The Class Basis of the Race Question in the United States

written by C.L.R. James | February 10, 2016

Now as usual, ten past nine; I certainly will not go on beyond ten past ten. And I would like to say at once that this is the task. It is so difficult that it is as well to say at the beginning that it can be done. Five hundred and eighty-three pages [Oliver Cox's *Caste, Class and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics*].

And to discuss this book, in a minute I can discuss other books, my own book, Dr. Du Bois's book, or various other books. It is quite instructive.[1] You must have read a book like this over the years, and gradually what the book stands for will emerge. And what I'm very much concerned about today is the writing of the book and what the book *signifies* in the intellectual development of our people. And of our nation.

Now, I remember when this book came out. I was in the United States. I had been in the United States for eight or ten years. And the book created a *sensation*. Because, for the first time, a black man had made a scholarly and highly political attempt to organize and to go into problems which everybody knew were problems which concerned black people in the United States.

I remember very well the sensation that the book made. I remember my wife at that time, we talked about the book, and we heard what people were saying, and the book cost a lot of money. And I looked at her and I suggested, "You want to read it?" She said, "Yes." [Laughs] She went and bought it, and she read it right through.[2]

Now, the first thing we ought to do—and that is what is going to be so difficult and limited—is to decide what the book is about. And then we shall have some more general statements about what the book signifies. The book is about caste, class, and race. And as far as I know, this is the first attempt that has been made to discuss the caste question. And Cox came from the West Indies. I don't know when he came here. But he was very American in his attitudes. He's discussing the caste question, and he's a man of great intellectual energy and moral strength. He's right on this; he's unafraid of his conclusion. A very distinguished person. But his concern is the discussion of caste made *here*. That caste was not based upon race. And the racial attitudes in the United States, and in relation to black people, cannot be justified at all by any reference to the caste system.

I personally would have preferred that he had been to India and had seen the caste system in action over some months. I remember Vidia Naipaul—that West Indian writer.[3] I picked him up one day in London, and he had just returned from India. He hadn't completely moved [to London] as yet. And he told me why, he'd like to go there and see. Meanwhile, he stayed in the Caribbean. But we don't know anything about what the caste system of India is, in the West Indies. You have to *go* there and see it! And Vidia was not, at the time, an excitable person. And obviously he had been shocked and startled, and obviously *horrified* by the existence of the caste system, which he had seen and personally experienced. He had read about it, and we knew something about it, we had an idea. I remember he was very disturbed. And I would have preferred if Cox had gone, himself. I get the impression that he was writing from books. How can I prove that? Hmm. That not only depends on

what is there, but it depends on what is *here*. But the work is very well done. He's obviously not printing a few ideas, he's gone into the subject seriously. And on page three, he says, "We dare to think of caste as we would of such institutions as labor unions, churches, or guilds in this society, and then the caste is some section of the society which exercises certain privileges." But, he says, that is not so! He says, "This society is a *caste society*."[4]

And right at the beginning, you have to understand that he's very much against the idea of using Western conceptions of history, Western conceptions of social development, and applying them to the analysis of different societies.[5] We have come very far in regard to that today. Now, on page five he says that, "The Hindus believe that the man's caste is irrevocably and functionally dependent upon his past lives." You see, Cox has in mind all the time the race question in the United States, and he's quite able, very concerned about, distinguishing [between India and the United States]. Now, nobody in the United States believes that if we're going to past history, and past lives, that you live according[ly] where you are in the United States. But the Hindus believe that. To what extent it was completely to believe, to what extent it was not only accepted by even the intellectuals who were opposed to it in surprising ways—yes, we'll go into that.

Now, on page thirty-three, he shows how different the caste system in India is in its ideological effect upon people. Not only do Hindus believe that a man is a member of a certain caste system because of his ancestors and his past generations, but, he says, it is based on the system of purity and impurity. And one important part of it is [that] the impure are the untouchable! Page thirty-three, "[The] high caste men would be veritably horror-stricken to accidentally come into contact with a Pariah. But the sense of untouchability is not limited to two groups; it pervades the system." What he's trying to do is to make us see that it is a kind of system, which is entirely different from the Western system and *cannot* be judged by the doctrines, the ideas, and the methods of Western civilization. And that was quite scientific to do in 1947 and [19]48.

Look at page eighty-five, the paragraph before the last. We shall refer again to this tendency to transfer one's own cultural attitudes to other social situations. That is very widespread today. That is the kind of mistake that no one can make today. Using the methods and ideas of Western civilization, and Western culture, and judging other civilizations by them. And as far as I know, this was the first time that this [idea] was made definitive, and put forward not only as a sense of dynamic movement, but as an ideological and political lesson. I am strongly moved by the idea that that was the particular point that Cox had in mind when writing the book: to elucidate the method of social investigation. And he took one, and he said, "That is that, and this is not this." Arguably, that has played a great role in argument. This is analysis in action.

