear that James' historical discussion is intended to throw into question the resolution's curtailing qualification with regard to black politics: that it would be revolutionary only 'under adequate leadership'. When James writes 'in America "under adequate leadership" the Negroes will come en masse to the revolutionary struggle' (August 22nd 1939) one is tempted to speculate that his quotation marks are being used as what we would call 'scare-quotes' in order to distance himself from the phrase. The latter interpretation would certainly be more in keeping with what he had already argued in his short but pioneering *History of Negro Revolt*: 'The African bruises and breaks himself against his bars in the interest of freedom wider than his own' (1938a: 85). That study, like *The Black Jacobins,* was premised precisely on a recognition of the revolutionary results of autonomous, black resistance, both in Africa and globally.

Secondly, however – and the point is implicit in much of what has just been said – James adds a qualification of his own in discussing the resolutions, one which steers his position clear of the opposing danger of racial essentialism. There is, he says, an 'overstatement' in the text of the resolution, 'it would be more correct to say *in* the very vanguard' (August 22nd, 1939). James clearly felt that the nuance was sufficiently important to reiterate it in a number of subsequent columns so that, by October of that year, he was effectively re-writing the resolution: 'The place of the Negro is in the very vanguard of the revolutionary movement for socialism [...rather than...] an appendage, however valuable, to the revolutionary movement' (October 6th, 1939). This qualification, for all that it hinges on a single additional word, is significant. Black struggle, for James, expressed a political energy and a desire for freedom which was consequential in its own right, and which had to be understood in

its own terms. Insofar as it expressed itself in demands for autonomy, or a racial chauvinism, this had to be recognised, in its context, as progressive. Black autonomy, however, or black chauvinism, were not to be understood as sufficient ends in themselves. There are various reasons for this. On the one hand, as has already been suggested, James was only too aware of the degree to which a petit-bourgeois leadership would use the premise of racial identity as a means of co-opting popular resistance to its own ends. If he was critical, for example, of 'two-cent revolutionaries' who pointed out the 'errors and absurdities' of Marcus Garvey's message of 'race' pride without seeing the fire that smouldered in that first mass black movement, he nevertheless agreed that Garvey's appeal to racial purity was, in itself, an absurd but self-serving one (see James in McLemee 1996 [1940]: 114-116; c.f. James 1938a: chapter 5). On the other hand, as he states clearly in 'the revolutionary answer', the very idea of racial difference leaves the door open to a politics of division which capitalist elites have been only too willing to exploit; an exploitation which was even then descending into barbarity in Germany and its conquered territories. James had no illusions on this score: 'if the proletariat is defeated […] there will fall upon the Negro people such a repression, such persecution, comparable to nothing that they have seen in the past' (James in McLemee 1996 [1943]: 145).

Underlying these points is the fact that for James, in the end, any truly adequate politics must reach towards something universal. One sees this clearly in two articles he wrote in 1949 for *Fourth International* in which he contests Herbert Aptheker's account of the role played by black forces in securing the abolition of slavery.[viii] James is at his very sharpest as he goes about dissecting Aptheker's account, and in particular the degree to which the latter portrays black involvement in abolitionism as a kind of appendage, or as an incidental stimulus, to a movement

whose real dynamism lay elsewhere. This, James notes, is the contemporary Stalinist approach to black struggle read retrospectively onto history. In one particularly acute moment he catches Aptheker suggesting that Fredrick Douglass 'found himself' calling for insurrection. James is acerbic in response: 'The magnificent African prince could do much, but that he could stand on a platform and out of his head consciously speak of insurrection – that Aptheker simply could not stand. He makes it a visitation from on high. Douglass just 'found himself saying' it' (1949: 340). Yet James' critique is not made in order to substitute black paint for Aptheker's white-wash. Of course, James *is* concerned to recognise the real historical contribution of revolting slaves, runaways and black abolitionists to the success of the movement, but he is concerned to do this precisely because their struggle for freedom is a concrete instance of the historical struggle for freedom as such. Hence James rejects Aptheker's racialised celebration of Douglass – 'a magnificent figure of a man, impregnable, incorruptible, scars on his back, African prince, majestic in his wrath…' (339) – just as scathingly as he rejects the sidelining of Douglass' political contribution. Indeed, James clearly sees the celebration of racial form in its own right as the flip-side of Aptheker's marginalising of black political struggles. Against *both* positions, James' argues that Douglass represented 'the voice of the American Revolution', and that the wider resistance of slaves and ex-slaves was the instantiation of the revolutionary concept of freedom or democracy, just as the slave revolution in San Domingo that he had written about in *The Black Jacobins* had instantiated the universal principles proclaimed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. James' defence of the autonomy of black struggle, in short, is not concerned with the defence of blackness in itself, but is about recognising the way in which universal principles are made concrete in historical contexts. It is about recognising

