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A ‘Bohemian freelancer’? C.L.R. James, his early relationship to anarchism and the intellectual origins of autonomism

In April 1940, in a private letter written amidst a fierce faction fight then engulfing American Trotskyism, Leon Trotsky would refer in passing to Cyril Lionel Robert James (1901-1989), one of his leading comrades hailing originally from Trinidad, as a ‘Bohemian freelancer’.¹ No doubt such an appellation would have caused distress to James had he heard of it at the time, for his political and intellectual evolution had owed much to Trotsky’s Marxism ever since his reading of the first volume of *History of the Russian Revolution* in 1932. Yet such an appellation would, for many, both within and outside orthodox Trotskyism, seem to be vindicated by James’s subsequent development as a political thinker, which would see him leave the official Trotskyist movement in 1951. Indeed, many commentators have gone much further than Trotsky, and associated James’s mature political thought as much with anarchist thinking as with revolutionary Marxism. In 1981, Paul Berman declared he thought James had ultimately come up with ‘a version of socialism that wittingly or unwittingly incorporates elements of anarchism within a larger Marxist framework’.² In 1987, James D. Young, subsequently author of *The World of C.L.R. James*, asserted ‘James was always a dissident with a touch of anarchist disaffection’.³ In 1989, after James’s passing, Robin Blackburn in an obituary declared him an ‘Anarcho-Bolshevik’, while E.P. Thompson apparently went as far as to speak of James’s writing not just being

¹ L. Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1976), p. 164.

² P. Berman, ‘Facing Reality’, in P. Buhle (ed.), *C.L.R. James: His Life and Work* (London: Allison & Busby, 1986), p. 211.

³ J.D. Young, ‘C.L.R. James’, *Journal of the Scottish Labour History Society*, 22 (1987), pp. 38-9. See also J.D. Young, *The World of C.L.R. James: His Unfragmented Vision* (Glasgow: Clydeside Press, 1999).

‘infused with a libertarian tendency’ but of James’s ‘instinctive, unarticulated anarchism’.⁴

Yet there is a problem here, since James’s anarchism was not simply ‘unarticulated’. Rather, he was about as explicit as he could get in articulating outright opposition to it. In 1948, in *Notes on Dialectics*, James casually noted in passing that ‘the Proudhonists and Bakuninists represented the petty-bourgeois capitalistic influences in the proletariat’ at the time of the First International which lost out to Marxism ‘because of the decline of the petty-bourgeois individualism in capitalism as a whole’ – a position exacerbated by the failings of anarchism in the Spanish civil war.⁵ As Berman admitted, in one of the only sustained and detailed discussions of James and anarchism in the existing scholarship, James

has always called himself, in spite of everything, a Leninist... as to anarchism, in all of his writings he condemns it forcefully. But I must

⁴ On Robin Blackburn’s obituary in the *Independent* of 8 June 1989, see Ian Birchall’s letter in *Revolutionary History*, 2:3 (1989), online at ‘<http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/backiss/vol2/no3/birchall.html>’. For Thompson’s obituary, see F. Rosengarten, *Urbane Revolutionary: C.L.R. James and the Struggle for a New Society* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), p. 26. E. San Juan Jr has suggested that ‘James’s belief in permanent world revolution ultimately committed him to a radical-popular democracy almost anarchic and utopian in temper and motivation’. E. San Juan, Jr, *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1998), p. 249.

⁵ C.L.R. James, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980), pp. 60, 197, 199, 215. This was a document written strictly for his supporters and not a work that was published in his name while a member of the official Trotskyist movement – indeed it was not first published in a widely available format until 1980. In the co-written 1950 work *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, a work which was published while James and his comrades were still in the official Trotskyist movement, anarchism was casually included alongside liberalism, Social Democracy and Stalinism as an ideology of ‘counter-revolution within the revolution’. See C.L.R. James, R. Dunayevskaya, and G. Lee, *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1986), p. 132.

say, James's forcefulness on this point reminds me of nothing so much as Rosa Luxemburg's similar forcefulness in the opening pages of *The Mass Strike* – an instance of protesting too much.⁶

The debate over James's relative intellectual affinity to or distance from anarchism is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. Given the complexity of his political and intellectual evolution, which ranged widely over both time and space, it is certainly beyond the boundaries of what is possible in one chapter to even attempt such a feat. Rather this chapter will attempt to clarify an important aspect of this question through a concrete historical exploration first of James's early relationship to anarchism and his growing openness to the idea that the Soviet Union under Stalin was 'state-capitalist' rather than socialist, and then a briefer discussion of how his more mature political thought came to inspire and influence strands of 'autonomist' thinking during the 1950s and subsequently. In making such an examination, however, it is perhaps worth stating that we will begin from the premise that James is best recognised and understood from the outset not as an anarchist thinker, but as a Marxist. Indeed, as I have suggested elsewhere, James was one of the twentieth century's most original and outstanding contributors to what Hal Draper has termed the revolutionary democratic tradition of 'socialism from below'.⁷ For Paul Buhle, James's original and authorised biographer, James was 'one of the few truly creative Marxists from the 1930s to the 1950s, perhaps alone in his masterful synthesis of world history, philosophy,

⁶ Berman, 'Facing Reality', p. 208.

⁷ See C. Høgsbjerg, 'C.L.R. James: The Revolutionary as Artist', *International Socialism*, 112 (2006), and H. Draper, *The Two Souls of Socialism* (London: Bookmarks, 1996). For my brief critical discussion of two pieces of recent James-scholarship, see C. Høgsbjerg, 'Remembering C.L.R. James, Forgetting C.L.R. James', *Historical Materialism*, 17:3 (2009).

government, mass life and popular culture'. Buhle thought any reference to James's politics as 'anarchist' in 'its treatment of party and state' was ultimately a 'sincere but mistaken' position.⁸

The aim of this chapter however is to illuminate the evolution and intellectual influence of James's creativity as a 'dissident Marxist', to use the phrase of another biographer of James's, David Renton, not to attempt to demonstrate in detail his intellectual distance from anarchism.⁹ James's life and work in 1930s Britain offers a fascinating glimpse into an almost forgotten subterranean world of far-left politics, a story of heretics and renegades, from surrealist poets to Jewish printers and anarchist booksellers. The empirical focus of the article will therefore firstly examine how the seeds of James's 'dissident Marxism' were arguably first sown in this early period, before making a brief outline of how it flowered during his American sojourn and then came to fertilise thinking on the European far-Left during the 1950s.

C.L.R. James's early bohemianism

Rather than being an 'instinctive anarchist', the early politics of James, such as they were while a young teacher, journalist and writer in the British Crown Colony of Trinidad were distinctly of the gradual, practical, statist, reformist variety. He was a democrat in a country without any meaningful democracy, a parliamentary socialist in a country without a meaningful parliament. James's hero at the time, and the subject of

⁸ P. Buhle, 'Marxism in the USA', in S. McLemee and P. Le Blanc (eds), *C.L.R. James and Revolutionary Marxism; Selected Writings of C.L.R. James, 1939-49*, (New Jersey: Humanity Books, 1994), pp. 55-6.