Now, an important thing you will find on page ninety-seven: It was not a racial question. It was not a question of biological difference. If you look at paragraph two on page ninety-seven, you will see that Nesfield "insists that no racial theory of caste can stand." Do you understand what that means directly—in the United States? There is no racial theory of caste that can stand. Because before the system became organized, the population had already become inseparably mixed. I remember very well the excitement of this book. (There were many things in it which many of us could see were quite false. And I will come to that.) "The restrictions of marriage which are *now* imposed by rules of caste did not begin to exist until at least a *thousand years* after the Aryans had come into the country, and by this time the Aryan blood had been absorbed beyond recovery into the indigenous" [97]. That is a tremendous statement. You understand the significance of that for what is taking place in the United States. Again, "The restrictions of marriage which are *now* imposed did not begin to exist at least until a *thousand* years after the Aryans had come!" So it was not a question of biology and racial distinctions. He says, "No!" Not that you have the racial distinction and caste came out of it. He says, "That's a lot of nonsense." He said, "Caste came out of that afterward."

Now, it is very important to see *how* it became that way. The persons who organized and who propagated and made the caste system, something that was absorbed deeply into the very consciousness as well as into the activity of the society, were not the bourgeoisie but the priesthood and whatever they preached. It was a priestly doctrine! Whereas, in Western society, the priests came after the Romans had formed the empire. And the priests guarded the feudal lords and represented the ideological and political importance of the feudal lords over the rest of society. These things had been preached by the masters, and *they* educated the people and promulgated the ideas that we know as the caste system today. That is quite different from Western civilization. *Quite* different.

Now, he goes on to say, "Belief in the fourfold"—paragraph two on page one hundred and five, paragraph three and four—"Belief in the fourfold division of caste in India has persisted from the Vedic period to this day, yet it appears never to have existed in fact. The persistence of this belief is probably due to the influence of Brahmans in the system." (They dominated the system; they were the highest caste, they were the priests, and they taught everybody what to believe.) "Quite obviously this ancient classification of castes is not the result of an objective study of Hindu society; rather, it represents a particular society as seen from the point of view of Brahmans. And, since Brahmans were the authors of practically all the early literature, their insights had more than an even chance of becoming generally accepted. As we have mentioned above, the concept 'Aryan-Anaryan' does not imply a white-caste versus black-caste relationship" [105]. And he goes into the question that the differences were not racial; they were not a difference of color. And he shows that in various places, some of the people at the top of the Indian society, and some of the goddesses and gods whom they worshipped, were dark-skinned people. The idea that it was a racial question and [that] it was a question of color has been introduced into that society by Western writers. And when that was done, the Brahmins themselves took it on! That is a very serious piece of work.

Now, he goes on to the question of class, and what I would like to draw your attention to [is] the question of estates. Because, in the French Revolution and in the French monarchy—the great, substantial monarchy of Europe for centuries—there were classes in the ordinary sense of the word. Yes. But the people had conceptions of themselves as different *estates*. The estate was the social conception of what the role you and your friends and associates claimed in society. … The whole basis of [the] American conception of society is the individual. That is it. But in the Middle Ages and up to the eighteenth century, the estate was the item and vital conception of various classes of society. The First Estate was the monarchy, and the aristocracy, who owned the land. The Second Estate was the clergy, who owned a vast deal of land and carried out a certain function similar to the function of the priests in the caste society where they had dominated completely. Because it did not dominate in that way. They [the clergy] were landowners, but they carried out the ideas and taught what the feudal lords demanded, what was required. And then you had the rest of society, the bourgeoisie, the Third Estate.

Now, Cox goes on to speak of the change from estates into modern classes. And it is worthwhile mentioning, because he has a lot of vital and important information [about] that. Where did the bourgeoisie come from? Because, society in the Middle Ages existed: there were the nobility, the monarchy, the land owners; there was the clergy; and there were ordinary people around. And it [the bourgeoisie] is the offshoot of ordinary society, the people who could not get on very well [under feudalism]. In ordinary society the serfs who ran away, and [other] people, formed the basis of what became the bourgeois society in the town. Very important today to know where the bourgeoisie came from. It is not decisive, but it is well that you should learn periodically in the course of debates in which you participate. They were sensitive people who were the offspring and offshoots of feudal society. [They] got stuck together in the cities, and began to trade and to carry on business and to talk to one another, and build up so and so, and in time they began to make money.

Because you make more money by trade than you can make by rent.[6]

And by the way, there are certain things you ought to know in history. Do you know that there was a tremendous development of trade that gave the bourgeoisie great strength? And made them really begin to move along and accumulate wealth. And do you know where it came from? You ought to know these things automatically. It came from the Crusades. When they went abroad to Jerusalem and the rest of that [region]. It was a religious conception, but they also had trade and commerce in mind. And you get some women and so on, priests and servants had it very good. They went there and they brought back a lot of stuff from the East, and [they] took things to the East, and that [trade] was very valuable. The East was very highly advanced, and that helped to build up the conception of trade. And international interchange [grew] and the bourgeoisie more and more became important people in the social structure.

