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REVIEW

Urbane Revolutionary: C.L.R. James and the Struggle for a New Society
FRANK ROSENGARTEN
Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008

Rethinking Race, Politics, and Poetics: C.L.R. James' Critique of Modernity
BRETT ST LOUIS
Abingdon: Routledge, 2007

Reviewed by **CHRISTIAN HØGSBJERG**

Remembering C.L.R. James, Forgetting C.L.R. James

In 1937, eighteen years after the murder of Rosa Luxemburg, C.L.R. James (1901-1989) noted that 'a study of her life and work is badly needed'.[1] In contrast, in the eighteen years or so after the death of James himself in 1989, and even for a short period before that, a plethora of studies of his life and work have appeared. And yet, as David Craven notes in a superb recent article on James, 'few defining figures of the 20th century are as famous and as unknown'.[2] Two new studies of James's life and work are therefore to be welcomed as part of the growing scholarship on someone who Paul Buhle noted in his lifetime was 'a prophet neglected if not scorned'.[3] While it will of course be impossible to do justice here to all the issues raised in either work, this review will look at Frank Rosengarten and Brett St Louis's studies in turn, examining their main strengths and weaknesses, while taking issue with one central underlying theme in both: namely both authors represent James as someone whose Marxism was not of defining importance. For Rosengarten, James's commitment to 'the principle of the creativity of the masses', 'his appreciation of what ordinary people can accomplish by themselves in the struggle for liberation, outside and independent of organised political parties' is what differentiates him in a fundamental sense from 'Marxism' (p. 26). St Louis insists on seeing James as a 'humanist' at least as much as a Marxist (p. 5). Yet by either consciously downplaying or unconsciously misrepresenting James's Marxism, both authors unfortunately only end up weakening their own laudable intentions to pay James the kind of intellectual respect he deserves but which he failed to receive in his own lifetime. This review will aim to not simply defend the central importance of Marxism for James but also suggest that as much as anything it is precisely this that gives so much of his work a rare urgency and critical relevance in the twenty-first century.

Rosengarten's Urbane Revolutionary

Frank Rosengarten's Urbane Revolutionary looks set to be an important point of reference for James scholars for the foreseeable future. A respected Gramsci scholar, Rosengarten has not only assiduously made his way through the vast bulk of the voluminous secondary literature on James but has also made sustained and

[1] James 1994, p. 96. Many thanks to Ian Birchall, Paul Blackledge, Robert Hill, and David Howell for comments on this article in draft.
[2] Craven 2005, p. 147.
[3] Buhle 2006, p. 17.

effective use of James's considerable correspondence with a wider variety of people from the 1940s onwards and his later autobiographical fragments. Much of this material is brought to light for the first time here and, as Rosengarten notes, it does shed new light on James, particularly his later years:

> James's exchange of letters with his friends and comrades are as illuminating about the gestation and development of his ideas as are the Prison Notebooks about the thought of Antonio Gramsci, or The Arcade[s] Project about the mind and the method of Walter Benjamin (p. 74).

Since the vast bulk of this correspondence has not been published and at the time of writing remains closed to scholars, one has to take such a judgment on trust, but students of James will remain indebted to Rosengarten for his careful and skilful use of a wide sample of them.

Rosengarten is insightful on James's early years growing up in colonial Trinidad where he has engaged in some original research using the Port of Spain Gazette. He provides a detailed and convincing discussion of James's novel Minty Alley and his early implicitly anticolonial short stories about the life of the poor in the 'barrack-yards' of Trinidad's capital, which were also 'attempts to demystify the lure and the power of money in a civilisation dominated by capitalism' (p. 171). He provides a brief description of James's intellectual transition 'from reformism to revolutionary socialism' after his move to Britain in 1932, including discussion of James's ten month stay in the cotton textile town of Nelson, in Lancashire. 'Like Rousseau, James was always appreciative of small communities where people could join together easily and naturally to deal with issues of general interest' (p. 21), something which in part explains why he was always so hopeful about the potential possibilities for 'West Indian self-government'.