⁹ D. Renton, *Dissident Marxism: Past voices for present times* (London: Zed Books, 2004), and D. Renton, *C.L.R. James; Cricket's Philosopher King* (London: Haus Books, 2007).

his first book in 1932, was Captain Arthur Andrew Cipriani, the former Commanding Officer of the British West Indies Regiment in the First World War and then leader of the mass social democratic nationalist Trinidad Workingmen's Association (T.W.A.). Inspired in part also by Gandhi and Marcus Garvey, James became a campaigner for 'West Indian self-government', but at this stage he was very far from the revolutionary Marxist and 'class struggle Pan-Africanist' he would become. If 'Conservatism unprodded hardens into tyranny, radicalism unchecked degenerates into chaos,' he wrote in one 1931 article.¹⁰ If anything, James was a liberal humanist who aspired to live by the tenets of the Victorian thinker and cultural critic Matthew Arnold, but his attempt to sincerely follow Arnoldian ideals led him to first implicitly, and then explicitly, criticise British colonial rule. He joined up with other writers around two literary journals, *Trinidad* and then *The Beacon*, the latter of which the editor Albert Gomes recalled 'became the focus of a movement of enlightenment spearheaded by *Trinidad's* angry young men of the Thirties. It was the torpor, the smugness and the hypocrisy of the *Trinidad* of the period that provoked the response which produced both the magazine and the defiant bohemianism of the movement that was built around it.'¹¹

If perhaps not therefore quite an 'instinctive anarchist', James seems to have been something of an 'instinctive Bohemian freelancer'.¹² Arriving in Britain in 1932, witnessing the Lancashire cotton textile workers strike while up in Nelson, and then

¹⁰ C.L.R. James, 'Michel Maxwell Philip: 1829-1888 [1931]' in S. R. Cudjoe (ed.), *Michael Maxwell Philip; A Trinidad Patriot of the 19th Century* (Wellesley: Calaloux, 1999), pp. 102-3.

¹¹ Quoted in R. W. Sander, 'Introduction: *The Beacon* and the Emergence of West Indian Literature', in B. Samaroo (ed.), *The Beacon, Volumes I-IV, 1931-1939* (New York: Kraus, 1977), p. xvii.

¹² The American labour historian George Rawick, who knew James from the 1960s, thought him a 'Victorian hippy'. Personal information from Marcus Rediker, 6 November 2007.

reading Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution amidst the conditions of the Great Depression and the triumph of Hitler's Nazis in 1933 led James to politically radicalise while working as the Manchester Guardian's cricket correspondent. In 1934, James left the British Labour Party which he had joined in solidarity with Ciprani's T.W.A. and joined the tiny British Trotskyist movement, in particular the section of it inside the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.), the Marxist Group.

James orientated to Trotskyism largely through his own critical independent reading, but it was while searching out Marxist classics in London in 1933 that he happened to visit a bookshop on 68 Red Lion Street, Lahr, owned by an anarchist from Germany, Charlie Lahr. Lahr was, according to David Goodway, 'very probably the last' in the line, 'stretching back to the late eighteenth-century', of 'great London radical booksellers-cum-publishers'.¹³ During the 1930s, Jonathan Rose argues, his bookshop was 'a mecca for down and out Nietzscheans and scruffy poets'.¹⁴ James remembers Lahr soon 'got interested in what I was doing and would put aside a book or pamphlet for me he knew or thought would interest me'.¹⁵ The two soon formed what James describes as 'a curious partnership', with Lahr helping James become acquainted with knowledge of the reactionary nature of individual Labour leaders and British trade union bureaucrats. In particular, James learnt much about contemporary Germany and Hitler's rise from power.¹⁶

¹³ D. Goodway, 'Charles Lahr', London Magazine (June/July 1977).

¹⁴ J. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 303.

¹⁵ C.L.R. James, 'Charlie Lahr' [1975], unpublished manuscript in the possession of D. Goodway, pp. 2-3.

¹⁶ James, 'Charlie Lahr', pp. 3-4, 7. James's chapter on the rise of the Nazis in Germany in his 1937 pioneering anti-Stalinist Marxist history of 'the rise and fall of the Communist International', *World Revolution*, would owe much to Lahr's influence and

C.L.R. James's reading of Peter Kropotkin

One might surmise that it was Lahr who also recommended James read the great anarchist Peter Kropotkin's masterful *The Great French Revolution* (1909), a pioneering volume of 'history-from-below' that was admired by Lenin and Trotsky, as part of his ongoing research on the Haitian Revolution.¹⁷ In 1938, in his majestic classic *The Black Jacobins*, James praised Kropotkin for having a 'more instinctive understanding of revolution than any well-known book' on the subject of the French Revolution.¹⁸ For Kropotkin, the 'true fount and origin of the Revolution' was 'the people's readiness to take up arms', noting that it was this that previous 'historians of the Revolution had not done justice – the justice owed to it by the history of civilisation'.¹⁹ In particular, Kropotkin's stress on the revolutionary violence of the peasantry in *The Great French Revolution* seems to have influenced James when he came to understanding and analysing the liberation struggle of the enslaved black

would depart somewhat from Trotsky's analysis. See C.L.R. James, 'Discussions with Trotsky', in C.L.R. James, *At the Rendezvous of Victory; Selected Writings*, Vol. 3 (London: Allison & Busby, 1984), and also James, *Notes on Dialectics*, pp. 38, 149.

¹⁷ As Alfred Rosmer recalled in his 1953 work *Moscou sous Lenine*, Lenin praised *The Great French Revolution* as Kropotkin 'well understood and demonstrated the role of the people in that bourgeois revolution'. See A. Rosmer, *Lenin's Moscow* (London: Bookmarks, 1987), p. 117. Trotsky is also said to have preferred Kropotkin's history to Jaurès'. See D. Guérin, *Le feu du sang: autobiographie politique et charnelle* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1977), p. 133. Thanks to Ian Birchall for these references.

¹⁸ See C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins; Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938), p. 320.

¹⁹ It might be noted in passing that Kropotkin's book was translated into Italian by one Benito Mussolini, then a young revolutionary socialist – and, incidentally, Kropotkin thought Mussolini's translation 'brilliant.' Peter Kropotkin, *The Great French Revolution* (Quebec: Black Rose Books, 1989), pp. xv, 15.

masses of French colonial Saint Domingue. For Kropotkin, ‘the insurrection of the peasants for the abolition of the feudal rights and the recovery of the communal lands’ in the summer of 1789 was ‘the very essence, the foundation of the great Revolution’ and ‘the great rising of the rural districts’ – the jacquerie - which ‘lasted five years, was what enabled the Revolution to accomplish the immense work of demolition which we owe to it’.²⁰

When James described the open revolt and indeed insurrection on the North Plain in Saint Domingue in August 1791, when the enslaved blacks ‘neglected and ignored by all the politicians of every brand and persuasion’ had ‘organised on their own and struck for freedom at last’ he effectively brought out the way in which their uprising resembled the contemporaneous struggles of the French peasantry.