So the bourgeoisie had established themselves in the city, and they called it a "commune," because they had all things, more or less, in common. Nobody had any aristocratic privileges there. That is the origin of the idea of the commune. But, the land belonged to the lord, and everybody's land belonged to the lord and the king. … And the bourgeois told [the lords], "Well, we would like to be able to do what we like *here*." And they [the lords] said, "Just pay us this rent and you are *free*! You are free from the money and the materials that you have to pay to the lord." So, the commune, having built up the cities and built up trade, and [the bourgeois] were able to buy their freedom from the lord and from the king. So, to this day you will see that the Lord Mayor of London can give the freedom of the city to the queen or to the prince! That is a very deeply established thing! Because in those days, after the commune had made a lot of money, and established themselves, in the city, they were masters. And when they give you the freedom of the city, they make [allow?] you [to] come in. And they will give the freedom of the city to the king and to the prince. That is a privilege because it was accepted that inside there, they were [the] bosses, and that would only take place because of the feudal domination that the landlords and the monarchy exercised in the rest of the world.

All this, Cox has very clear. And it is very valuable for people in the United States to read it. It is history. It is historical writing. But in Europe, it is not. Do you know why? He is an American; that is so obvious to me. In Europe, it is not, because in Europe, the city, and the feudal vestiges, and the habits and so forth, they have there still. As I'm sure, as you begin to open your eyes and you read, you *see* them. But you don't see them in the United States. The United States only was born yesterday … and what is troublesome. They [Americans] have no sense of history. In Europe, you go to France, you go to Italy, you go to Spain, you *see*. You can't help it. And when you *read* the famous [literature], you read Chaucer, and you read Shakespeare—and you read them not for history, but you read because they're interesting—and you see them all around, you see with the castles, and the Inns of Court, and the rest of them there. The big castles, the Duke of Norfolk, is *still* a duke, and a great Catholic duke, the senior duke in England. And you walk about, once you begin to look at what is happening, it is all around you. And when the queen goes down to Parliament and makes the speech with the prime minister—there was a time when the king read the speech or the queen—and she had written it herself, of all people. But they still have the letters, by which and so forth. Yes. You certainly should go to Europe. And see where all this comes from. Certainly.

Now, we have to take one of the great weaknesses of Mr. Cox. Look at page two hundred and sixty-two. Look at the last paragraph. And I hope that all remember this; it is a very serious error. But it does not alter the great value of the book. "However, the charge of the capitalist politicians that Roosevelt was a communist is in its essence correct." Who believes that? But in 1947 [Cox wrote,] "His policies and actions had the potentialities of taking the economy step by step, inch by inch, out of the hands of the bourgeoisie, and of turning it over to the people as a whole." It's a terrible mistake! And he made that mistake simply because his experience was the experience of an

American citizen. “[A]nd that is exactly what is meant by communistic activities. The logical conclusion of such a trend must necessarily result in the overthrow of the capitalist order. There has probably been no individual in the history of the United States who has done so much to bring about democracy and therefore communism in the United States as President Roosevelt; and there has been no individual so much beloved by the people, and so much hated by the bourgeoisie as he” (262). That is very problematic. A European writer of some intellectual distinction could not possibly write that.

Now, if you read the history of President Roosevelt and what he did when he met Stalin and his conceptions of the relationship between the United States and Russia after the war, you will see that Roosevelt believed that he had made a personal impression on Stalin and both of them would be able to work [together]. He was the original leader of calling Stalin what? Do you know what they called him?

Unidentified audience member: “Uncle?”

Uncle! And he was making this colossal mistake, to believe that with his personal connection with Stalin [he could attenuate] this tremendous conflict between opposing societies [that went on] until the end of his days. … And in fact there were times when he—you will see that in [Harry] Hopkins’ writing—there were times when he [Roosevelt] made jokes about Churchill and made Churchill very angry, and Churchill was very hostile, and he [Roosevelt] seemed to gang up with Stalin to make jokes against Churchill in the belief that *they’re* right.[7] The conflict between Russia and the United States was being solved. I mean, that is there in writing. And you are not to make jokes about it, or to laugh. It is typical. … But, the Americans have their own method, and this is very American, where [Cox] says they loved Roosevelt so much and the bourgeoisie hated him. There you go. This is a *terrible* paragraph. Terrible! Roosevelt was not a communist. He was no more communist than I was a cat.

And I will tell you what is the significance of Roosevelt. It’s very important. Up to 1929, America was made, more or less, by the principles and the practice of free enterprise. Capitalistic competition, and something will happen, and the capitalistic political parties would work out this and that and the other. And free competition was the essence of it. In 1929, the free competition went to *pieces*! It went to pieces all over the world. The Depression was all over the world, and nowhere did it go as far as in the United States. But the principle of free competition was absolutely untroubled by previous historical developments [such] as [those] in Europe. It went to pieces. And what Roosevelt did was to establish that free competition would not run as it did in the past. Roosevelt introduced the fact that the government was responsible for maintaining some balance and order in the economy and seeing that free competition did not rush to its extremes, untouchable by the government intervention. That’s what Roosevelt did. He was not a communist. In fact, using dialectical thinking, he was the *savior* of the capitalist system! Because if he didn’t do that, God knows what would have happened. But he said, “You will not make as much money as you did in the past. You fellows have dominated the economy, you’re not going to do that [any longer].” And then he fixed it—he didn’t fix it very much, but he prevented it from going into collapse. That he did. But for Cox to call him a communist is typical of what was happening in 1945 or thereabouts.

