

# Introduction

February 10, 2016

In 1971 the Institute of the Black World (IBW) was at a crossroads. Founded in 1969 by historian Vincent Harding, literary scholar Stephen Henderson, and other scholars in the colleges that comprised the Atlanta University Center (AUC), as well as with the support of leading national researchers of the African American experience, the IBW served as the intellectual wing of the Martin Luther King Center. The King Center initially was a multiunit memorial that included King's childhood home, his burial site, a museum, and a civil rights archive in addition to the IBW. During the institute's first year, Harding and Henderson guided the organization as it analyzed the declining civil rights movement and the growing Black Studies Movement. Its support for Black Studies and its willingness to question the orthodoxies of the civil rights movement—nonviolent direction and charismatic leadership—led to a painful split from the King Center that cost IBW members' jobs and strained long-time friendships. As the IBW commenced its second year, its first as an independent organization, the institute moved from the shadow of the King Center and beyond the curricular debates surrounding Black Studies.<sup>1</sup>



**C.L.R. James**

The 1971 Summer Research Symposium marked a vital moment in the IBW's history that would ultimately define the future of the organization. William Strickland, a political scientist and a key IBW organizer, wrote to Harding and others that the social, political, and economic analyses that emerged from the symposium "should be systematic, not scattered; directed to clarifying our conceptual understanding of our history and to explicating what it is we mean exactly by 'education for liberation.'" Central to IBW's developing analysis was a more thorough examination of "the politics of class and mass movements."<sup>2</sup> To this end, the IBW developed a six-week program

designed to teach emerging intellectuals “the process of charting a progressive Black future based on our assessment of our past and present condition.”<sup>3</sup> To accomplish this task the IBW invited C.L.R. James, St. Clair Drake, Edward Brathwaite, and George Beckwith, to teach alongside IBW founders and associates Vincent Harding, Robert Hill, and William Strickland.

C.L.R. James arrived at the Institute of the Black World in June 1971 to give a series of lectures that would contribute to the IBW’s mission of revolutionary analysis. On June 14, James opened with a critical examination of his magnum opus on the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. The next day the elder Black statesman of anti-colonialism offered a riveting comparison of *The Black Jacobins* and W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*. On June 18, James concluded with a lively rumination on “How I Would Rewrite the Black Jacobins” today.<sup>4</sup>

These lectures feature the Caribbean intellectual in fine form. At age 70, he is at ease with a multi-generational audience, telling jokes as he patiently guides them chapter by chapter through two of the definitive Marxist historical works of the twentieth century. James assesses the potential of a new revolt “from below,” one that would not repeat the errors of past revolutionary leaders such as Toussaint L’Ouverture who lost touch with the masses. Of course, these are not mere speeches. The Institute of the Black World emphasized self-activity, historical analysis, and collective struggle. As James sweeps through the history of five centuries of upheaval, audience members are enthusiastically turning pages and marking passages of *The Black Jacobins* and *Black Reconstruction*; they are encouraged by the speaker to connect the revolutions in France and Haiti in the 1790s with the urban rebellions of the 1960s.

Thanks to Dr. Robert A. Hill, James’s literary executor and a former IBW staff member, we have been able to read James’s lectures at the Institute of the Black World after they were transcribed and published in the September 2000 issue of *Small Axe: A Caribbean Platform of Criticism*.<sup>5</sup>

What has been missing up to now however, is a record of the presentation that C.L.R. James gave the day after his workshop on Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction*. On June 16, James spoke and answered questions for over an hour on Oliver Cox’s *Caste, Class, and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics*, a landmark book originally published in 1948 and reissued in 1959 by the Monthly Review Press.<sup>6</sup> This hitherto forgotten session ties together several major themes that James touches on in the series, particularly questions of where revolutionary ideas come from as well as the relationship between racial and class oppression in a capitalist society. Midway through the lecture, James sums up Dr. Cox’s contributions to understanding the emergence of racism in the modern world: “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. Then it began and before that it didn’t exist, and that was something to say. And to say politically.”<sup>7</sup>

C.L.R. James provides a critical analysis of one of the most important—and persistently ignored—historical studies employing Marxist methodology in the United States.<sup>8</sup> The lecture’s publication by *New Politics* represents a watershed moment in the historiography of the left, a signal contribution to the literature of what Cedric Robinson calls the “Black Radical Tradition,” as well as a critical intervention in the debate over racism and modernity in the era of the Black Lives Matter movement. In *Caste, Class, and Race*, Cox traced the origins of the “Negro Problem” to the economic foundations of Western civilization and the concerted efforts of upper-class whites to exploit Black workers in the modern world. Cox rejected the popular idea that sexual tensions between the races or deficiencies in Black culture were the major culprits in racial inequality. He also criticized the notion that race relations in the United States were locked into a static “caste system” such as that

which was said to have existed in India. First, Dr. Cox demonstrated that most intellectuals in the United States misunderstood the origins and operations of the caste system in India.<sup>9</sup>