The slaves worked on the land, and, like revolutionary peasants everywhere, they aimed at the extermination of their oppressors...the slaves destroyed tirelessly. Like the peasants in the Jacquerie...they were seeking their salvation in the most obvious way, the destruction of what they knew was the cause of their sufferings; and if they destroyed much it was because they had suffered much.²¹

By 1803, after twelve years of fighting for national independence and social liberation, James noted that the black rebel slave army had been forced to burn Saint Domingue ‘flat so that at the end of the war it was a charred desert’.

²⁰ Kropotkin, *The Great French Revolution*, p. 95.

²¹ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins; Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 68-9, 71.

Why do you burn everything? asked a French officer of a prisoner. We have a right to burn what we cultivate because a man has a right to dispose of his own labour, was the reply of this unknown anarchist.²²

If other writers, above all Trotsky in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, had helped James understand the way in which the enslaved blacks acted like a ‘proto-proletariat’ during the Haitian Revolution, then Kropotkin’s *The Great French Revolution* must have been critical to helping James understand the way in which the rebellious slave army acted like a ‘proto-peasantry’.²³

The other way in which James seems to have been influenced by Kropotkin comes with his discussion of events in revolutionary France itself, particularly the ‘Communism’ in Paris between March 1793 and July 1794.²⁴ ‘In the streets of Paris, Jacques Varlet and Roux were preaching Communism, not in production but in distribution, a natural reaction to the profiteering of the new bourgeoisie’, a comment that essentially summarises Kropotkin’s more detailed discussion of ‘the Communist movement’ in *The Great French Revolution*.²⁵ In 1963, in the revised edition of *The Black Jacobins*, James would continue to praise ‘Kropotkin’s brief history of over fifty years ago’ as ‘the best general book in English [on the French Revolution]...Kropotkin

²² James, *The Black Jacobins* [2001], p. 291.

²³ For further discussion of Trotsky’s critical influence on James here, see C. Høgsbjerg, ‘C.L.R. James and the Black Jacobins’, *International Socialism*, 126 (2010).

²⁴ James, *The Black Jacobins* [2001], p. 112.

²⁵ James, *The Black Jacobins* [2001], p. 144, and Kropotkin, *The Great French Revolution*, pp. 484-492.

thought the Revolution was a wonderful event and was neither afraid nor embarrassed to say so'.²⁶

C.L.R. James, anarchists in Britain and the Spanish Civil War

Yet as well as James's sense of fair play and critical thinking abilities which led him to read widely, of more significance in the making of James into a creative and distinctly anti-statist Marxist was the whole environment of far-left politics in 1930s Britain, and the eclectic milieu around the I.L.P., with its various traditions including council communism and diverse other forms of non-Leninist socialisms.²⁷ Moreover, James, fast emerging as the intellectual driving force of British Trotskyism during the 1930s, was on reasonably good terms with some of the leading anarchists in Britain during this period, as well as activists like the veteran Guy Aldred who he met in Glasgow.²⁸ Almost by accident, James had also crossed paths with Vernon Richards, a young anarchist from Italy who was editor of *Spain and the World*, the main British anarchist paper of the day (previously and subsequently called *Freedom*) which Richards had launched in London in late 1936 in solidarity with the eruption of the Spanish

²⁶ See James, *The Black Jacobins* [2001], p. 332. One should also note James's respect for and subsequent friendship with Daniel Guérin, and his unfinished attempt to translate into English what in 1963 he described as Guérin's 'brilliant, original and well documented iconoclastic study' of the French Revolution, *La Lutte de classes sous la première république, bourgeois et "bras nus", 1793-1797* (1946). For more on James and Guérin, see Rosengarten, *Urbane Revolutionary*, p. 149.

²⁷ G. Cohen, *The Failure of a Dream; The Independent Labour Party from Disaffiliation to World War II* (London: Taurus Academic Studies, 2007), p. 111.

²⁸ Young, *The World of C.L.R. James*, pp. 82-3.

Revolution while only 21 years old.²⁹ As the editor of the Trotskyist journal *Fight* (launched in October 1936), James met Richards on one of his regular visits to the printers at Narod Press in 129/131 Bedford Street, Whitechapel, which was run by a team of Jewish apprentices under ‘Papa Naroditsky’ and his three sons. As Richards remembered, ‘apart from the boys themselves...one had the opportunity to meet other editors supervising their journals’, including ‘the gentle-speaking West Indian Marxist CLR James who was producing his *Fight!* No punch-ups, political or otherwise.’³⁰

Indeed, James would on occasion rally to the side of the tiny British anarchist movement against the I.L.P. and Communist Party of Great Britain (C.P.G.B.) in *Fight*. For example, in November 1937, James would take issue with leading I.L.P. figure Fenner Brockway in *Fight* for forbidding I.L.P. speakers to stand on the Anarchist platform during the May Day celebrations in Britain that year in order to appease the C.P.G.B. In the context of the Spanish Civil War then raging, James noted that in Spain ‘the I.L.P., the Trotskyists and the Anarchists, are in their different ways, on one side of the barricade and the Stalinists on the other’, before returning to the British context to conclude and ask rhetorically of Brockway, ‘will he propose [a] united front, actively in defence of the Spanish Revolution, between the I.L.P., the Trotskyists and the Anarchists?’³¹

²⁹ D. Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow: Left-Libertarian Thought and British Writers from William Morris to Colin Ward* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), p. 126.

³⁰ V. Richards, ‘Printers We Have Known: 1936-1986’, in *Freedom; Anarchist Magazine, Centenary Edition*, 47:9 (October, 1986). *Freedom*, the main British anarchist publication, then called *Spain and the World* used the Narod Press from October 1936-December 1936 and then from June 1937-September 1938. On Richards, see Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow*, p. 126.

³¹ ‘The Struggle for the Fourth International’, *Fight*, 1:11 (November, 1937).

Indeed, Richards's publication *Spain and the World* suggests something about the wider connection between anarchists and the tiny Pan-Africanist movement in Britain in the 1930s. In May 1937, James with his compatriot and boyhood friend, George Padmore, launched the International African Service Bureau (I.A.S.B.) in London, and the title at least of the I.A.S.B.'s 1937 newsletter, *Africa and the World*, seems a little inspired by *Spain and the World*. The presence among the patrons of the I.A.S.B. of the I.L.P. affiliated socialist free-thinker F.A. Ridley, who called for an 'anarcho-Marxist alliance' in 1938, is perhaps significant.³² There are tantalising glimpses in Ethel Mannin's satirical 1945 novel *Comrade O' Comrade* of one key Pan-Africanist in Britain during this period, the Barbadian veteran anti-colonialist and organiser of the Colonial Seamen's Association - Chris Braithwaite - better known under his pseudonym 'Chris Jones' - speaking alongside Emma Goldman on meetings on the Spanish Revolution in London during this period.³³ Such contacts and meetings meant George Padmore would later recall the period 'immediately before the outbreak of the Second World War' as 'one of the most stimulating and constructive in the history of Pan-Africanism', noting that black intellectuals made what he called a 'detailed and systematic study of European political theories and systems' including Anarchism.³⁴

³² F.A. Ridley, 'Anarchism and Marxism', *Controversy*, 2:23 (August 1938). On Ridley, see R. Morrell, *The Gentle Revolutionary; The Life and Work of Frank Ridley, Socialist and Secularist* (London: Freethought History Research Group, 2003).

