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## C. L. R. James, the Revolutionary Left in Imperial Britain, and the Archives of Decolonization

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Christian Høgsbjerg. *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 312 pp.

Christian Høgsbjerg has emerged as a major voice on the thought and enduring importance of C. L. R. James with a string of essays and articles in *Small Axe*, *Twentieth Century British History*, *Socialist History*, *International Socialism*, and a number of edited collections. His rediscovery of and excellent introduction to James's play, *Toussaint Louverture*, secures its rightful place within the archives of black anticolonial art (James 2012). Høgsbjerg's most recent and significant contribution, *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain*, is the focus of this review essay.

There has been a dramatic growth of interest in the Trinidadian activist, theoretician and historian since the 1980s, aided by the reappearance of James's books and his shorter writings in a series of collections edited by Anna Grimshaw. In the quarter century since his death in 1989, "C. L. R. James Studies" has developed into a field of inquiry and a term describing an increasingly voluminous literature.<sup>1</sup> *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain* is the first original

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of the recent growth of new scholarship on James, see Christopher Gair, ed., *Beyond Boundaries: C. L. R. James and Postnational Studies* (London: Pluto, 2006); Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Carol Polsgrove, *Ending British Rule in Africa: Writers in Common Cause* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); Jonathan Derrick, *Africa's 'Agitators': Militant Anti-Colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918-1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); John H. McClendon III, *C. L. R. James's Notes on Dialectics: Left Hegelianism or Marxist-Leninism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2005); David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Stephen Howe, "C. L. R. James: Visions of History, Visions of Britain," Bill Schwarz, ed. *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Nicole King, *C. L. R. James and Creolization: Circles of Influence* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001); Paget Henry, *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2000); James D. Young, *The World of C. L. R. James: His Unfragmented Vision* (Glasgow: Clydeside, 1999); Scott McLemee, ed., *C. L. R. James on the Negro Question* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996); Selwyn R. Cudjoe and William E. Cain, eds, *C. L. R. James: His Intellectual Legacies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995); Paul Buhle and Paget Henry, eds, *C. L. R. James's Caribbean* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992);

critical work by a contemporary James scholar published as part of the *C. L. R. James Archive Series* (Duke University Press) edited by Robert A. Hill.

*C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain* builds on the seminal studies of Hill (1981) and Paul Buhle (1988). Despite the florescence of James scholarship since their publication, James's time in Britain between 1932 and 1938 remains strangely neglected. During these years, he produced a string of books, including *The Black Jacobins* (1938), a three-act play, and reams of articles. He wrote on cricket for the *Manchester Guardian* and *Glasgow Herald*, acted as ghostwriter for Learie Constantine's *Cricket and I* (1933), and translated Boris Souvarine's biography *Stalin* (1939) into English from French. In addition to this prodigious publishing record, James threw himself into political organizing and agitation. He served in positions of leadership within or on the executive committees of the League of Coloured Peoples, International African Friends of Ethiopia, and International African Service Bureau—all centers of black internationalist activity in London—as well as the Finchley branch of the Independent Labour Party, the small Trotskyist Marxist Group, and the Fourth International. It is likely that only a few black men, such as Paul Robeson, Peter Carl McKay aka Prince Monolulu, and George Padmore, addressed more British audiences during the decade. James also edited the journals of the International African Service Bureau and Marxist Group. "By anyone's standards," as Hill observed in 1981, "it was a monumental achievement, which staggers the mind simply in the recounting of it" (62). Nonetheless, this period is glossed rapidly in most recent biographies of James, and scholarly interest has gravitated toward his later writings, especially *Beyond a Boundary* (1963). Høgsbjerg's detailed study makes great strides toward filling this void. Drawing upon under-utilized and newly-released sources, *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain* interweaves the diverse strands of James's thought and activism in a lucid account of this important moment in the life of one of the twentieth century's most creative and original thinkers.

The book begins with a chapter on James's education and brief career as a teacher in Trinidad, his association with the group of writers around the literary and cultural journals *Trinidad* and *Beacon* in the 1920s, and the circumstances surrounding the production of *The Life of Captain Cipriani* (1932). From postwar Trinidad, the narrative follows James to London in 1932 and turns to its primary focus—his six and a half years in imperial Britain. The organization of material into separate chapters on James's encounter with Marxism and his months with the Trinidadian cricketer Learie Constantine's family in Nelson, his anti-imperialist and black internationalist activities during and after the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, and his writings on cricket and English society largely mirrors that found within the chapter on James's years in Britain in Buhle's

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Paul Buhle, *C. L. R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary* (London: Verso, 1988); Paul Buhle, ed., *C. L. R. James: His Life and His Work* (New York: Alison and Busby, 1986).

biography (1988). A chapter on James's *Black Jacobins* and *A History of Negro Revolt* and a concluding reflection on the effects of his British sojourn on his subsequent work round out the volume.