There is also a considerable amount of new information on the Johnson-Forest Tendency (JFT) that James ('Johnson') formed with Raya Dunayevskaya ('Forest') and others including Grace Lee Boggs and Martin Glaberman within the American Trotskyist movement in 1941, not long after James's arrival from Britain in 1938. Rosengarten makes use of the Internal Bulletin of the JFT produced for three months during 1947 while an independent organisation in the midst of leaving the Workers' Party to rejoin the Socialist Workers' Party, and the Bulletin of the JFT produced after leaving the official Trotskyist movement altogether in 1951. He provides often extensive and useful political portraits of the other leading figures (and information on a host of more minor members) of the JFT, something which helps to give a sense of the collective nature of the group as a whole as well as going some way to overcoming the general neglect of such people in much of James scholarship.

Rosengarten's chapter on 'The Internal Life of the Johnson-Forest Tendency' is particularly illuminating on the more personal dynamics of this group and its sect-like character. For example, he quotes the testimony of Stanley Weir:

> [Weir] remembered a scene where James, recumbent on a couch, with his feet propped up carefully on a pillow, was being fed 'exotic foods' by Raya Dunayevskaya while he 'held court' at an informal meeting of friends and cohorts. 'They set him up as some kind of emperor', Weir observed (p. 77).

It is hard to ever look again at the JFT and in particular purely philosophical explanations of why the group ultimately split in 1955 in quite the same way after reading such testimony. As Rosengarten notes of 'Johnson' and 'Forest':

> theirs was a closeness that can also breed the kind of bruising hostility one associates with a troubled marriage. … [B]y 1953, not only had James and Dunayevskaya ceased using endearing phrases in their letters to each other, they had become adversaries whose disagreements had all the earmarks of a rancorous divorce (p. 66).

The testimony of a few other members of the JFT also demonstrates the fact that for all its innovative attempts to develop a profoundly new internal culture of rank-and-file democracy as a model for future revolutionary Marxist organisation, it remained in practice internally a distinctly centralist organisation. As Rosengarten comments:

> The idea that the JFT alone had succeeded in creating an 'internal life' wholly different from the life of people in the world outside was a conceit, however sincerely felt, that was bound to provoke scepticism and ridicule (p. 79).

Rosengarten is also often an incisive commentator, as in his discussion of Aristotle:

> James found in Aristotle a confirmation of his own tendency to seek order, pattern, meaning, and direction in all phenomenon, whether natural or social, whether political or artistic. He saw fragmentation as the greatest 'curse' of modern civilisation, especially rife under late capitalism but present to varying degrees in all human societies after the Greek synthesis of the sixth to the fourth century B.C. As far as James was concerned, only socialist democracy, founded on the idea of popular participation and creativity in all areas of life, could hope to restore something of the wholeness that he saw as the heritage of Greek civilization. But at the same time, his very emphasis on the integration of artistic and social life prevented him from appreciating why much of the avante-garde art and literature of the twentieth century had found it necessary to go against commonly held conceptions of reality, as part of a criticism of life that challenged the rationale behind notions of integration such as that advanced by James (p. 191).

Amongst the strengths in Rosengarten's book includes the detail he adds to our picture of the process by which,

> upon his return to Trinidad in 1958, James felt compelled to put his revolutionary socialist politics on temporary hold, in order to explore the possibilities of what I have called 'national-popular' politics, a catch-all phrase that serves reasonably well to evoke the main thrust of his political and cultural efforts during the nine years…to 1966 (p. 118).

There is also a critical examination of the publishing history of The Black Jacobins, James's masterful 1938 dramatic and historical representation of the Haitian Revolution and Mariners, Renegades and Castaways, James's 1953 study of Herman Melville's Moby Dick. James's correspondence also reveal something of the occasional moments of high drama in his own life, such as his experience of the tumultuous year of 1968, when he criss-crossed around Africa, France and Britain attempting to relate to what he excitedly celebrated as 'The World Revolution' which had erupted (p. 149).