³³ E. Mannin, *Comrade O Comrade, Comrade O Comrade; or, Low-Down on the Left* (London: Jarrolds, 1947), p. 118. On Braithwaite, see B. Bush, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance; Africa and Britain, 1919-1945* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 222. On Mannin, see A. Croft, 'Ethel Mannin: The Red Rose of Love and the Red Flower of Liberty', in A. Ingram and D. Patai (eds), *Rediscovering Forgotten Radicals; British Women Writers, 1889-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

³⁴ G. Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism? The Coming Struggle for Africa* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1956), p. 151. On 26 February 1943, Braithwaite was billed

For James, of critical importance while in Britain during the 1930s for sowing the seeds of his later break with orthodox Trotskyism was the impact of the Moscow Trials and the Spanish Civil War - two external events which exposed the counter-revolutionary nature of Stalinism. These were also to be critical for the political evolution of James's key intellectual collaborator during the 1940s, Raya Dunayevskaya. As Peter Hudis has suggested, the Spanish Civil War in particular

presented revolutionaries with what Dunayevskaya was later to call the 'absolute contradiction' of our age - the emergence of counter-revolution from within revolution. It was not only the Stalinists, however, whose role was compromised by these events. For the various anti-Stalinist tendencies, be they Trotskyist, anarchist or independent, failed to successfully combat the new phenomenon of counter-revolution emerging from within revolution.³⁵

In response to the apparent intellectual and political failure to have fully prepared for the new reality of Stalinist counter-revolutionary terror in Spain, Dunayevskaya, Trotsky's Russian language secretary from 1937-38, later recalled how she first became critical of the limitations of Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet Union as a 'degenerated workers' state' during this tumultuous period. 'Out of the Spanish Civil War there emerged a new kind of revolutionary who posed questions, not only against Stalinism, but against Trotskyism, indeed against all established Marxisms.'³⁶

to speak on 'Colonial Blacks on the move' at the anarchist-run Freedom Press Rooms on 27 Belsize Road in London. See *New Leader*, 6 February 1943.

³⁵ R. Dunayevskaya, *The Marxist-Humanist Theory of State-Capitalism* (Chicago: News and Letters, 1992), pp. x-xi.

³⁶ Dunayevskaya, *The Marxist-Humanist Theory of State-Capitalism*, pp. x-xi.

James similarly began to ask questions of Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet Union in *The Revolution Betrayed*, a work which Trotsky had completed in June 1936 and so before the Moscow Trials and the Stalinist suppression of the P.O.U.M. and anarchists in Barcelona. Indeed, by the time James wrote his pioneering anti-Stalinist Marxist history of 'the rise and fall of the Communist International', *World Revolution*, published in April 1937, while still formerly accepting Trotsky's analysis he was already showing an openness to those arguing that the Soviet Union had become a state capitalist society. According to Special Branch operatives, when James spoke in London in defence of Trotsky after the first Moscow Trial on 9 September 1936, 'he compared the conditions of the British and Russian workers, adding that a form of capitalism was creeping into the Soviet State'.³⁷ In the course of researching *World Revolution*, James read the works of a number of people who felt the Soviet Union was now state-capitalist including two former leading German Communists, Arthur Rosenberg and Karl Korsch - the latter James apparently met in 1936.³⁸

Another influence was the former leading French Communist Boris Souvarine. Born Boris Lifschitz in 1885 in Kiev, Souvarine, who clearly had some sort of anarchist sympathies early on as he took his name from the Russian anarchist bomb-planter in Emile Zola's *Germinal* - had been a founding member of the French

³⁷ The National Archives, London, KV/2/1824/1z. 'Stalin, he said, was striving for National Socialism, while Trotsky was upholding International Socialism.'

³⁸ C.L.R. James, *World Revolution 1917-1936; The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (New Jersey: Humanity Books, 1994), pp. 168, 175, 178, 185. A. Rosenberg, *A History of Bolshevism; From Marx to the First Five Years' Plan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), pp. viii, 236-7. James's meeting with Korsch is recorded by Kent Worcester, from an interview in 1981 with American historian George Rawick. K. Worcester, *C.L.R. James; A Political Biography* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996). p. 30. On Korsch's analysis of state capitalism, see the discussion in M. van der Linden, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union; A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates Since 1917* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), pp. 41-4.

Communist Party. Having known Trotsky since meeting him in Paris during the Great War, Souvarine had spoken bravely against Stalin in Moscow. Though Trotsky had high hopes of Souvarine forming a viable French Trotskyist movement, since 1929, Souvarine had broken off good relations with Trotsky, attacking Leninism and describing the Soviet Union as 'state capitalist'. Souvarine's 1935 biography of Stalin maintained that 'the Federation of Socialist Soviet Republics, the very name a four fold contradiction of the reality, has long ago ceased to exist', and 'Soviet state capitalism', 'so-called Soviet society' rests 'on its own method of exploitation of man by man'.³⁹ James seems to have met up with Souvarine in Paris in 1938 and would translate his *Staline* into English in 1939, generously describing it as 'a book with an anarchist bias against the dictatorship of the proletariat but irreproachably documented, very fair, and full of insight'.⁴⁰

Indeed, while James himself in *World Revolution* remained formally loyal to Trotsky's characterisation of the Soviet Union in *The Revolution Betrayed*, he also presented much evidence which suggested that Stalinist Russia could not in any way be described as a 'workers' state', even a 'degenerated' one. As James noted, 'the fiction of workers' control, after twenty years of the revolution, is dead. But the bureaucracy fears the proletariat. It knows, none better, the temper of the people it so mercilessly cheats and exploits.'⁴¹ For Trotsky, the bureaucracy was a brutal oppressor, but was

³⁹ B. Souvarine, *Stalin: A Critical Survey of Bolshevism* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1940), pp. 564, 570. See also C. Phelps, 'C.L.R. James and the Theory of State Capitalism', in N. Lichtenstein (ed.), *American Capitalism; Social Thought and Political Economy in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p.165.

⁴⁰ James, *World Revolution*, p. 140, and Worcester, C.L.R. James, p. 45.