*C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain* meticulously reconstructs of James's movements and activities in Britain and provides the first systematic survey of his writings from the period. But Høgsbjerg aspires to more than an intellectual biography, presenting the work as a corrective to what he takes as the prevailing but flawed image of James and a critical rejoinder to reigning interpretations of his oeuvre. The book, he explains, "aims, through a careful historical examination of a particular past reality, one currently perceived as marginal and peripheral, to alter our traditional understanding of what is of central importance about the life and work of James" (15). For Høgsbjerg, the predominant feature of James's thought was his commitment to "revolutionary socialism" (5).

Discernible patterns and, indeed, fault-lines have emerged within James scholarship since the 1990s. Within the United States academy, the rediscovery of James occurred concomitantly with the ascendancy of postcolonial studies, cultural studies, African diaspora studies, and ethnic and American studies—all responses to the limited fruits of twentieth-century movements for liberation (from capitalism, colonialism, racism, sexism, etc.) and informed by a hermeneutics of suspicion, including when it came to reified identity categories, totalizing theoretical schema, and grand revolutionary projects. Most recently, James has been heralded as a harbinger of "transnationalism" and "postnationalism" (Stephens 2005, Gair 2006). Marxist and social historians, especially in Britain, have greeted much of this work with growing skepticism. In a critical review of Farrukh Dhondy's *C. L. R. James: Cricket, the Caribbean, and World Revolution* (2001), Timothy Brennan notes that James "has been filtered through the New Left prisms of postcolonialism, which find it hard to appreciate his years of apprenticeship" in Britain (113). Høgsbjerg also laments the blind spots that have followed from James's "canonization as a 'pioneering icon' of 'cultural studies' and 'postcolonial studies'" (3). The latter, he claims, has left us with "the dominant image ... that he [James] was essentially a would-be bourgeois dilettante playing around with Marxist ideas" during the 1930s (7). Dhondy's book is particularly thin and misleading on James during the 1930s and 1940s, and Høgsbjerg identifies it as an especially "cynical" reading (218, n. 27). He also cites several influential reassessments of James's legacy, which foreground his interest in literature and his attention to narrative and poetics as opposed to his commitment to "'real' politics" (4), as contributing to the neglect of his sojourn in Britain (e.g. Farred 1995, Nielson 1997, St. Louis 2007). In contrast to latter-day acolytes who, in his view, portray James as more of a cultural critic than a professional revolutionary, Høgsbjerg argues that James

“should be remembered as one of the most creative and significant Marxist thinkers to emerge in Britain during the Great Depression” (213).

As is well known, James came to Britain in 1932 with literary ambitions (as well as two book manuscripts). Once there, as James recalled in an oft-quoted passage from *Beyond a Boundary* that Høgsbjerg cites repeatedly, “Fiction-writing drained out of me and was replaced by politics” (James 1993: 151). James arrived with two other things that he would carry with him for decades to come: a firm commitment to federation in the Caribbean as part of a transformed global order and faith in the transformative potential of the masses of working people. This faith was born largely from events in Trinidad after the Great War. Following a mass dockworkers strike in Port of Spain in November 1919, the Trinidad Workingmen’s Association, led by Captain Arthur Andrew Cipriani, a former commander of the British West Indies Regiment, and inspired in part by the pan-Africanist philosophy of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, developed into a mass labor movement with, after 1925, a substantial presence in the Legislative Council. James told this story as part of an extended argument for federation and self-governing dominion status in the Caribbean in *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, which he later reprised in Britain as *The Case for West Indian Self-Government* (1933) for Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press.

Høgsbjerg briefly discusses the formative influence of events in Trinidad on a young James and describes his drift from liberal humanism toward parliamentary socialism in the book’s first chapter. Drawing upon the arguments of Harvey R. Neptune, Simon Gikandi, and Anne Spry Rush, Høgsbjerg suggests that James and the Beacon Group embodied an “Afro-Victorianism” (e. g. Neptune 2007, Spry Rush 2011). In the post-World War I years, they “transplanted” and “reinvented” the ideas of Matthew Arnold as part of their mobilization of “imperial Britishness” in opposition to the racist foundations of colonial society in the Caribbean (17-21). However, aside from passing references (23-25, 33), there is little engagement with recent scholarship that situates James within a larger genealogy of Caribbean thought and a vibrant political and cultural scene in 1920s Trinidad. Anthony Bogues’s *Caliban’s Freedom*, for example, makes a strong case for considering James an anticolonial intellectual shaped by local and diasporic black radical traditions (1997). Høgsbjerg confirms and deepens Bogues’s insights regarding James’s original contribution to Marxist thought, but much like Kent Worcester in *C. L. R. James: A Political Biography* (1996), he is more circumspect about the development of James’s politics and thought before his departure for Britain. “Though the roots of James’s later political radicalism lie in his experiences in Trinidad,” he concludes, “the limitations of his thinking in this early period are all too apparent” (35). James himself provided ample fodder for such an interpretation later in his life. In

Høgsbjerg's account, this rendering of James cast "within the mould of nineteenth-century intellectualism" becomes the baseline of sorts for evaluating the personal and political transformation wrought by his sojourn in imperial Britain (35). What is at stake here is less a question of periodizing James's political evolution and more one of the weight attributed to Marxism relative to other elements, especially his Caribbean background, in that process. In the eyes of scholars such as Bogue and Selwyn Cudjoe (1997, 2003), Marxism was certainly enabling but not determinative; it provided an analytical language and critical diagnostic for identifying salient structures of the colonial society that formed him and with which he had begun to grapple in Trinidad. Høgsbjerg, Worcester, and others place greater emphasis on the impact of his encounter with Marxism.