how specific political struggles can surpass their own parochial aims and serve to realise 'a freedom greater than their own'.

I have argued that in his cultural writing, James' concern with the forms of cultural expression is neither dull formalism (i.e. an interest in texts for their own sake) nor mere instrumentalism (i.e. an interest in them as the epiphenomena of 'real' politics). In exactly the same way here, it seems to me, we can see that James' account of the specific formations of social struggle is concerned to do justice to the historically determinate modalities of particular movements, while at the same time refusing to reify these, recognising that beyond the specific forms and ambitions of these movements lies a wider horizon of freedom.

'Not quality … but movement'.

If, as I have suggested, James' consideration of culture gives relatively scant attention to the question of production, he is similarly reticent when it comes to the question of the production of racism in the modern world. There are some scattered and suggestive comments in his work. In a important document entitled 'The Historical Development of the Negro in the United States', for example, James and his collaborators in America, came close to pinpointing the emergence of American racism in the period between 1830-1860, when the Southern plantocracy, haunted by the spectre of unity between white and black workforce, specifically 'elevated race consciousness to the position of a principle' (James et al in McLemee 1996 [1943]: 64). James was also, of course, instrumental in the development of Eric William's *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944)*,* which famously interpreted racism as the ideological counterpart to slave production in the new world.[ix] And he does, in 'The Negro

Question' column from November 3rd 1939, address what he calls 'the wherefore of race prejudice', insisting to his readers that 'the Negro's skin has nothing at all to do with the fundamentals of this question'. Racism, he argues, has its root 'in the system which gives the capitalist the need and the power to divide', a policy which has no intrinsic or necessary relationship to phenotypical difference, as a whole series of historical examples make clear: the fermenting of religious division in India under British imperialism, and the treatment of the Irish, the long and bitter history of European anti-Semitism, and the sponsoring of aristocracies of labour in all the advanced capitalist countries. In general, however, just as with his account of culture, James trod warily when it came to the issue of historical explanations precisely because a concentration on the problem of the genesis of 'racism' could end up stabilising or reifying the concept of 'race' itself, as if the problem were simply to explain why 'races' as such have failed to get along. In that respect, when James does venture into this discussion he does so with explicit contemporary concerns in mind. The question of the 'wherefore' of racism is useful only insofar as it serves to defamiliarise our assumptions about 'race'. In the column immediately following that which has just been cited, he makes this explicit. In studying the question of 'race', he argues, we must, as with any social question, 'see it from all sides and particularly […] see in what direction it is moving, what is likely to happen tomorrow'. The 'very opposite' of this dialectical method, he continues, is the treatment of 'race' as a cause in itself: e.g. the assumption that because a white worker gets selected over a black worker, the 'Negro problem is a race problem' (Nov 7th).

This is why, in the end, it seems to me justified to argue that James' consideration of the 'Negro question' hinged on thinking blackness 'as a form'. His reading of culture, as I have argued, dispensed with any treatment of cultural objects

in terms of timeless categories of beauty or artistic value and took its cue, instead, from the fact that culture is always already being made use of in the struggles of the here and now. In just the same way, his account of black politics hinges on putting blackness into motion. What James continually seeks to achieve is the recovery of blackness as something of which some use could be made. This recovery insists on the historically specific nature of racialised experience, just as his cultural analysis insisted on recognising the communicative specificity of particular cultural conventions and styles, but it also continually rejects any attempt to essentialise 'race'. Blackness was a form which reflected both the existent divisions of capitalist modernity *and* which might serve as a means of moving beyond these. If blackness was, as it unquestionably was, a form of social constraint then it was also something which could be turned into the condition of a possible freedom. One of the premises of that freedom, of course, would be the superseding of the form of blackness itself.