⁴¹ James, *World Revolution*, p. 371.

not actually exploiting the working class.⁴² Yet for James, the first Five Year Plan meant that ‘the remnants of workers control were wiped away’.⁴³ ‘The Russian proletariat, after its Herculean efforts, seems to have exchanged one set of masters for another, while the very basis of the proletarian state is being undermined beneath its feet.’ James declared the methods of Stalin’s industrialisation drive seemed to be just ‘discovering what the capitalists knew hundreds of years ago...where will all this end?’⁴⁴

Such ideas were in the air on the far-left during the 1930s, and so James’s criticisms of the idea that state ownership of the means of production necessarily meant socialism were not unique.⁴⁵ After writing *World Revolution*, for example, James would in 1937 write an introduction for *Red Spanish Notebook*, an eyewitness account of revolutionary Spain through the eyes of two surrealist poets who had gone to fight for the P.O.U.M., Mary Low and the Cuban Trotskyist Juan Breá. Breá had concluded by pondering the motives of the Soviet Union with respect to revolutionary Spain, noting ‘let us suppose that Russia is no longer a proletarian state but is making her first

⁴² Trotsky felt the Stalinist bureaucracy was a ‘temporary’ phenomenon, and in 1939 argued ‘Might we not place ourselves in a ludicrous position if we fixed to the Bonapartist oligarchy the nomenclature of a new ruling class just a few years or even a few months prior to its inglorious downfall?’ See A. Callinicos, *Trotskyism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 21.

⁴³ James, *World Revolution*, p. 296.

⁴⁴ See James, *World Revolution*, pp. 17, 415.

⁴⁵ The best general survey and discussion of state capitalist theories is Marcel van der Linden’s *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union*. One former comrade of James’s from the Marxist Group, Dr. Ryan L. Worrall in 1939 would put forward a substantial and sophisticated state capitalist analysis in the I.L.P. journal *Left*. Phelps, ‘C.L.R. James and the Theory of State Capitalism,’ pp. 165-6, 331-2.

steps towards capitalism'.⁴⁶ One other witness to Stalinist counter-revolution in Spain was George Orwell, who seems to have met up with James in the summer of 1937 after returning to Britain and who once described *World Revolution* as a 'very able book'. In his 1938 classic work of revolutionary journalism, *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell described the 'socialism in one country' being built in Russia by Stalin as little more than 'a planned state-capitalism with the grab-motive left intact'.⁴⁷

On 3 September 1938, at the founding conference of the Fourth International, James intervened forcefully in the debate challenging the orthodox position that Trotskyists should call for the defence of the U.S.S.R. in case of war.⁴⁸ A month later, James would travel to America, meet Trotsky himself for discussions on the strategy and tactics of the black liberation struggle in the U.S., and steadily establish himself as an original and creative thinker inside the American Trotskyist movement during the 1940s.⁴⁹ Trotsky's 1940 comment on James as a 'bohemian freelancer' therefore has to be seen in the context of the split in American Trotskyism over the class nature of the Soviet Union, and the position James took in this split which saw him side against

⁴⁶ M. Low and J. Breá, *Red Spanish Notebook; The First Six Months of the Revolution and the Civil War* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1937), pp. 254-5.

⁴⁷ P. Davison (ed.), *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, Vol. 11 (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998), p. 87. L. Cripps, *C.L.R. James; Memories and Commentaries* (London: Cornwall Books, 1997), p. 21. G. Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 83. As Orwell noted of the Soviet Union in 1939, 'Is it Socialism, or is it a peculiarly vicious form of state capitalism? All the political controversies...for two years past really circle round this question.' Quoted in J. Newsinger, 'Destroying the Myth: George Orwell and Soviet Communism', in P. Flewers (ed.), *George Orwell: Enigmatic Socialist* (London: Socialist Platform, 2005), p. 138.

⁴⁸ Socialist Platform, *C.L.R. James and British Trotskyism; An Interview* (London: Socialist Platform, 1987), p. 10. See also I. Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast; Trotsky: 1929-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 419-21.

⁴⁹ For my take on these discussions, see C. Høgsbjerg, 'The prophet and Black Power: Trotsky on race in the US', *International Socialism*, 121 (2008).

Trotsky and with the minority around Max Shachtman. James's subsequent embrace and development of the theory of state capitalism after Trotsky's death would steadily enable him and others to help clarify Marx's meaning of socialism itself as the self-emancipation of the working class anew, where state ownership of the means of production was not recognised as any kind of end in itself, to be equated with 'socialism', but merely a means for achieving the end goal of the emancipation of the working class through the creation of what Lenin in *The State and Revolution* had called the 'Commune-State'.⁵⁰ After exploring some of the ways in which James politically evolved from parliamentary socialism to a politics based on the revolutionary democratic tradition of 'socialism from below' during the 1930s, we shall now examine how his later intellectual development in the United States from 1938 to 1953 would come to influence one currently influential strand of autonomist political theory.

The evolution of C.L.R. James's mature Marxism

In *Beyond a Boundary*, James's 1963 semi-autobiographical classic cultural history of cricket in its colonial context, he had this to say when he looked back at his political evolution after arriving from Trinidad to encounter a Europe devastated by the First World War and the economic slump and now witnessing the alarming rise of fascism:

⁵⁰ In 1956, James would borrow 'Every cook can govern', a phrase of Lenin's, as a title for a Correspondence pamphlet on 'democracy in Ancient Greece'. Ian Birchall has reminded me that it is worth remembering that Lenin's own relations with anarchism were rather more complex than is often acknowledged. *The State and Revolution* was widely accused of 'anarchism' when it was first published, and Lenin made considerable efforts to engage with visiting anarchists in Moscow, particularly at the Second Congress of the Communist International in the summer of 1920. See, for example, Rosmer, *Lenin's Moscow*, pp. 51-65.

Fiction-writing drained out of me and was replaced by politics. I became a Marxist, a Trotskyist. I published large books and small articles on these and other kindred subjects. I wrote and spoke. Like many others, I expected war, and during or after the war social revolution. In 1938 a lecture tour took me to the United States and I stayed there fifteen years. The war came. It did not bring soviets and proletarian power. Instead the bureaucratic-totalitarian monster grew stronger and spread. As early as 1941 I had begun to question the premises of Trotskyism. It took nearly a decade of incessant labour and collaboration to break with it and reorganise my Marxist ideas to cope with the post-war world. That was a matter of doctrine, of history, of economics and politics.⁵¹

To attempt to do justice to this ‘reorganisation’ of Marxism by James is impossible here. Using his Trotskyist pseudonym, ‘J.R. Johnson’, and together with Raya Dunayevskaya or ‘Freddie Forest’ as she was known and Grace Lee Boggs and others became known collectively as the ‘Johnson-Forest Tendency’ inside 1940s American Trotskyism. It is noteworthy that James and his group in the Second World War and its aftermath drew inspiration from Lenin’s attempts to come to terms with the disaster that had engulfed the working class movement during the First World War. So for example, just as the exiled Lenin in 1914 turned in despair to the library and a serious study of Hegelian dialectics to produce his ‘Philosophical Notebooks’, so James, Dunayevskaya and Lee in their search to find a philosophy of revolution now

⁵¹ C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1969), p. 149.

also spent hours engaged in serious study of the German philosopher. One product of this was James's 1948 work *Notes on Dialectics* (subtitled 'Hegel, Marx, Lenin').