The author's commitment as a socialist historian is evident throughout *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain* and a source of the book's strengths as well as some of its weaknesses. Høgsbjerg is primarily concerned with tracing James's turn toward revolutionary socialism and the constellation of ideas, people, and texts behind it. His knowledge of the British left and Marxist historiography clearly surpasses that of most writers on James. He paints a vivid portrait of Nelson in the declining textile region of Lancashire and the homegrown radicalism of its inhabitants among whom James began his lifelong study of Marxism, reading and rereading Hegel, Marx, Lenin, and the first volume of Trotsky's *The History of the Russian Revolution*. In the book's longest chapter, Høgsbjerg touches upon James's encounter with Léon-Gontran Damas in a brief but suggestive discussion of the "impact of 'Black Paris'" as the former conducted research for *The Black Jacobins* in winter of 1933 and spring of 1934. He then proceeds to chronicle James's manifold contributions to left anti-imperialism and, alongside his childhood friend George Padmore (Malcolm Nurse), pan-Africanist agitation in London. Other scholars have noted the Hegelian and Shakespearean qualities of James's masterful history of the Haitian Revolution. Following Brennan, Høgsbjerg demonstrates that Trotsky's history of the Russian Revolution and Marxist historiography provided invaluable models for James's analysis. According to Høgsbjerg, the major breakthrough in James's thought during the 1930s consisted of the creative adaptation of Trotsky's conception of "permanent revolution" to an imperial world in crisis.

Høgsbjerg analyzes James's writings from this period with a keen eye for the influence of those of Trotsky and other Marxist philosophers and historians, but the interpersonal and intertextual dialogue among black intellectuals could be explored in greater depth. He notes "the importance for black, radical, anti-colonialist activists of developing their own alternative counterculture of resistance in the imperial metropolis" (9). However, compared to his stint in "Red Nelson," we get less of a sense of this part of James's social world in London,

which included a diverse array of black and non-European intellectuals, overwhelmingly male, after his return to the capitol in March 1933. Following received wisdom and historiographical trends, Høgsbjerg suggests that Afro-Caribbeans predominated within the circles of black agitation in Britain after the Italian occupation of Ethiopia—an assertion which is debatable and ignores a variety of African initiatives and organizations (113). There is little discussion of how James’s ideas and activities fit into the longer history of black settlement and political struggle in Britain or how they were informed by his interactions with others of African descent. This is particularly true of James’s relationships with Africans. Høgsbjerg writes that, “if Paul Robeson ... could declare in 1953 he had ‘discovered Africa and come to consider himself ‘an African’ in London ... , the same is fundamentally true for James” (123). Nevertheless, his famous arguments with the Kenyan Jomo Kenyatta and his friendships with the Nigerian Louis Nwachukwu Mbanefo and other West Africans are largely missing from this account—as are his encounters with such African-Americans as Ralph Bunche and Paul Robeson.

Nor does Høgsbjerg engage with the excellent recent work that highlights how certain models of masculinity and gendered notions of “heterosexual domesticity” informed James’s (and other black male intellectuals’) self-presentation, evolving politics, and conceptions of collective liberation (e.g. Carby 1998, Edmondson 1999, Stephens 2005). Moreover, other than one early reference (8), there are few details of his private life such as those one finds in Worcester’s biography (1996). A few lines beneath the quote from *Beyond a Boundary* above, James qualifies his reflections on the dawning of his new political consciousness in the 1930s: “In my private mind, however, I was increasingly aware of large areas of human existence that my history and my politics did not seem to cover. What did men live by? What did they want?” (151, 154). While in Britain, James began to realize that “men” do not live solely through or according to political ideologies or material interests. Høgsbjerg often occludes the realms of existence that James later found missing from his own conception of politics in the 1930s.

With *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain* and other publications (e.g. Høgsbjerg 2011), Høgsbjerg has shed new light on the contributions of black socialists to the political left and anticolonialism in Britain. *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain* offers further confirmation of the centrality of James’s writings to the archives of decolonization in the twentieth century. Høgsbjerg’s book demonstrates that any attempt to reckon with the complex, connected histories of empire, capitalism, and struggles for liberation from both must include Caribbean intellectuals such as James. Another of its strength lies in the author’s careful attention to the depth and breadth of James’s impact on British political thought and culture in the 1930s. Unfortunately, it has less to say about the social and

political world of black London that James inhabited during these years and about his place within the broader of context of black internationalist activity around the Atlantic.

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