However there are also inevitably some weaknesses with Rosengarten's Urbane Revolutionary, in part as a result of an over-reliance on and sometimes too

uncritical use of James's own memories about earlier periods of his life and work. Sometimes Rosengarten has researched the relevant period well enough to be able to provide a more accurate corrective to James's comments. For example, he quotes James claiming 'I was committed completely' to the Jamaican Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey while in Trinidad, only to have to clarify this rather misleading statement later on (pp. 9, 19). In general, Rosengarten tends towards reducing the political to the personal, and settles for the descriptive rather than the analytical, as for example in his chapter on James's response to both the anti-Stalinist revolts in East Europe and the Cuban Revolution. He could have also arguably made more effective use than he did of the often fascinating correspondence between the JFT leadership which intellectually in power and range was profound. Too often we get just a brief summary, and sometimes the discussions are declared to be 'far too detailed and technical to summarise' (p. 60). The result is a work which is worth reading, but at times distinctly unsatisfying. For example, Rosengarten discusses an intriguing but unfinished and unpublished 'Outline of a Work on Lenin.' Here James is quoted as rightly noting that:

> Lenin always saw the party in relation to a conception of the revolutionary development of the masses of the people…without this conception the party is bound to be nothing more than a bureaucratic straight-jacket.

In this work, Rosengarten tells us that 'James clearly considered himself a student of Lenin, not his antagonist,' but sadly provides little indication as to when it might have been written (possibly because it is itself undated) (pp. 55-6).

St Louis's Rethinking Race, Politics and Poetics

One person who would certainly not consider himself 'a student of Lenin' is Brett St Louis, a sociologist whose work on James grows out of a doctoral study submitted to the University of Southampton back in 1999. Though more of a 'Jamesian' than Rosengarten, St Louis has clearly also taken to heart the following point made by Aldon Lynn Nielsen in his 1997 'critical introduction' to C.L.R. James:

> [While] James is patently not a 'deconstructionist' … it is equally clear that James's analyses…are part of an international theoretical development that brings us to the threshold of poststructuralist, post-Marxist, and postcolonial critiques. At several points in his writings James can be seen to be moving in the directions that eventually lead to Derrida and Spivak, to Lyotard and Paul Gilroy, points at which the grey shades of two critical motions meet.[4]

Written from a standpoint of unconditional but critical support for poststructuralism, post-Marxism and postcolonialism, St Louis's work is essentially a discussion of these 'grey shades' and the extent to which James does indeed prefigure these trends. As such it is illustrative of both the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary intellectual fashions. In his discussion of both James's magisterial The Black Jacobins, and his quasi-autobiographical cultural history of cricket, Beyond a Boundary (1963), St Louis is perhaps at his most insightful. Both classic works have produced a quite substantial academic literature already, and yet St Louis is able to

[4] Nielsen 1997, pp. 105-6.

build on the best aspects of these and yet also find new things to say about both works in a generally quite convincing manner.[5]

In his discussion of The Black Jacobins, St Louis brings out the modernity of New World colonial slavery well, and has an excellent and original discussion of how James seems to anticipate Foucault's concept of 'bio-power' in his discussion of how discipline on the capitalist slave plantations of the Americas was enforced and regulated through punishment. Through what James called a 'regime of calculated brutality and terrorism', coupled with advanced forms of surveillance and social control, order was maintained and profits made out of barbaric bondage. As St Louis notes, although James

> usefully documents the vicious bloodshed fundamental to plantation slavery, he was at pains to demonstrate that it was not gratuitously brutal, but that its techniques of repression and violence were the most sophisticated expression of capitalist discipline at that precise historical moment (p. 18).