Though a systematic exposition is impossible, it is vital to have some sense of how the Johnson-Forest Tendency attempted to, in James's own words 'work through Leninism' in order to try to come to terms with the crisis that had overcome not just Marxism but the wider working class movement in a period dominated by Stalinism and Fascism.⁵² This 'working through' Leninism necessitated a break with the theory and practice of 'orthodox Trotskyism', a movement James had been committed to since becoming an organised revolutionary in 1934. However, this break was conceived as a conscious attempt to not only return to classical Marxism as understood by Marx and Lenin - but also to develop that tradition so it fitted with the new realities of the post war world. It was to make, as James put it grandly, 'our own leap from the heights of Leninism'.⁵³ For Trotsky the founding of the Fourth International in 1938 represented the solution to what he called the historic 'crisis of revolutionary leadership' gripping the official political organisations of the working class movement. Against this perspective, the Johnson-Forest Tendency during the 1940s felt the critical crisis of the age was instead what they called the 'crisis of the self-mobilisation of the proletariat', and so argued for a greater stress and focus on what James called 'free creative activity' and 'disciplined spontaneity', the self-activity of the working class itself autonomous of official political parties and trade union bureaucracies.⁵⁴

⁵² James, *Notes on Dialectics*, p. 135.

⁵³ James, *Notes on Dialectics*, p. 150.

⁵⁴ James et al, *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, pp. 58-9. James, *Notes on Dialectics*, p. 118.

Yet James, writing while still a member of the official Trotskyist movement, still felt in an important sense that the struggle to build a Fourth International amidst a period of world-historic defeats for the international working class movement had at least preserved the honour and the tradition of revolutionary Communism associated with Marx and Lenin. The new found stress on the self-activity of the working class in the work of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, James insisted, had not come from anarchism. As James put it in Notes on Dialectics,

we have arrived, are arriving at Marxist ideas for our time out of Trotskyism. We would not come out of Stalinism, or social democracy, or anarchism. Despite every blunder, and we have not spared them, Trotskyism was and remains in the truly dialectical sense, the only theoretical revolutionary current since Leninism...we came from there and could have only come from there.⁵⁵

However, James's 'Marxist ideas for our time' would ultimately come to influence the origins of a new and different current of political thought to either anarchism or Marxism in its classical forms – autonomism. Though as Steve Wright suggests, 'the core premises of autonomist Marxism were first developed in Italy during the 1960s and 1970s' when militants first sought to confront Marx's Capital with 'the real study of a real factory' in 1960s Italy, the intellectual origins date back earlier, and include the work of James and the Johnson-Forest Tendency

⁵⁵ James, Notes on Dialectics, p. 151.

more generally during the 1940s.⁵⁶ As Wright, and others including Harry Cleaver have noted, Romano Alquati's pioneering 1961 'Report of the new forces' at F.I.A.T. was not totally unprecedented. During the momentous year of 1956 and for two years subsequently, for example, Daniel Mothé, a member of the French revolutionary group Socialisme ou Barbarie around Cornelius Castoriadis and a milling machine operator at the Renault Billancourt vehicle factory, kept a diary. This was subsequently published as *Journal d'un Ouvrier, 1956-58*, and translated into Italian in 1960. Even earlier, in 1954, Danilo Montaldi, a 'dissident Marxist' sociologist had published in *Battaglia Comunista* a translation of a 1947 work entitled *The American Worker* by a member of the Johnson-Forest Tendency Phil Singer (who used the pseudonym Paul Romano). This work had first been translated into French by the comrades of Socialisme ou Barbarie who published it in their journal in parts from 1949 onwards, before being translated from the French by Montaldi.⁵⁷ It therefore seems important to explore in detail the circumstances in which Phil Singer's highly influential work came to be written.

C.L.R. James and the making of *The American Worker*

Phil Singer was an American car worker at a General Motors plant who in his late twenties had kept a diary which with the help of Grace Lee Boggs he had written up in order to portray 'Life in the Factory', 'what the workers are thinking and doing

⁵⁶ S. Wright, *Storming Heaven; Class composition and struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 1, 3.

⁵⁷ Wright, *Storming Heaven*, pp. 1, 3. H. Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979), pp. 50, 53, 183. On Mothé, see I. Birchall, 'Nineteen Fifty-Six and the French Left', *Revolutionary History*, 9:3 (2006).

while actually at work on the bench or on the line'.⁵⁸ For Singer, most significant was his recording of not simply the degrading experience of factory work but also the everyday attempts by workers to resist at the point of production through struggles for dignity and a meaningful existence.

This pamphlet is directed to the rank and file worker and its intention is to express those innermost thoughts which the worker rarely talks about even to his fellow workers. In keeping a diary, so to speak, of the day to day reactions to factory life, I hoped to uncover the reasons for the workers deep dissatisfaction which has reached a peak in recent years and has expressed itself in the latest strikes and spontaneous walkouts.⁵⁹

The contribution made by Singer himself to the making of *The American Worker*, was then clearly profound – yet it would be mistaken to assume this was not essentially also a ‘collective work’ of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, with James himself playing a particularly critical role. As Grace Lee Boggs, who under her pseudonym Ria Stone wrote a lengthy piece of commentary entitled ‘The Reconstruction of Society’ as an afterword to Singer’s commentary in *The American Worker*, recalled,

because CLR could not be publicly active, we acted as his transmission belt to the larger American community...one of CLR’s great gifts was that he could detect the special abilities and interests of individuals and encourage them

⁵⁸ [P. Singer], *The American Worker* (Part 1: Life in the Factory), online at ‘www.prole.info’, p. 1.

⁵⁹ [Singer], *The American Worker*, p. 1.

to use these to enrich the movement and at the same time enlarge themselves...Phil Singer, a young GM worker, was always talking about the frustrations of the rank-and-file worker in the plant. CLR proposed that he keep a journal of his experiences. These were subsequently published in *The American Worker*.⁶⁰

In a sense this does not sound that original, as attempting to understand society from the standpoint of working class experience at the point of production had, ever since Marx's own *Workers Inquiry* of 1880 if not before, at least been nominally at the heart of classical Marxism. As James had noted in his discussion of 'Lenin and Socialism' back in 1937 in *World Revolution*,

The creative capacity of the masses – he [Lenin] believed in it as no other leader of the workers ever did. That creative capacity had hitherto been seen only in revolution. The Soviet system based on the masses in the factories was to organise this creativeness not only for purpose of government but also for production, linking the two closer and closer together until ultimately the all-embracing nature of production by the whole of society rendered the State superfluous.⁶¹

Indeed, the British Trotskyist journal *Fight* which James had edited in the 1930s had carried a regular series entitled 'On the Job' in 1937, featuring for example 'The

⁶⁰ G. Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 62.