And then Cox goes over to the race question. And there, he’s extremely good. Cox is aware that the race question did not exist from all the previous facts. He’s aware of that. Cox states *definitively* that in 1492, when Columbus leaves Europe to America, and slavery and the slave trade started, that [that] began the modern world. … That time was important, because, not up to today, since World War II happened, and World War I, and for some years after, it was the basis of the South. And the South’s ideology dominated. So, Cox had given his blows on the question of the caste system. He said, “[I]t is not a racial hierarchy, is it?” And now, he’s saying that the race question in the United

States, here, that came in Western civilization from about 1500, from the beginning of capitalism and the slave era, and slavery, and modern capitalism. It began then, and before that it didn't exist—and that was something to say. And to say politically.

And what I want to go ahead, go on with now, is—the last part of what I want to talk about is what he has to say about Gunnar Myrdal. The race problem in the United States. Because Gunnar Myrdal's book is a very American book.[8] There's a mass of information in the book. He got a lot of people together. By the way, do you know how that book was done? The American government, an important person in the American government says, "This race question has reached a state where we've got to do something about it." And they sent for Gunnar Myrdal, who is a great scholar and sociologist, and told him, "Tell us something about it." And he produced this monstrous book. Because Gunnar Myrdal said it was an "American dilemma," the "Negro problem." These words are very important. It is an American dilemma. You see, though it is a dilemma, it was a problem that cut the throat of American society that we have today. We'll use "dilemma." [Laughter] Nowadays people don't believe at all what the government says. President Kennedy went so far as to say, "That it is right when we want to deceive the enemy, that we should make statements that deceive the American people because that is a necessity of government." Kennedy said so. So, when people say, "These fellows are lying all the time, you can't trust them." The bourgeoisie comes up to their friends, says there's a "credibility gap." Credibility gap!

Now modern young people today do what they like. They say, "Your society, what you taught us, you never taught us anything. You didn't know anything, so we are going to do what we want to do." The bourgeoisie, sheesh! The bourgeoisie's in trouble. They put them in a "permissive society." They aren't permitting anything! Nobody asked them permission. But they are still [saying], "You are a permissive society."[9] [Laughter] And Gunnar Myrdal uses "an American dilemma." They do that all the time! "American dilemma." And he [Cox] says that Gunnar Myrdal will not face the question that it is a conflict of the races based on the economic struggle, and the chapter on Gunnar Myrdal there is *very* fine. The chapter on Gunnar Myrdal is a very fine subject. I understand that Cox is now at work on another big work, and I believe that he will produce something. This book, I'm going to talk about it a little later in general for what it is.

1947. In 1948, I was doing a work on dialectics, Hegel and Marxism.[10] And later sometime, I will be speaking on this in Detroit. And later this year I'm going to give two talks on Huey, Angela, and the dialectic. Now here is C.L.R. James' *World Revolution 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International*. This is a Kraus reprint, 1970.[11] The book was written in 1937. *This* [*Caste, Class & Race]* was written in 1947, but in 1937 I had already gone way beyond where Cox is. And that is not because I was smart; it was because I was working in Europe. I could not have written this book without the *immense* accumulation of material and ideas which Trotskyists [had gathered]. [Cox] was working practically alone in the United States. I don't know if he ever was a member of the Communist Party, but he had decided that their method was not his, and he was independently working at it. I'm trying to get you to understand that the book is the product of a socialist strain. I could not have written this book alone.

I will tell you what this book *[World Revolution]* is.[12] [Chapter] number one, "Marxism"; number two, "The Fore-Runners of the Third International"; number three, "The War and the Russian Revolution"; number four, "The Failure of the World Revolution and the Foundation of the International"; "Lenin and Socialism"; "Stalin and Socialism"; Stalin Kills the 1923 [German] Revolution"; "The Kulak and the British General Council"; "Stalin Ruins the Chinese Revolution"—page 229 to 268, forty pages. And so forth. "After Hitler, Our Turn." Without all my friends and all the material, and so forth, what kind of predicament would I be [in] and what would I have accomplished? But Cox was working, not practically alone, but he didn't have the environment

which I did have and which enabled me to produce this in 1937, and I published it. When he was struggling with this [*Caste, Class, and Race]*, I was already working on the Hegelian dialectic and its relation to Marxism.

I wrote another book, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways.* Do you know that book? It's a book on Herman Melville.[13] Do you know what that book is about? I said [to myself] that Marxists needed a certain book that would give a conception of literature and art in relation to the economic base. We didn't have one—I certainly didn't have one—so I wrote it. And it was a very high standard of political [criticism]—and it wasn't that James was of a high standard. I couldn't be of low standard because there were lots of people around me. And the United States [was backward politically] in relation to Europe; I was living in Europe first, and I came here to the United States, and that's what Cox didn't do. And that's why—[though] he's a fine intellect and obviously a man of great ideological morality, etcetera—[Cox could not achieve such a high standard.] He made some mistakes and he worked for many years, but I could see that he was working with—he didn't have around him what he should have had. I don't know whether he was a member of the Communist Party, but I know this: He had gone away from that method because the Communists used to say, "Marx said," "Lenin said," and therefore [that] tells us the truth. "Marx and Lenin said, and old Stalin continued it with Marx and Lenin—that is the truth." Cox does not say that. So I am interested in the book from that point of view.