St Louis's work also contains what must stand as one of the most sustained and sophisticated analyses of James's take on his beloved game of cricket in Beyond a Boundary, elucidating what Neil Lazarus identified as

> the indispensability, for James, of a sociopoetics of cricket, an approach to the game that will make neither the mistake of supposing it to be less than a form of art, nor the mistake of supposing it, as a form of art, to be autonomous of society (p. 171).

There has been much excellent recent writing on James and cricket, but St Louis's chapter on 'Sociality and the Cultural Politics of Cricket' gives a sense of the complexity of the issues at stake in such debates and on the whole stands as a valuable contribution.[6] Nor is St Louis afraid of provoking controversy. This is not the place to judge whether his suggestion that the cultural commentary of the conservative F.R. Leavis has more 'penetrative insight' with respect to popular culture than that displayed by James in American Civilisation (1949-50) is a fair one (p. 77). However, it is certainly a brave writer who can casually remark that James, one of the most cultured Marxists of the twentieth century, 'had no idea how to assess the liberatory significance of popular culture – let alone incorporate it within the class struggle' during his first American sojourn (p. 100).

St Louis claims that the 'analytical foundation' of his work is the elucidation of his belief that James's Marxism was not 'the defining feature of his intellectual career' as in fact he was also a 'humanistic romantic' (pp. 4-5). It is here that the real problems with St Louis's work begin. Of course, in a fundamental sense, James was a humanist thinker. As St Louis carefully shows, the JFT were among the very first Marxists to incorporate Marx's 1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts into their Marxism, publishing the first English translations from them in 1947 (p. 126). A humanist concern with the alienation that results from the labour-process under capitalism was therefore at the forefront of their Marxism over a decade before 'socialist humanism' took off as an intellectual current on the left after the brutal Stalinist crushing of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Given this, a detailed examination and exploration of James's humanism is a worthy enterprise, and in the

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[5] Recent scholarly discussion of The Black Jacobins has been shaped by the work of David Scott. Scott, 2004.

[6] See also Smith 2006.

face of some black nationalist and crude postcolonial criticism of his life and work is an admirable one. As St Louis eloquently notes:

> The visionary quality of thinkers such as James becomes a casualty when their humanistic concern is distorted as treachery instead of monumentally magnanimous gesture (p. 68).

Yet when it comes to James himself, things are rather more complicated than St Louis's reading would make out. One of the achievements of Rosengarten's study is that he makes clear for the first time what he calls 'the religious and biblical origins of his conversion to revolutionary socialism.' As James later described it, 'I had plunged into a river from which I was never to emerge', an echo of William Morris's famous statement about 'crossing the river of fire' (p. 16). St Louis is forced to dismiss this aspect of James, which should have always been clear enough from his repeated references to his 'Puritanism' in Beyond a Boundary, as 'bad faith' on James's part, even wondering 'given the deep stain of his Puritanism, how could he envision a form of radical social transformation?' (p. 92) Yet, especially given the role Puritanism played during the English Civil War, is it not possible James's own previous belief actually helped him to understand how religion could become a revolutionary ideology once he became a Marxist? Indeed, James's profound Marxist understanding of religion and its contradictions was apparent as early as 1938 from his analysis of the role of voudou in The Black Jacobins and his pioneering analysis of millenarian movements in colonial Africa in A History of Negro Revolt, where he famously noted that 'the grotesquerie of Watch Tower primitively approximates to the dialectic of Marx and Lenin'.[7] While St Louis is continually at pains to stress that 'James embarks on a secular eschatological project' (p. 205), he ignores the many occasions in which, as Rosengarten notes, 'James envisioned the struggle for socialism as a "concrete" continuation and fulfilment of the noble but "abstract" principles of Christianity'. As James put in June 1944, for example, in an article for the New International on 'Laski, St Paul and Stalin', modern socialism was 'the concretisation of the desires and demands of Christianity', maintaining that 'what the masses for centuries had to transfer to heaven is now and increasingly the aim of their daily lives' (pp. 15-16).