⁶¹ James, *World Revolution*, p. 123.

Building Worker' by a young member of the Marxist Group who was a carpenter, Arthur Alexander Ballard, and then 'From the Engineer's Bench' by a member of the engineers union, the A.E.U.⁶² Trotsky himself in 1939 famously criticised the American Trotskyist paper, Socialist Appeal, on the grounds that 'is a paper for the workers' and not a workers paper... You do not hear at all how the workers' live, fight, clash with the police or drink whisky... the task is not to make a paper through the joint forces of a skilled editorial board but to encourage the workers to speak for themselves.'⁶³

Yet in a sense James's encouraging of a fellow member of the Johnson-Forest Tendency to keep a diary detailing his experience at work was quite original - as the group's distinctive perspectives of a shift towards 'state capitalism' from the 1930s on not simply in Russia but internationally profoundly shaped what became The American Worker. As the leaders of the Johnson-Forest Tendency put it themselves in 1947,

the Russian question is only a part of the world crisis. The decisive stage of economic development is statification of production. Statification of production is not a phrase or a description. It marks the capitulation of anarchic capitalist society to the planning of the invading socialist society. The planning, however, torn by class contradictions, repeats the fundamental features of capitalist antagonisms in their most barbarous form. Statification carries in itself the most profound social awareness of the proletariat, and its social structure repeatedly propels the proletariat on the road to the complete transformation of society... The barbarism of capitalism was concretely

⁶² Fight, 1:3 (January, 1937) and Fight, 1:4 (February, 1937).

⁶³ Trotsky, In Defense of Marxism, p. 112.

demonstrated in Russia. But it was the American proletariat which concretised for us the necessarily abstract conception of the creative power of the proletariat in industry as a force for the social regeneration of society. The work of American industrial psychologists and the observations of proletarian comrades whom we had developed opened this door to us. The Johnson-Forest Tendency will soon publish a pamphlet by Phil Romano and Ria Stone which will deal fully with this question from both a practical and a theoretical point of view.⁶⁴

The American Worker then was about re-affirming and re-emphasising the Johnson-Forest Tendency's 'conception of the creative power of the proletariat in industry as a force for the social regeneration of society' at a time when 'socialism' had come to be seen merely as state ownership without any accompanying revolutionary democracy or workers' control.⁶⁵ In particular, James's individual contribution to developing this conception should be noted. As the American Trotskyist Stanley Weir recalled,

⁶⁴ J.R. Johnson, F. Forest, M. Harvey, *Trotskyism in the United States, 1940-47: Balance Sheet; The Workers Party and the Johnson-Forest Tendency* (Detroit: Johnson-Forest Tendency, 1947), pp. 8-9. See also Worcester, C.L.R. James, pp. 88-9, Rosengarten, *Urbane Revolutionary*, p. 71 and P. Buhle, *C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 70.

⁶⁵ The work was heralded as being highly original at the time. As Castoriadis later recalled, 'for the first time there was something that was absent totally from the entire Marxist tradition and from Karl Marx himself except in the Economic and Philosophical manuscripts of 1844: that is the acknowledgement that being a worker does not mean that one is just working or that one is just being exploited. Being a worker means living with workers, being in solidarity with other workers, living in working class quarters of the city, having women who are either workers themselves or, if they are not, their predicament is the same or even worse than that of the men.' C. Castoriadis, 'C.L.R. James and the fate of Marxism', in S. R. Cudjoe and W. E. Cain (eds), *C.L.R. James; His Intellectual Legacies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 283.

James was the first and only leader in the entire Trotskyist movement, from which I heard discussion of the special form of workers' control which develops in every workplace naturally and informally. He knew of the existence of informal cultures and that they were the basis from which to broach the entire question of workers' control...For me, he introduced the ideas which demonstrated the value of what is done socially from below on the job to get out production and to survive.⁶⁶

C.L.R. James, *The American Worker* and Italian workerism

We can now tentatively assess the impact of the Johnson-Forest Tendency as expressed through *The American Worker* on Italian workerism, something which as we have seen was possible thanks in no small part to the translations of Danilo Montaldi.⁶⁷

As Montaldi noted, *The American Worker* expressed

⁶⁶ S. Weir, 'Revolutionary Artist', in P. Buhle (ed.), *C.L.R. James: His Life and Work* (London: Allison & Busby, 1986), pp. 183-4. It is a pity Weir never seems to have had the chance to hear the Palestinian Trotskyist Tony Cliff, based in Britain, as James was not quite so unique in this. See for example, Cliff's discussion in *The Employers' Offensive* (1970) of how the 'demand for workers' control' is 'the most important fact about modern industrial capitalism – for the "bloody-mindedness" of workers, and the thousand and one ways in which they express their demand, implicitly and explicitly, for control over their own lives, is the embryo of workers' power, of socialism.' See T. Cliff, *In the Thick of Workers' Struggle: Selected Writings, Vol. 2* (London: Bookmarks, 2002), p. 290.

⁶⁷ 'A young participant in the Resistance in Cremona, Montaldi became the bridgeman between Socialisme ou Barbarie and its intercontinental ramifications on the one hand and the Italian non-Stalinist groups on the left of the Italian CP and SP on the other.' See F. Gambino, 'Only Connect', in P. Buhle (ed.), *C.L.R. James: His Life and Work* (London: Allison & Busby, 1986), p. 199.

with great force and profundity, the idea - practically forgotten by the Marxist movement after the publication of Capital Volume 1 - that before being the adherent of a party, a militant of the revolution or the subject of a future socialist power, the worker is a being who lives above all in capitalist production and the factory; and that it is in production that the revolt against exploitation, the capacity to construct a superior type of society, along with class solidarity of other workers and hatred for exploitation and exploiters - both the classic bosses of yesterday and the impersonal bureaucrats of today and tomorrow - are formed.⁶⁸

Moreover, for those on the anti-Stalinist far-left in France and especially Italy during the 1950s, *The American Worker* was even more remarkable given the anti-Americanism of the Communist dominated official Left in the context of the Cold War. As Ferruccio Gambino, a sociologist from the University of Padua and co-founder of two 1960s Italian workerist journals *Quaderni Rossi* – ‘Red Notebooks’ - and *Potero Operaio* – ‘Workers Power’ - recalls, after the brutal suppression of the Hungarian Revolution by Russian tanks,

tiny groups and individuals in Southern Europe discovered and read “the American comrades” - two words that at long last it was possible to put together again - “the American comrades” who contributed to *Socialisme ou Barbarie*...The conditions of the working class looked strikingly similar throughout the so-called First World - and, we argued at that time, it could not be dissimilar in the Second World. State capitalism was a living category

⁶⁸ Quoted in Wright, *Storming Heaven*, pp. 23-4.

whereby we could relate in solidarity to the people who were bearing the brunt of the opposition to “actuated socialism”.⁶⁹

In the 1960s, Gambino and another historian of American labour, Bruno Cartosio from Milan – would eventually establish relations with James and his loyal disciple Martin Glaberman, and the publishing of James himself into Italian began with *The Black Jacobins* in 1968 – and continued subsequently.⁷⁰ Links were established with the Jamesians in Detroit at the heart of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers while the translation of other American Jamesians followed in the 1970s.⁷¹ As Cleaver noted in 1979, ‘works by C.L.R. James, James Boggs, George Rawick, and

⁶⁹ Gambino, ‘Only Connect’, pp. 197-8.