Now, I think I should introduce you to some of the things that Cox did *not* do. I believe that it is obvious that I respect him, and I think his book did some *very* important things at that time. And I was here, and I know the impact that the book made on people. But I wanted to say—so, I wrote *The Black Jacobins*. And I think that today, *The Black Jacobins* as a political organism, and the way it is functioning, is more active and meeting more people and moving more people in the political direction of this movement. I think so.

Now, I want to take another West Indian: Aimé Césaire. He wrote a famous book, *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, "A Statement on the Return to My Native Country."[14] And has anybody got *The Black Jacobins* here? And can you give it to me please? Thank you. This was written in 1938, and Césaire was a West Indian. I talked to Césaire in Cuba the other day. I liked his work. He knew that I had written about it, and he said he liked mine. And I asked him, "Where, when did you begin?" He told me at the Victor Schoelcher School, in Martinique.[15] Very fine school, in the Caribbean. I was educated at Queen's Royal College, very fine school. Eight or nine masters, all men from Oxford and Cambridge. They brought something, and they taught us. Victor Schoelcher School. Harrison College in Barbados, one of the famous classical schools in the world, Latin and Greek. But there were very few of us who got it. Education that we were getting through the mainland people who came [from] abroad. … I asked him where he began, he said "I began [at the] Victor Schoelcher School." I said, "What did you do there?" He said, "Latin, and Greek, and French Literature." The essence of Western civilization is Latin and Greek, and French. You get the transference of it into the modern world. I said, "And then where did you venture to go?" He said, "I went to the École Normale Supérieure." This is a famous school, the most famous school in France. Chiefly notorious for producing great scholars and Communists. And they produced one in Césaire; he became a member of the Communist Party. I said, "What did you do at the École Normale?" He said, "Latin, and Greek, and French literature." I said, "And then?" He said, "I went to the Sorbonne." And I said, "What did you do at the Sorbonne? I suppose you did the same." "Yes. Latin, and Greek, and French literature."

And he [Césaire] said, "But I have another thing to tell you." He said, "I went back to teach at the Victor Schoelcher School." But, before he went back, he wrote the most devastating critique of Western Civilization that has been done in the twentieth century. This is the "*Cahier*." In other

words, he *attacked* it. He could attack it as he did because he understood it from the inside out. He had spent, from the time he was six or seven until he was a man of about twenty-five, studying it. They had taught it to him, and that was characteristic of every West Indian, and in a sense, that is Europeans' influence upon the West Indian. Cox didn't have that. This is for Césaire. Césaire says we've got to pay for this civilization! Pay for the Western Civilization. (I'm looking for one that says we've got to go to Africa.)

Hoorah for those who never invented anything

Hoorah for those who never explored anything

Hoorah for those who never mastered anything

He says the basis of a human life you can find in the African tribal system. Their art, their philosophy, their politics; that's what Césaire was saying. He had never been to Africa. But the rejection of Western Civilization was so complete after this Western education that he went on to say, "I reject Western Civilization because":

[Recites from Césaire's poem "Displaced"]

Listen to the white world

its horrible exhaustion from its

immense labours

They are tired today, and they were very tired since 1938. Césaire was able to see that.

its rebellious joints cracking under

the pitiless stars

its blue steel rigidities, cutting

through the mysteries of the flesh

listen to their vainglorious conquests

trumpeting their defeats

listen to the grandiose alibis of their

pitiful floundering

He says, that is, "What does 'civilization' mean?" That is Césaire. Cox, brought up in the American environment, hadn't reached so far. I want you to understand that. He was the same intellectual, pointed [in the same direction], [with] the same energy, the same determination, the same honesty, and everything else, but he grew up in this environment. I grew up in the other environment and was educated elsewhere. And by 1937, I could write *World Revolution,* which in many ways was beyond Cox. And in 1948, I was doing *Dialectic*, and in [19]38 Césaire could reject [Western civilization] completely, and so forth. That is the difference. And you can appreciate, therefore, the *immense* worth and *high* significance of the work of Dr. Du Bois.

But you will see, in an important letter that Dr. Du Bois wrote to Kwame Nkrumah, where it said—I

think it was in 1958—Africa has to go the socialist way.[16] He says, “Pardon me, Russia and Eastern Europe are socialist.” And he says, “In Scandinavia and Britain they are going Socialist. And Mr. Roosevelt, even in America, even in America he’s introducing some socialist ideas in the government. You watch,” he said. It’s not surprising that Cox, a much younger man, and had not getting the background—Du Bois would have never gone so far to say that Roosevelt was introducing communism. But he says “some socialist doctrine.” I wish you would look up that. It is in the form of a letter to Nkrumah, telling him what was to be the future of the economy of Africa. When he said that in Britain and the Scandinavian countries certain elements of socialism were being introduced, and [that] even in the United States, some activities of the New Deal were socialist in character, I want you to understand, he [Cox] lived in a certain environment and he had certain contacts. It is not accidental that he did. The West Indian and the Europeans completely—I remember … [missing text]. I couldn’t have written that at all. No! I’ll tell you what I wrote it in 1936.