In the next column from the same series James reiterates the point with some urgency: 'History is moving very fast. That is why it is necessary to know where we come from, where we are, and infinitely more important, in what direction we are moving' (n.d. Nov. 10th?). For those familiar with James' writing the remark immediately recollects his more famous words from *Beyond a Boundary,* words which would become part of the epitaph on his grave in Tunapuna: 'it is not the quality of goods or utility which matter, but movement: not where you are or what you have, but where you have come from, where you are going, and the rate at which you are getting there' (1963: 116-7). Although, in the latter context James claims self-deprecatingly that he had come to understand this only after empires had fallen and relations of nations and classes had shifted, something of that insight obviously emerged a quarter of a century earlier as he grappled with the dilemmas raised by

black politics and the experience of a particular form of racism in the United States. His response to those dilemmas was precisely the refusal to think of 'race' as a settled 'quality', or as something that one fixedly 'has', but rather as something born in and used up in the movement of history. The similarity of expression in these two contexts, separated by nearly a quarter of a century, is striking.

If, for James, the forms of culture could only be understood in historical terms, as expressions of specific social desires, contradictions and possibilities, but also as the means by which something of the future might be glimpsed in the troubled present, the same clearly applies to his understanding of what was at stake in black political struggle. The same historicising instinct that drives his desire to understand how changing cricketing styles are related to a shifting social landscape, for example, drives also his effort here to think about blackness as a particular expression of existing social relationships, one which might be used as a means of mobilizing or unifying towards specific political ends, but one which should be treated as strictly contingent, rather than as an end in itself.

Conclusion.

My intention in this essay has been to provide some sense of the particular and, to my mind, still very pertinent contribution that James offers to the sociological understanding of culture. However, precisely because James himself was so concerned to resist the fragmentation of intellectual life that he saw as one of the baleful consequences of capitalist modernity, I have sought to tally this account of his cultural sociology with a discussion of James' wider political interventions. I have argued that there is an important correspondence between these aspects of his work,

one which has not been sufficiently recognised, but one which is unlikely to surprise anyone familiar with James' staunch insistence that culture was not a reflection of politics, but political in itself.

Indeed, as a number of his grateful readers have borne witness (e.g. Georgakas in Buhle 1986: 185-194; Renton 2007: 178) one of the great achievements of James' work is that he so effectively scorns the idea that the games, performances, spectacles and texts of culture should be treated as 'guilty pleasures' with an inherently problematical relationship to the world of hard politics. This is not to say that James promoted a retreat into textualism; he surely would have been bewildered by many of the rabbit-holes down which contemporary cultural studies has disappeared. What James recognised, however, was that the pleasures and longings, the flashes of wholeness and completion of which cultural forms at their best provide fleeting instances, were not the 'other' to political struggle. Those pleasures, that desire for togetherness and the celebration of the human as an ability to act creatively in the world; these things are what any truly popular politics is about. The means of political struggle too easily become its ends. James' repeated question to himself and his comrades, in this respect, was an urgent one: 'what is it that people want' or, as he put it in *Beyond a Boundary,* 'what do men live by'? A politics which is not a politics of such questions is something else, something steely, instrumental and, ultimately inhuman.

It was, therefore, just this question that James asked with regard to the black communities of America. And what he saw, as he famously concludes his statement in 1948, having watched them 'in their churches […] at their own theatres […] at their dances' (James in McLemee 1996 [1948]: 147), was a passion for freedom, and hatred of a society which denied that freedom, which was 'in itself a constituent part

of the struggle for socialism' (139). It seems appropriate to conclude, therefore, with the reminder that at the heart of James' approach to culture, as to black experience, as to so much else, was his refusal to lose sight of the ends of political struggle. A refusal, moreover, to allow the means of struggle to usurp those ends. As he wrote to Constance Webb:

> It isn't that one does this or that 'for socialism'. No. One does this or that because in society as it is today, a substantial number of people express themselves and live the life that is in them. They refuse to be bound by the old traditions and ideas. The very fact that these people appear in increasing numbers is a sign of the break-up of the old society and the emergence of the new – both of which take place at the same time and are one movement. It is not 'I would do this – for you, but I have to do this for socialism'. It is, 'I must do this, for myself, and not to do it is treason to myself, and to the other who are all fighting with me in this sphere, and to all the millions who in their various ways, are fighting their battles, which constitute the struggle for a new society' (Grimshaw 1992 [1944]:145).