⁷⁰ M. Glaberman (ed.), *Marxism for Our Times: C.L.R. James on Revolutionary Organisation* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), p. xxii. P. Buhle, ‘Political Styles of C.L.R. James: An Introduction’, in P. Buhle (ed.), *C.L.R. James: His Life and Work* (London: Allison & Busby, 1986), p. 26. Gambino was especially inspired by the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit – a Jamesian group whose first interview abroad was with *Potere Operaio* around the same time as *The Black Jacobins* - which had inspired the League of Revolutionary Black Workers - appeared in Italian. As Gambino recalled, ‘the interview of the League [of Revolutionary Black Workers] in *Potere Operaio* led to more than the well-known slogan of *Potere Operaio*: “Turin, Detroit, Togliattigrad, class struggle will win”. It signalled the death knell of the isolated within the narrow confines of the official left’s “Italian road to socialism”.’ Gambino, ‘Only Connect’, p. 198.

⁷¹ George Rawick published with others including Antonio Negri – *Operai e stato* [Workers and the state] (Milan, Feltrinelli, 1972), *Lo schiavo americano dal tramonto all'alba* (Milan, Feltrinelli, 1973), with Harold Baron and Hubert Gutman *Da schiavo a proletario* [From slave to proletarian] (Turin: Musolini, 1973). In 1976 Martin Glaberman published *Classe operaia, imperialismo, rivoluzione negli USA* [Working class, imperialism, and revolution in the USA] (Turin: Musolini), with an introduction by Bruno Cartosio. See F. Fasce, ‘American Labor History, 1973-1983: Italian Perspectives’, *Reviews in American History*, 14:4 (1986), pp. 602, 610-611. See also C. Taylor, ‘James and those Italians’ [2009], ‘<http://clrjames.blogspot.com/2009/09/james-and-those-italians.html>’, and P. Buhle, ‘From a Biographer’s Notebook: The Field of C.L.R. James Scholarship’, in S. R. Cudjoe and W. E. Cain (eds.), *C.L.R. James; His Intellectual Legacies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 449.

Martin Glaberman, among others, have been translated into Italian and probably received wider circulation and discussion in Italy than in the United States'.⁷²

Overall, though it has not been possible here to examine James's influence on Italian autonomism more fully, it might still be possible to draw a few conclusions. In one sense it is a pity that after helping to provide a critical focus on the self-activity of the working class at the point of production, a stress on the possibilities which flowed from wildcat strikes and other unofficial industrial action, that more of James's writings were not translated into Italian during the 1960s. It is possible that they might have ensured less of a subsequent retreat from revolutionary Marxism towards an ultimately elitist substitution of the actions of a minority for the mass action of the working class among many in the Italian autonomists. From joining the Trotskyist movement in 1934 up until his death in 1989, James – unlike say some of the current 'thought leaders' of autonomism such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri - never lost sight of either the central importance of working class struggle or the need for some sort of revolutionary Marxist organisation.⁷³ Moreover, as Chamsy El-Ojeili has noted, compared to the majority of early Italian workerist theorists who failed adequately to consider the lives of workers outside of the purely economic battles at the point of

⁷² Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, p. 184. A. Lichtenstein, 'George Rawick's "From Sundown to Sunup" and the Dialectic of Marxian Slave Studies, *Reviews in American History*, 24:4 (1996). See also the excellent forthcoming comparative discussion by Nicola Pizzolato, 'Transnational radicals: labor dissent and political activism in Detroit and Turin (1950-1970)', *International Review of Social History* (forthcoming).

⁷³ J. Fuller, 'The new workerism; the politics of the Italian autonomists [1980]', *International Socialism*, 92 (2001). For some brief discussion of the possible influence of James on Hardt and Negri, see P. Hudis, 'Workers as Reason: The Development of a New Relation of Worker and Intellectual in American Marxist Humanism', *Historical Materialism*, 11:4 (2003), p. 290.

production, James was more ‘attentive to the wider cultural aspects of such an investigation of proletarian working life’.⁷⁴

However, that said, James’s own reification of spontaneity, and own gradual abandonment of the rich classical Bolshevik legacy of strategy and tactics after his 1951 break with official Trotskyism were not without consequences of their own. They meant that his subsequent groups of supporters, like even the best elements of the Italian autonomists, were unable to ever really satisfactorily develop a new form of revolutionary organisation able to adequately relate to the key insight of ‘working class autonomy’.⁷⁵ It is possible that this was because that insight in itself, without an adequate material understanding of the wider economic and political context outside the factory, and the wider, uneven consciousness among the working class where forms of reformist politics are inevitably almost always dominant - even inside the most militant factory itself - can only reveal so much. Yet though James, the ‘bohemian freelancer’,

⁷⁴ C. El-Ojeili, ‘Book Review: “Many Flowers, Little Fruit”? the Dilemmas of Workerism’, Thesis Eleven, 79 (2004), pp. 114-5. After they left the official Trotskyist movement, the Johnson-Forest Tendency in their newspaper Correspondence noted that ‘From the stories we get everyday from the shops, we can see a new form of struggle emerging. It never seems to be carried to its complete end, yet its existence is continuous. The real essence of this struggle and its ultimate goal is: a better life, a new society, the emergence of the individual as a human being...This is the struggle to establish here and now a new culture, a workers’ culture...It is this that we must be extremely sensitive to. We must watch with an eagle eye every change or indication of the things that these changes reflect’.

⁷⁵ For my discussion of James’s failed attempt to build a ‘Marxist Group’ in Britain during the tumult of 1956 after he was forced to leave McCarthyist America in 1953, see C. Høgsbjerg, ‘Beyond the Boundary of Leninism? C.L.R. James and 1956,’ Revolutionary History, 9:3 (2006). This article explores the republication of the Johnson-Forest Tendency’s 1950 work *State Capitalism and World Revolution* in the aftermath of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, with a new preface by James, through an anarchist publisher in London, Philip Sansom. The republication of *State Capitalism and World Revolution* after the Hungarian Revolution was a collaboration by James’s ‘Marxist Group’ with Castoriadis and Theo Massen from *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France and Cajo Brendel, a Dutch ‘Council Communist’, then researching autonomous class struggles in Britain for a book.

ultimately failed to make his great leap forward ‘from the heights of Leninism’, his creative, revolutionary and democratic ‘dissident Marxism’ nonetheless deserves critical appreciation and study by anti-capitalist scholars and activists today.

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