Permanent Revolution or permanent slaughter, Trotsky has written. What other prospect is there? The Tories accept the permanent slaughter. The international Socialists accept the Permanent Revolution. Liberals and Social Democrats, including Roosevelt, are the comedians of the modern world. They are on the side of the permanent slaughter, but want it dignified by the League of Nations, or Collective Security, or some such twaddle. Their special technique lies in being deceived. They were deceived by Grey before 1914; they were deceived by Lloyd George and Wilson in 1919; they were deceived by John Simon over Manchuria in 1931; they were deceived by Samuel Hoare; by Baldwin; by Anthony Eden. If Beelzebub stood on the Treasury Bench without troubling to disguise his horns and tail in coat and topper, and swore to them that this coming war would be fought for Christianity, they would rush to support it, to bewail after that they were deceived.[17]

[Laughter]

You see where I come from? I want you to understand that. You have to take into—I began when I spoke about *The Black Jacobins*. I began with where I came from, and how I met, and who I met, and so forth, that the book came from there. …. What is a person’s life but of a whole lot of people? That is what a book is. And Cox’s book should be read historically in that way. And I would be glad if you look up that [quotation] in Du Bois, in the letter to Nkrumah, when Nkrumah became ruler, talked about socialism in the way that Cox said. So, okay.

I think now we could be ready to discuss. There were some other things I could say, but there’s no need. I’ve done the best I could. I hope I’ve given you some idea of what this book was *doing*, what he was aiming at, what he actually achieved, and that there are serious mistakes, but they are part of the environment in which he lived. And I tell you what was happening to us West Indians writers, we who were educated and had the experience of the Europeans, who had a lot of political experience which Cox and company were not able to get in the United States … Okay.

Facilitator: Okay. Why don’t we just start right quick. Questions for discussion, since everything seems so informative. What time is it now? Ten o’clock?

James: By my watch, five past ten.

Unidentified Questioner 1: I would like to know … because I really don’t have a formulated question, but it’s kind of bothering me, and maybe you could get to it. And I feel you saying that, Cox being a product of the environment that he was a part of in the United States, but working alone. But you seem also to be—maybe not—it just appears that you’re negating the possibility that there was, if not

there, at least *evolving* within the United States, a kind of a political environment that determines what happens to black people in this country, is what I want to say. So the race question in the United States would be sort of out of context in a European environment. Had he been working in a European environment, he might have been able to come—he would have definitely been able to come up with some position, some statements, about how the racial attitudes came about. But in terms of understanding and knowing what they were in the United States, and dealing with *that* type of thing, you had to be a part of *that* environment. And I know that doesn't salvage the whole book, and I wasn't really trying to, but I was really trying to speak to the point of whether or not within the United States and working in the United States, here alone or amidst the, let's say, semi-intellectual environment, that if Cox was not presenting a total picture of political thought, he was at least presenting that picture of political thought that might have been evolving out of the United States.

James: Cox is very *plain:* "*Caste, Class and Race*." And what I'm saying is, what the comprehensive task that he attempted with such courage and such ability, he lacked certain things which he would have had if he had been in the European environment. And in four of five years, I was learned on the Chinese Revolution, and I was able to read this and that, and I met a marvelous bunch of people. I will tell you something about myself. I went to England in 1932, with this immense knowledge of European literature and history. And I met the Trotskyists in those days, you know; they were the people who had been Leninists from 1917! And they had broken with Stalin, hoping to restore the Leninist doctrine! There is a new generation of Trotskyists who know nothing about that, but the Trotskyists I met in 1932 who educated me were Leninists. And they were seeking to restore the doctrines and practices and political morality of Lenin, over what Stalin had introduced, and those were the people who I learned from. And I haven't the slightest doubt that if Cox had had that environment something else would have come out. Because Cox wasn't attempting a racial question, he was doing everything. But you see that when he wrote about the classes, and he said they began as estates, and then moving from the estates to classes. And then from classes to modern [society]—all that is there. He wasn't even—I said that he was somewhat limited, and limited he had to be, because he was attempting so *much* in this book. That's all. I understand that he did so much.

Unidentified Questioner 2: On the part dealing with fascism, and stuff about classes, he made a statement on page 197.

James: Ah, I like a question that mentions the page. Yes, what does he say?

Unidentified Questioner 2: It's like, in the middle of the page. "But nationalism breeds counternationalism; hence fascism merely clears the way for unending struggle 'between mighty antagonists, each of whom can enlist the powers of whole states.'"

James: And that's exactly, that is Leninism, he says basically, but go ahead.

Unidentified Questioner 2: What I wanted you to do for me, was to tell me how that operated, if it did at all, in your book *Black Jacobins*. In other words, the antagonism between, at one point between mulattoes and Toussaint's former generals, and himself, how does it relate to this particular statement?