Perhaps there is a whiff of romantic individualism about the statement, or of that belief in 'spontaneity' of which sympathetic critics have accused him; a belief which ignores the need for hard-nosed political organisation and education. That debate is for another time. At the least, it seems to me that we should be profoundly grateful for the reminder that all progressive politics begins with the struggle to live the life that is in us, for ourselves and (because the two cannot finally be distinguished) for and through others. In thinking about culture and, in an analogous way, thinking through the experiences of those designated 'black' in America, it was evidence of that struggle which James continuously sought, and continuously found.

Endnotes

[i] I am grateful to the David Inglis and to two anonymous reviewers for *Cultural Sociology* for their thoughtful suggestions with regard to this article. I am also grateful to Professors Bridget Fowler and Satnam Virdee for their constructive criticism.

[ii] For those unfamiliar with the wider context of James' life and work, there are at least five biographies currently available, the best of which remain the earliest: Buhle (1988) and Worcester (1996). There are also numerous critical studies of which the best are Nielsen (1997) and Rosengarten (2007) as well as the edited volume by Cudjoe and Cain (1995). Among the most helpful introductions to James' cultural writings more specifically are Lazarus (1999) and Grimshaw (1991). Important critical questions have been raised, particularly regarding James' approbatory treatment of cricket, by Gregg (2000: chapter seven), Kingwell (2002: 116-152), Stoddart (1998) and Surin (1996). This essay derives from research carried out towards a forthcoming book length account of James' cultural sociology which is due for publication in 2010.

[iii] James, in this period, wrote for *Socialist Appeal* from August 15th, 1939 to 9th March, 1940. His regular column was called *The Negro Question*, but the paper also carried serialisations of two extended pamphlets he produced in that period entitled 'Labour and the Second World War' and 'Negroes and the War', as well as other occasional pieces by him. All of these were published under the pseudonym J.R. Johnson. 'The Negro Question' column usually appeared on the paper's third page. This particular article, headed 'Hollywood Epic Film *Gone With the Wind* Glorifies Old Slave Holding South' appeared in the *Socialist Appeal* and is signed 'National Negro Department'. Both of the articles referred to here are also available in McLemee's collection.

[iv] Hansen, it might be added, has some rather knowing fun pointing out the apparent disagreements between the views of J.R. Johnson and those of 'C.R. James' [sic] (e.g. 1940: 168).

[v] An explanation is probably in order for those not familiar with the cricketing vernacular: there is, on a cricket pitch, a line marked behind which the batsman is, as it were, 'safe' – equivalent to having a foot touching a base in rounders or baseball. If, however, in attempting to facilitate a more aggressive shot, or in attempting to reach the ball before it bounces, the batsman goes beyond that line of safety, called the crease, any member of the fielding side who can hit the stumps with the ball before the batsman returns can 'get them out'. In other words, to use your feet, to advance past the point of safety, is a calculated risk indicative of aggressive intent and a refusal to be intimidated.

[vi] Both Scott McLemee (1996: introduction) and Anna Grimshaw (1992: 424) present the trajectory of James' thought in this way. Paul Buhle (1986: 91) gives the year of the conference speech as 1947, but other sources are consistent in suggesting 1948. The text was first published under the name J. Meyer in *Fourth International* in December of that year.

[vii] One recalls, in a not dissimilar context, Frantz Fanon's angry response to John Paul-Sartre when the latter, in *Orphée Noir,* represented black struggle as a kind of 'minor term', an epiphenomenon, of class struggle: 'so it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me. It is not out of my bad nigger's misery, my bad nigger's teeth, my bad nigger's hunger that I will shape a torch with which to burn down the world, but it is the torch that was already there, waiting for that turn of history' (Fanon 1967: 134).

[viii] The articles are titled 'Stalinism and Negro History' and 'Herbert Aptheker's Distortions' and appeared in the November and December editions of *Fourth International* respectively. Both are signed 'J. Meyer'.

[ix] Selma James, in a retrospective from 2001, suggests that James not only supervised the production of *Capitalism and Slavery* but was actually responsible for writing the book's final chapter (2001: 46).

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