Further examples of James's sensitivity to the forms of religious belief which both flow from and attempt to overcome systematic oppression could be given almost ad infinitum. During his lecture series that he gave in Trinidad in 1960, published as Modern Politics, James continued on this theme, telling his audience that 'if you want to read about anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism, take the Bible and read the last book, that is the Revelations of St. John'.[8] Perhaps my favourite story dates from the time when James was living in London in later life and was invited once to present the religious slot on BBC radio, Thought for the Day. He phoned a Marxist friend, Jim Higgins for advice. Higgins remembers explaining to James

> that this was an early morning God-slot, and advised that he steer clear of this opium of the masses. He enquired if many people listened to it, and when I guessed that probably

[7] James 1938, p. 85.
[8] Nielsen 1997, p. 144.

several million tuned in whilst they waited for the news, he said: 'In that case, I shall teach them a lot of Marxism.'[9]

To simply try to bypass all this with the remark that James was 'an avowed atheist', as does St Louis, in order to claim him first and foremost for humanism surely misses out too much of importance and interest (p. 31).

St Louis shows a similar partial and one-sided interpretation of James's life when he attempts to counter the tendency for scholars of James to be 'ruthlessly unsympathetic towards the personal impact of psychic struggles' (p. 118). Employing Sartre's notion of 'bad faith', St Louis argues James was forced by the harsh colonial environment of his youth to display 'a form of disembodied and disinterested consciousness' which somehow lasted his whole career. Despite mustering little in the way of hard evidence, St Louis asserts through an extended speculative psychoanalytical discussion that, for example, 'James's adherence to normativity of manners' placed 'limitations' on his 'analytical insights and ability to puncture iniquitous and fallacious ideas' and led to 'injudicious pragmatic concessions' (pp. 53, 55). Perhaps so, but matters are again more complicated than St Louis contends. As Rosengarten notes, while it is indeed true that as a young 'democratic reformist', the 'young James was acutely aware of current iniquities and injustices, yet did relatively little in concrete political ways to alter the conditions that created them,' crucially, 'this was not true of the mature James, a distinction that St Louis does not take into account' (p. 19).

Despite claiming an 'ambition to engage with James in toto' and 'to understand the entirety of James's corpus', there is much that is quintessentially James that fails to even really register in St Louis's vision (p. 9). One crucial absence for example concerns St Louis's near total failure to discuss James's contribution as a Marxist historian. St Louis shows little interest in exploring James's epic vision of human history, and his study even suggests Joseph Stalin had equal importance alongside Leon Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution as an intellectual influence in writing The Black Jacobins, while ignoring the influence on James of the likes of Jules Michelet and Georges Lefebvre altogether (p. 58). St Louis also passes over James's later relationship with other revolutionary and socialist historians like Daniel Guérin, E.P. Thompson, Walter Rodney and Isaac Deutscher.

All this serves to demonstrate the problematic nature of an intellectual dependence on postmodernism. At times the work sounds like it was written in the late 1980s or early 1990s, as St Louis talks of the 'irresistible march of identity politics and postmodernism'. He tells us that

> the epistemological erosion of the 'old' certainties of (organised) class struggle and framework of historical materialism signals the death of unitary subjectivity and its explanatory 'grand narratives' (p. 195).