Most importantly, Oliver Cox argued that American race relations were as dynamic as capitalism, the system that determined social relations in the broader society. In a thesis he continued to develop in his pioneering books on global capitalism, Cox insisted that,

There can hardly be a greater misconception than to approach this subject [race relations] in the traditional missionary spirit which seeks to discover elementary causes in assumed racial traits and pathologies, or behind the veil of proclaimed sexual fears. To do this would be to misapprehend the profound involvement of the future of capitalism in racial situations. Prime movers, to the contrary, must be sought in peculiar economic interests and power structures mainly in the South. The tremendous resistance to change in that area is suggestive of the role of the power-group which supports the existing social order.<sup>10</sup>

For those like us who came of age in the Reagan Era, the radical triumvirate of Cox, Du Bois, and James provided vital introductions to Marxism and social theory, as well as analyses of capitalism as a system that had to be viewed globally if one ever hoped to grapple with its deformities. These scholars taught many of us how to integrate history and theory into our movement-building work. Above all, they demonstrated that the systems of domination were not all-powerful—that they could be challenged and even overthrown given the right amount of energy, organizing, and solidarity. In the 1990s, the prophets of neoliberalism bragged that there was no longer any alternative to the “free market” world order and that we had reached “The End of History.”<sup>11</sup> *Black Reconstruction*, *The Black Jacobins*, as well as *Caste, Class and Race*, taught us how to interrogate the inevitability of a system based on exploitation and gave us tools to uncover the bases of mass resistance to oppression and neocolonialism. These texts remain as vital as ever for building new social movements today. We are indebted to C.L.R. James for bringing the three books together in this remarkable lecture series.

Oliver Cromwell Cox was born in Trinidad in 1901, the same year as James. Like James, Cox left colonized Trinidad as a young man to pursue opportunity abroad. However (and James will emphasize this point in his lecture), while James traveled to England and immersed himself in leftist politics, Cox pursued a career in academia in the United States. Cox completed his master’s degree in economics at the University of Chicago in 1932 and went on to earn a law degree at Northwestern and a Ph.D. in sociology at Chicago in 1938. He taught for most of his career at historically Black colleges including Wiley, Tuskegee, and Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. His academic output was astonishing; however, his works remained dramatically underappreciated during his lifetime. As Herbert M. Hunter notes, “Many reviewers, especially those ideologically opposed to Cox’s ideas, dismissed his work as ‘Marxist dogma’ or ‘communist propaganda’ because of his critical analysis of capitalism and race relations.”<sup>12</sup>

While C.L.R. James finds much to praise in *Caste, Class and Race*, he also finds flaws. James believes that Cox was an exceptional scholar; however, he argues that Cox’s American academic training and his disconnection from broader left organizing—including Trotskyism and Pan-Africanism—placed limitations on his analysis. In contrast, James posits, Aimé Césaire’s educational experiences in Martinique and France, as well as his travel within the international circuits of the anti-colonial movement, allowed Césaire to go farther than Cox. Hence, James calls Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*), “the most devastating critique of Western Civilization that has been done in the twentieth century.” C.L.R. James is concerned here with the process whereby an individual comes to challenge the fundamental premises of the society she lives in. His thesis is that it takes more than individual brilliance or experience; it takes a rootedness in a broader community of struggle. James had argued, as a member of the Facing Reality organization

in 1968,

The only program, policy, perspective is the recognition that those with ideas will not lead the mass. As we have once more seen in France, the mass movement, as it has done for hundreds of years, will register its rejection of the social order in decay. And today more than ever the road is open between the mass movement and those who have ideas corresponding to the needs of the day.<sup>13</sup>

This is why C.L.R. James's criticism of Oliver Cox's educational background vis-à-vis Césaire's and W.E.B. Du Bois's is inconsistent. James emphasizes that Du Bois's time at Harvard with reform-minded faculty prepared him for a life of radicalism. He goes on to state that Du Bois's and Césaire's experiences studying in Europe allowed them to get to the heart of what was wrong with Western civilization. In contrast, James argues, Oliver Cox's academic background as well as the fact he remained in the United States isolated him from the political education and comradeship that Césaire, Du Bois, and James received in Europe. At the same time however, James fails to note that Cox attended the University of Chicago at a time when its sociology and anthropology departments were teeming with scholars attempting to grapple with major social problems as well. Cox's intellectual development and sharpening critique of capitalism allowed him to imbibe and then surpass the best of what Chicago's luminaries such as Robert E. Park and William F. Ogburn had to offer.<sup>14</sup> Cox's experiences in the heart of capitalist America, as well as decades of teaching at historically Black colleges such as Tuskegee and Lincoln University, obviously lent strength to his emphasis on the intersection of capitalism and racism. The reprinting of *Caste, Class and Race* by Monthly Review Press in 1959 and again in 2000—as well as C.L.R. James's lecture on the book at the Institute of the Black World in 1971—clearly demonstrate that Cox's oeuvre qualifies as movement scholarship containing “ideas corresponding to the needs of the day.”