James: No. The antagonism that is most important, that is very important in relation to this work—the antagonism between two very different powers: Britain and France. And to set the New World between them, and was able to use the antagonism between them so as to bring Haiti on the map. That is what he's talking about here. And today, however, in the twentieth century, capitalism does not fight another capitalism, but they seek to dominate whole economies! The Japanese sought to dominate a large part of China, not only to exploit them physically, but to have the labor of the population at their disposal. And when these two large state capitalist blocs, the United States on

one side and Russia on the other, began to dominate sections of the world, then the struggle was a struggle for world mastery! So there are two sets of antagonisms going on: There is the antagonism *inside* this particular country, but there is [also] the antagonism on a world scale. And in 1800 when Haiti came up, it was the antagonism between Britain and the French. It is out of that that the Haitians came out. And Cuba came out today and has been able to hold itself because of the antagonism between the United States and Russia. And Cuba benefits by that. So in addition to the internal antagonism of different sections of society, you have the antagonism on a world scale of this imperialist model. Cox is very much aware of that. Cox is aware of that. I am very much aware of that, in what I'm doing here also.

Unidentified Questioner 3: Mr. James, if Cox is remembered by Americans writ large. His is a book that takes the question of color and places it in the world. In the context of *Color and Democracy* by Dr. DuBois, how would you compare the two?

James: No, Du Bois was a different type than Cox entirely. Du Bois had an absolutely magnificent education. Du Bois went up to Harvard, and at Harvard, there was … William James, there was George Santayana, some of the greatest intellectuals of the period—as a matter of fact, they were—at no time did Harvard ever have a body of teachers of the intellectual quality and creative capacity that they had when Du Bois went there. And then he left there and he went to Europe, he went to Germany. And studied in Germany because at that time, it was one of the centers of the European development. Two things were taking place in Germany: The Marxists were busily upsetting the ideological ideas of capitalist society. And there were people who were doing splendid work. Werner Sombart was one, and the social democracy of Germany was busy fighting against them; and secondly, sociology was being—what was the great sociologist?

Unidentified audience member: Weber.

James: Weber. They were busy developing sociology against the Marxism, and Du Bois went into the middle of that. So when he came back to the United States, that was the kind of education that very few people had had. Cox *didn't* have that, that's what I'm trying to say. He had already the benefit of all that was most important at the time.

And I would like to mention that at Harvard, in 1900, 1898, or thereabouts, what had happened was, after and during the Civil War, American capitalism had begun to develop. And by 1900, it was clear that the ideas on which the American democracy had been founded had gone by the board, and these capitalistic monsters now dominated the world. Populism was an attempt in the [18]90s to try to do something, but William J. Bryan made a great speech, and that was the end of it as far as he was concerned. And George Santayana, William James, and a whole lot of these others, were searching for ways in which to develop the old American principles established in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, et cetera, against this monster which had appeared as a result of the Civil War. Du Bois was a part of all that. And he went to Europe and took part in the great intellectual discoveries that were being made. So when he came back and began to write and work, he was not interested in the same thing that Cox was in. Du Bois was one of the great intellectuals of the twentieth century—not one of the great *black* intellectuals. No sir. One of the intellectuals of the twentieth century. It so happened that he had had a magnificent education.

Unidentified Questioner 3: Let me rephrase the question. What I'm trying to say is, at the conclusion of the Second World War, Cox writes a book. Du Bois writes another book. Those books are the product of the environment of the times; the same could [be] said of the dialectical relationship between *Color and Democracy* and *Caste, Class, and Race*. They represent two different kinds of things. That's the question I am asking. What do you see as the dialectical relationship between *Caste, Class, and Race* and *Color and Democracy*? Capitalism?

James: I think that Cox is doing, has accepted at the beginning. He says so. And that's a very useful question. Because there's a lot of—Cox says, "[W]e have an observation by a distinguished sociologist, the accuracy of which would certainly not be impaired, simply because we recognize the nature of the re-statement of the position that has been the very driving force behind the colossal intellectual output of Karl Marx."[18] [xi]. In the history of historical perspectives, it is important that the assertion be known to have been emphasized by Marx. But in so far and so forth. In other words, he was using the Marxist doctrine but applying it to caste and applying it to the race question. But he said he was a Marxist. And he wrote the book because he felt that things should have been said about the class/racial question in the United States, by means of the Marxist analysis, that were not being said. I think that is what he was trying to do. His whole analysis of class, and the estates and so forth, and the analysis of fascism, and the analysis of class consciousness. And his attack on Myrdal, is because Myrdal will not accept the class basis of the race question in the United States. That's what he [Cox] was doing.

Appendix & Editorial Note

This transcript and the lecture are copyrighted and may not be reproduced without the expressed written permission of Dr. Robert A. Hill, the literary executor of the estate of C.L.R. James.

The lecture was transcribed and audit-edited by Justin Dunnavant, Randi Gill-Sadler, Justin Hosbey, Ryan Morini, and Paul Ortiz, staff members of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program at the University of Florida. Deborah Hendrix, digital humanities coordinator at SPOHP used TwistedWave, SoundSoap, and spot amplitude enhancement to restore the audio quality of the recorded lecture. Minor editorial changes have been made in the text in order to preserve the integrity of the overall lecture. Ellipses in the text indicate passages that were impossible to transcribe with certainty. The notes and citations in the text were added in order to provide the reader with an introduction to key readings, concepts, individuals, and events that James cites throughout the course of the lecture.