This judgment would perhaps be slightly more convincing had St Louis not himself earlier on in his study demonstrated just how vitally alive to many modern concerns James's own historical materialist 'grand narrative' of organised class struggle during the Haitian Revolution remained. His deference for the likes of Althusser, Laclau and Mouffe, and even Norman Geras, also gives the work a distinctly dated feel, and even risks giving some readers the mistaken idea that Geras

[9] Higgins 2005, p. 135. I would be intrigued to know if James ever did present Thought for the Day. On James's sensitivity to belief in the supernatural, see Worcester 1996, p. 294, n. 100.

is flavour of the month among Marxist theorists today. In general, the importance St Louis gives throughout his work to his abstract 'elective affinity between race, politics and poetics' that he sees as so crucial to understanding James's life and, it seems, life in general, lacks much analytical weight and confirms the manner in which this is overall, for all its occasional profound insights, a highly problematic work (p. 55). At one point, for example, he mystifyingly refers to the Communist Party's 'ongoing doctrinal conflict between politics and poetics', one doctrinal conflict that I suspect would have been news to many Communists (p. 102). Ultimately, St Louis's insistence that James's significance lies in the fact that he 'grapples with a proto-post-marxist problematic' possibly tells us as much about himself as it does about James (p. 195). As James once noted of W.E.B. Du Bois, in words of course equally applicable to himself:

> [Du Bois] was a very profound and learned historian, but he was always driven by the need of expanding and making clear to black people in what way they were involved in world history. (Today they take Du Bois and say that, in Black Reconstruction and Souls of Black Folk, he was a man concerned primarily with blackness; they limit him to what they are concerned with. They are quite wrong.)[10]

In defence of James's Marxism

'James is, to my mind, one of the most innovative and significant Marxist intellectuals of the twentieth century', asserts St Louis (p. 9), a statement with which Rosengarten might well reluctantly concur despite his insistence that it is necessary 'to see James whole' rather 'than as associated with a single theoretical and ideological orientation' (p. 244). But after reading either or both of these works it is unlikely that a reader who knew nothing else of James would draw the same conclusion about the creativity and power of his Marxism. For St Louis, James's 'choice of vocation' was not that of a professional revolutionary but the world of 'letters and criticism' (p.118). For Rosengarten:

> James was a man who devoted virtually his entire life to the cause of revolutionary socialism, yet the words that stand out most prominently on his tombstone in Tunapuna, Trinidad – words he himself chose for his epitaph – are 'C.L.R. James – Man of Letters'. In James's conceptual universe, the phrase 'man of letters' was what gave his life its particular distinction (p. 158).

Both works therefore fail to take James's Marxism as seriously as it deserves. Rosengarten again:

> James was a responsive interpreter and user, but not a philosophical disciple, of Marxism and Leninism, nor did he allow other aspects of his personality and vision of life to be subordinated either to Marxism or to Leninism. James was always his own man (p. 34).

Or as St Louis puts it:

[10] James 2000, p. 86.

> James argues that dialectical materialism is a means to develop social understanding projected towards the establishment of progressive politics; he does not seem to suggest that it is the only means (p. 198).

For Rosengarten, Marxism is understood as something inherently 'economistic', (pp. 42, 68) and both authors fail to grasp how the stress on human agency which runs throughout James's work was not a fundamental break from Marxism but rather an attempt to defend classical Marxism from its vulgarisation at Stalin's hands. Indeed, both writers have little interest in or apparent comprehension of the ideas of Leon Trotsky, whether of his development of the Marxist theory of permanent revolution or Trotskyism as a movement in general, which is something of a barrier to understanding the intellectual and political formation of James. Both avoid any serious discussion of James's life in the 1930s, when he was perhaps the intellectual driving force of British Trotskyism, which is possibly just as well given the mistakes they manage to make in the little they do say.[11] St Louis makes out that James was almost alone as a Marxist in opposing European imperialism during the 1930s, mistakenly indicting Trotskyism alongside Stalinism as being just another 'Euro-Marxism':

> Significantly, James retained a critical conception of imperialism within his adherence to Marxism alongside race and class, eschewing the simplistic communist-fascist axis that preoccupied Euro-Marxisms (p. 96).

Neither Trotsky's or James's anti-Stalinism is viewed particularly sympathetically by either author, and is often caricatured, with St Louis insisting that James's 'portrayal of Stalinism – as a repressive ogre countered by Trotskyism as the true bearer of socialism … is easily questioned' (p. 102).