Now that scholars are returning to study the linkages between imperialism, slavery, and capitalism, *Black Reconstruction*, *The Black Jacobins*, as well as *Caste, Class and Race* should be read in organizing workshops, seminars, and everywhere where “education for liberation” is the ultimate goal.

Ravi Malhotra, a sponsor of *New Politics*, alerted Paul Ortiz to the existence of a recording of James's lecture in the summer of 2015. Malhotra kept the digital recording safe after receiving it from Professor Aldon Nielsen who had preserved it for many years. Nielsen recalls digitizing the original analog cassette tape around 2002. The recording had degraded markedly over the decades. A team of staff members at the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program at the University of Florida restored a significant amount of the audio quality of the lecture, and then toiled several weeks to transcribe it. A note on editorial method used by the Proctor Program in processing the recording follows the text. Page numbers demarcated in brackets refer to the 1959 *Monthly Review* edition of Oliver Cromwell Cox's *Caste, Class and Race*.

The authors are grateful for the permission of Dr. Robert A. Hill to transcribe this lecture by C.L.R. James.

## Footnotes

1. Derrick E. White, *The Challenge of Blackness: The Institute of the Black World and Political Activism in the 1970s* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011).
2. William Strickland, “Some Reflections and Recommendations on Research for Summer Research Symposium,” *The Institute of the Black World Papers - Summer Research Symposia 1971*. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

3. The Institute of the Black World 1971 Summer Research Symposium Official report, The IBW Papers - Summer Research Symposia 1971.
4. C.L.R. James, *Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, rev. ed. (1938; repr., Vintage Books, 1989); W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (1935; New York: Meridian Books, 1964).
5. Small Axe printed the three aforementioned lectures with an analytical introduction by Robert A. Hill. See: Robert A. Hill, "Preface: The C.L.R. James Lectures," 61-64; C.L.R. James, "Lectures on the Black Jacobins," 65-112; Anthony Bogues, "Afterword," 113-117, *Small Axe* (Vol. 4, Issue 2, September 2000).
6. Oliver C. Cox, *Caste, Class & Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (1948; Monthly Review Press, 1959). Monthly Review Press reissued an abridged version of the text with an introduction by Adolph Reed, Jr., as *Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (Monthly Review Press, 2001).
7. Cedric Robinson traced the lineage of this critique of capitalism in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. New Foreword by Robin D.G. Kelley (1983; Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
8. The literature on Oliver C. Cox's intellectual contributions has been steadily growing. This includes Herbert M. Hunter, "Oliver C. Cox: A Biographical Sketch of His Life and Work," *Phylon* (Vol. 44, No. 4, 4th Qtr., 1983), 249-261; George Snedeker, "Capitalism, Racism and the Struggle for Democracy: The Political Sociology of Oliver C. Cox," *Democracy and Socialism* (No. 7, Fall 1988), 75-96; Cedric Robinson, "Oliver Cromwell Cox and the Historiography of the West," *Cultural Critique* (Vol. 17, Winter 1990/91), 5-20; Christopher A. McAuley, *The Mind of Oliver C. Cox* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2004); Barbara Celarent, "Caste, Class and Race by Oliver Cromwell Cox," *American Journal of Sociology* (Vol. 115, No. 5, March 2010), 1664-1669; Christopher A. McAuley, "Oliver C. Cox and the Roots of World Systems Theory," in Nelson Lichtenstein, ed., *American Capitalism: Social Thought and Political Economy in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 175-190.
9. Louis Dumont, in *Homo Hierarchicus*, wrote, "The criticism of the 'Caste School of Race Relations' has been remarkably carried out by Oliver C. Cox. ... Cox, with admirable insight, has evolved a picture of the caste system which is infinitely truer than that with which [W. Lloyd] Warner was satisfied." Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. Complete Revised English Edition (1960; University of Chicago, 1980), 254-255.
10. Oliver Cox, *Capitalism and American Leadership* (Philosophical Library, 1962), 242. Along with *Capitalism and American Leadership*, Cox's books on capitalism included *The Foundations of Capitalism* (London: Peter Owen, 1959) and *Capitalism as a System* (Monthly Review Press, 1964). In recent years, Cox's research is being acknowledged as a vital foundation to world-systems approaches in understanding capitalism. See: Sean P. Hier, "The Forgotten Architect: Cox, Wallerstein and World-System Theory," *Race & Class* (Vol. 42 (3), January 2001), 69-86.
11. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 1992).
12. Hunter, 255.
13. C.L.R. James, "Introduction," in *Marxism for Our Times: C.L.R. James on Revolutionary Organization*, Martin Glaberman, ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 183.
14. Cox demonstrates this in his critique of E. Franklin Frazier, Park, Ogburn and others in Nathan Hare, *The Black Anglo-Saxons*. Introduction by Oliver C. Cox. (rk: Marzani & Munsell, Inc., 1965), 1-14.