Footnotes

1. James is referring to his The Black Jacobins and Du Bois' Black Reconstruction.
2. Constance Webb (1918-2005) was a socialist and a labor activist as well as an accomplished writer, actress, and biographer of Richard Wright. She was James's second wife. She writes about her life with James as well as her interactions with Wright, Chester Himes, and the political milieu of the left in the 1950s in, Not Without Love: Memoirs (Dartmouth Press, 2003).
3. V.S. Naipaul was born in Chaguanas, Trinidad, in 1932. James and Naipaul were friends and correspondents for many years after Naipaul began his literary career. His first novels, foremost of which was A House for Mr. Biswas (1961), were set in Trinidad. Although political difference separated them, James retained a great respect for Naipaul and the latter depicted James in A Way in the World as the character Lebrun. Naipaul received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001. See Rhonda Cobham-Sander, "Consuming the Self: V.S. Naipaul, CLR James, and A Way in the World," Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal (vol. 5, Issue 2, December 2007), 1-22.
4. The full quote from Caste, Class, and Race is, "Hence to think of castes as we would of such institutions as labor unions, churches, or guilds is to begin with a false conception. One caste cannot exist in an otherwise casteless society, for castes are interdependent social phenomenon" (3).
5. This was a critical point that Cedric Robinson in Black Marxism (University of North Carolina Press, 1983) applied to James's own work and to the scholarship of activists working in the Black Radical Tradition. See Robin D.G. Kelley's introduction to Robinson's Black Marxism, xii.
6. In The German Ideology, Marx and Engels argued, "By the mere fact that it is a class and no longer an estate, the bourgeoisie is forced to organize itself no longer locally, but nationally, and to give a general form to its mean average interests. Through the emancipation of private property

from the community, the State has become a separate entity, beside and outside civil society; but it is nothing more than the form of organization which the bourgeois necessarily adopt both for internal and external purposes, for the mutual guarantee of their property and interest." Karl Marx with Friedrich Engels, The German Ideology (1846; Prometheus Books, 1998), 99.
7. Harry Hopkins was an adviser of President Roosevelt's and accompanied him to the Yalta Conference in 1945 where Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin met. C.L.R. James was an anti-Stalinist, and he will discuss his ideas on Stalin later in this lecture.
8. Gunnar Myrdal was a prominent economist and a Swedish Social Democrat. He was hired by the Carnegie Corporation to conduct the study that eventually was published as An American Dilemma in 1944. Cox was highly critical of Myrdal for eschewing economic explanations in racial inequality. See: Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1944).
9. A popular phrase used in the United States and United Kingdom in the 1960s to refer to changing values in the society, particularly among youth. Mary Evans notes, "The 'permissive' society, as it was called with loathing and hatred by some and with enthusiasm by others, began to allow a greater degree of freedom in the public expression of those forms of personal behavior—for example, homosexuality—that had been publicly unacceptable." Mary Evans, The Imagination: Detective Fiction and the Modern World (Continuum, 2009). See also Alan Petigny, The Permissive Society: America, 1941-1965 (Cambridge University Press, 2009).
10. C.L.R. James, Notes on Dialectics (1948; repr., Lawrence Hill & Co., 1981).
11. C.L.R. James, World Revolution, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International (1937; Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1970).
12. Here, James is reading actual chapter headings and key themes of World Revolution.
13. C.L.R. James, Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live in. With a new introduction by Donald E. Pease. (1953; repr., Hanover: University Press of New England, 2001).
14. Originally published in 1939, Césaire's Notebook of a Return to My Native Land became a pivotal text in the burgeoning Pan-African and anti-colonial movements of the time; James frequently drew from Césaire to illustrate the forward motion of Caribbean and African struggles for freedom. In his essay, "From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro," which appears in the revised, 1936, edition of Black Jacobins, James draws from Notebook to highlight the centrality of Africa to world revolution. See James, Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution, rev. ed. (1938; repr., Vintage Books, 1989), 399-400.
15. Founded in 1902, Lycée Victor Schoelcher helped to produce generations of remarkable students including Césaire, Frantz Fanon (whom Césaire mentored), and Édouard Glissant, among others.
16. The correspondence between Du Bois and Nkrumah, and Du Bois's thoughts on the meaning of independence in Africa, is referenced in W.E.B. Du Bois, The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois (International Publishers, 1968), 400-406.
17. James is quoting from World Revolution, Chapter 15, "A Fourth International The Only Hope." For a version accessible on the internet, see here (Accessed October 13, 2015). See also: James, World Revolution: 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International (London: Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd, 1937) p. 419.
18. Cox begins this passage with the statement by Louis Wirth that, "[R]esearch in the social sciences will remain stunted and inadequate until it includes the search for knowledge on power relations among men and the means for generating the will and the capacity for action directed toward the achievement of a good society." Cox traces the origins of this idea to "the colossal intellectual output of Karl Marx." Caste, Class, and Race, xi.