Things get worse when Rosengarten and St Louis examine the JFT's break with orthodox Trotskyism and attempt to make what James described in Notes on Dialectics as a 'leap from the heights of Leninism'.[12] It is undoubtedly unfair to say this, but one statement made by the American Trotskyist Irving Howe during the 1940s, 'On Comrade Johnson's American Resolution – or Soviets in the Sky,' which is quoted by Rosengarten, seems to come far closer to revealing the problematic nature of James's mature theory of revolutionary Marxist organisation than anything managed at much greater length by either Rosengarten or St Louis:

> The basic error underlying Johnson's approach to every political question is his constant underestimation of the role of the party in our epoch. He constantly speaks

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[11] Rosengarten for example confuses a 1937 article by James on 'Trotskyism' which defended orthodox Trotskyism in the Independent Labour Party (ILP) journal Controversy with a much more 'Jamesian' article on 'Lenin, Trotsky and the Vanguard Party' which was first published in Controversy in 1963 (p. 46), thus giving the impression James had in some fundamental sense already intellectually broken with Trotsky only three years after joining the Trotskyist movement. Rosengarten also claims that the ILP had 'functioned for decades as an independent radical caucus in the British Parliament' since its founding in 1893 (p. 48). In fact it had helped form and then build the Labour Party before disaffiliating and becoming independent again in 1932. St Louis describes 'the unexpected arrival, at James's London flat in 1935, of an agitated [George] Padmore, who had left his Comintern post in disillusionment with the Hitler-Stalin Pact [of 1939!]' (p. 102). Rather, Padmore was 'disillusioned' with the turn of the Comintern to the Popular Front after Hitler's seizure of power in 1933 and the resultant retreat from support for anticolonial struggles, particularly in Africa, in order that the Soviet Union might cultivate a military alliance with Britain and France for reasons of national security.

[12] James 1980, p. 150.

> of the 'self-activity' of the working class as if that were some magical panacea. … The working class cannot conquer power by 'self-activity' or 'self-mobilisation'; it can conquer power only under the leadership of a consciously revolutionary and democratic socialist party (p. 80).

Yet for all that, the achievements of the JFT in helping to restore to Marxism the importance of viewing society 'from below', from the standpoint of the working class at the point of production deserve better treatment than they warrant in either Rosengarten or St Louis. If one quotes from Stanley Weir's critical testimony of the JFT, one should then in all fairness also acknowledge that Weir also had other, fonder, memories as well:

> James was the first and only leader in the entire Trotskyist movement, or any socialist 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. All differences recede behind that, and I, like many others, am deeply indebted.[13]

Both works are also frustratingly marred by occasional statements which serve to misrepresent classical Marxism. Rosengarten's discussion of Gramsci's term 'national-popular' seems to me to be a case in point. According to Rosengarten:

> Gramsci believed … that in order for oppressed and disunited peoples to free themselves from a subaltern existence, and move toward socialist objectives, they would first have to develop a strong feeling of national identity and cohesiveness (p. 50).

While I am reluctant to question such a distinguished scholar of Gramsci as Rosengarten on matters such as this, one finds it difficult to simply take such a statement on trust. Rosengarten also talks in a problematic fashion of 'the antireligious attitudes of classical Marxism' (p. 16), and maintains that 'the denial of an essential human nature was always integral to the tenets of historical materialism' (p. 183). St Louis takes James to task for 'failing to fully anticipate or conceptualise' patriarchy theory, without acknowledging the limitations of that theory in overlooking the class nature of women's oppression and class divisions in society more generally (p. 147). Among James's other apparently 'indisputable failings' according to St Louis include 'his tacit support for a masculinist industrial proletariat and his reliance on reductive binarisms such as black/white and proletarian/bourgeoisie' (p. 156).

The underlying problem with both works perhaps flows from what St Louis defends as his avoidance of what he calls the 'compelling temptation to read James "historically" – in terms of his retrospective significance' (p. 194). However, the significance of James's life and work can only really be fully understood when it is placed in its concrete historical context. How can one even begin to explain James's profound political isolation without reference to the way the revolutionary Marxist tradition was almost destroyed by Stalinism and fascism during the 1930s and then marginalized almost totally by Stalinism and social democracy after the Second World War? It is this state of political isolation, the extreme difficulty of being a

[13] Weir 1986, pp. 183-4.

revolutionary in a non-revolutionary time and place, that helped lead to what St Louis detects as 'a hint of sectarianism' in James's anti-Stalinism (p. 133), which comes through in his work Mariners, Renegades and Castaways, written while James was detained on Ellis Island facing deportation from the United States during McCarthyism. Though James, who always had such productive cultural 'hinterlands' outside of organised politics, never seems to have consciously felt this isolation subjectively, his attempt to escape from such an objectively isolated situation, something reinforced by the split with Dunayevskaya in 1955, ultimately underpins his other tendency towards 'liquidationism', common enough in the history of the revolutionary Marxist movement. It is this in the final analysis which explains James's uncritical support for Eric Williams's Peoples National Movement on his return to Trinidad from 1958-60, and inclination to play what Rosengarten calls 'national-popular' politics as opposed to international socialist politics subsequently more generally with respect to Africa and the Caribbean.

Yet for all his faults, James was one of the outstanding Marxist historians of the twentieth century in every sense of the phrase. He was not simply the author of the classic The Black Jacobins but he also brought to the twentieth century itself an historical vision almost unparalleled in its acuity with respect to not only the African diaspora but also to what Alex Callinicos has identified as such critical issues as Stalinism, capitalism, and catastrophe.[14] He experienced not only the First World War which, following colonial slavery and the imperialist 'scramble for Africa', marked yet another stage in the descent of Western civilisation into barbarism, soon to be followed by the Great Depression, the rise of Nazism and the Second World War. For James, 'the collapse of Communism' with all its repercussions for the revolutionary Marxist project came not in 1989 but in the 1930s when state terror came as the bloody culmination of Stalinist counter-revolution in Russia. It is as a pioneering theorist of the epoch of global state capitalism in its full totality, a system which emerged in the 1930s and lasted until the rise of neoliberalism during the 1970s that may well come to be seen as his defining achievement as a Marxist.[15] As well as being a Marxist historian, James deserves to be remembered more generally for making a critically important contribution to the development of the revolutionary democratic vision of 'socialism-from-below', to use Hal Draper's phrase.[16] It is for reasons such as these – rather than his relationship to 'post-Marxism' – that ensures James can take his place as 'one of the most innovative and significant Marxist intellectuals of the twentieth century'.[17]

Overall, these two works stand comparison with the most serious and sustained single-volume pieces of 'James scholarship' to date. Both works make new contributions to our knowledge of James overall, and this can only be welcomed by anyone concerned with learning from his rich and inspiring legacy. Yet equally neither work should be taken as any sort of 'definitive' guide to James's life and work, as they mistakenly assume that tribute is best paid to his memory by forgetting that he was first and foremost a revolutionary Marxist. If Rosa Luxemburg was right to insist that the choice facing humanity really was 'socialism or barbarism', then it is vital that the best elements of James's Marxism are preserved and built on in the coming struggles ahead. It should not be left to postmodernists, postcolonialists and

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[14] Callinicos 2008, p. 172.
[15] For a generally superb discussion of James's theory of state capitalism see Phelps 2006. See also Callinicos 1990.
[16] Høgsbjerg 2006.
[17] For more on James's Marxism, see for example, Glaberman 1999 and McLemee and LeBlanc 2000.

post-Marxists to try and determine C.L.R. James's place in history. Indeed, James may yet prove to be too important a figure to be left to even the Jamesians.

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