

# Renegades and Castaways

July 2, 2014

For many years the dominant trend in scholarship on C.L.R. James has been to emphasize his cultural and literary writings. Arguably the most popular way to frame his legacy has been to situate him as a forerunner to cultural studies, post-colonial studies, and identity politics. Grant Farred, for example, has criticized “earlier modes of James studies” that addressed “debates that occupied sectarian James scholars” and welcomed “the centrality of cultural studies within James scholarship,” while Brett St. Louis has argued that the “march of identity politics and post-modernism” is “irresistible,” and that James’s work is of value precisely because it “grapples with a proto-post-marxist problematic.”

Anyone familiar with James’s life and work will recognize that this culture-centered reading of James is at best incomplete. Cyril Lionel Robert James (1901-1989) wrote on a formidable range of topics and participated in all kinds of struggles and causes. Some of the topics he thought and wrote about included Hollywood movies and team sports. He certainly wasn’t an “orthodox” historical materialist who downplayed the significance of social, cultural, and even psychological forces. Yet it is worth insisting that he consistently and explicitly located himself within a Marxist framework, initially Trotskyist and later on, by the 1950s, self-declared independent Marxist. With this bedrock political commitment came an unfettered sense of intellectual freedom and curiosity. His corpus includes books on Pan-Africanism, Hegelian dialectics, Herman Melville, Soviet foreign policy, West Indian party politics, the politics of socialism, and the Haitian revolution, as well as a novel and a number of short stories. He also wrote essays and delivered lectures on the vanguard party, the British Empire, Shakespearean tragedies, literary criticism, Abraham Lincoln, Picasso, Toni Morrison, cricket matches, strike waves, Athenian democracy, the Atlantic slave trade, the Paris Commune, China under Mao, and the civil rights movement in the United States. Even his biographers have wrestled with the challenge of accounting for and doing justice to the diversity of his interests.

Having spent much of his life in relative obscurity and genteel poverty, James achieved the status of *éminence grise* during his final years. Many (but not all) of his books and essays found their way back into print, and journalists traveled to his modest lodgings in the Brixton section of London to conduct interviews and research magazine profiles. A few years before his passing the *London Times* memorably described him as the “Black Plato” of the twentieth century. After his death, the academic world began to pay closer attention to his ideas, and for the past couple of decades roughly a book a year has been published in Britain, the United States, and the Anglophone Caribbean on various aspects of James’s life and work. He has also been the subject of numerous academic conferences and workshops. C.L.R. James is arguably one of a small number of twentieth-century radical thinkers whose intellectual agenda inspires and provokes new readers in the twenty-first.

More than any other contemporary writer on James, Christian Høgsbjerg appreciates how provisional and incomplete our understanding of this intellectual agenda has actually been. Given the proliferation of fresh editions of James’s books and essays, and the availability of several biographies, it would seem as if this ground would have been thoroughly canvassed. But the gaps are enormous, both in terms of thematic development and the material record. There are still numerous C.L.R. James speeches, reviews, letters, poems, videos, signed and unsigned essays, and even book chapters and manuscripts deposited in archives, libraries, and personal effects that have been scarcely touched by academics, let alone publishers. Furthermore, we conspicuously lack reliable and detailed accounts of any number of Jamesian episodes, from his role in the 1941 Missouri sharecroppers’ strike, and his occasional interventions in mainstream Trinidadian politics,

to his relationship to the New Left, not only in North America but in the eastern Caribbean. Høgsgbjerg's research takes aim at what is perhaps the most productive and fruitful of these episodes, his six-and-a-half-year sojourn in Britain in the 1930s.

A little over a year ago, Duke University Press published the first result of Høgsgbjerg's archival investigations. Rummaging through the papers of Jock Haston, a working class Trotskyist from Scotland, Høgsgbjerg stumbled across "the long-lost original playscript" for James's three-act dramatization of the life of Toussaint Louverture, the leader of the "only successful slave revolt in history." James's drama had been staged in London in the mid-1930s, with Paul Robeson in the starring role, but until Høgsgbjerg's fortuitous discovery only a small portion of the script had weathered the passage of time. The resulting volume features the recovered script, the original theatrical program, and nearly two-dozen reviews of the 1936 production. It also includes a thoroughly researched introduction by Høgsgbjerg as well as a forward by the historian Laurent Dubois, and a sampling of letters and essays by James and Robeson that more or less date to this period. Whether the play represents, as Høgsgbjerg argues in his introduction, "the last major missing piece of his writing yet to be published" is debatable. But the publication of James's foray into theatrical prose is not only a delightful literary event in its own right but provides a welcome opportunity to revisit the historical and intellectual context in which James produced his landmark work of comparative historical analysis, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938).

Earlier this year, Duke published a substantially upgraded version of Høgsgbjerg's dissertation, which uses interviews, archival findings, and published materials to track James's intellectual and political progression during the Great Depression, a period in which he embraced Marxism and wrote some of his most consequential books and essays. The result is one of the most impressively researched biographies of a prominent radical to appear in recent memory. As Scott McLemee notes in his blurb for *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain*, Høgsgbjerg "follows him into the meeting halls and radical bookstores, the cricket grounds and bohemian haunts where this displaced 'Victorian with the rebel seed' emerged as a leading figure in the Trotskyist and Pan-Africanist movements." Thanks to Høgsgbjerg, we have a much clearer picture of what James was up to from 1932 to 1938, when he first lived in Nelson, a proletarian stronghold in the county of Lancashire and then in London, before relocating to the United States in his late thirties, at the request of Leon Trotsky, in order to embark on a major speaking tour for the Socialist Workers Party on the eve of World War II. We learn about James's friendships with labor militants in Nelson, his work as a sports columnist, his immersion in anti-colonial and radically socialist political campaigns, his encounters with publishers, well-known writers, Communists, and Labour Party officials, and his efforts to join the Ethiopian military in response to the Italian invasion of 1935-1936. Anyone with an interest in black protest, literary London, and/or left politics in the 1930s will enjoy this smart, factually grounded yet thematically rich biographical study.

Høgsgbjerg's slim monograph on Christopher M. Braithwaite (1885-1944), which was co-published last year by the radical bookshop Bookmarks and the Socialist History Society, offers additional insights into interwar black radicalism and the ways in which politically minded West Indians and Africans joined together in places like London and Paris to advocate and agitate on behalf of anti-colonialism. While James was a leading member of the International African Service Bureau and other pro-independence organizations, he worked alongside a number of powerful thinkers and writers who were similarly wedded to what has been described as "class struggle Pan-Africanism." Chris Braithwaite, who often operated under the name Chris Jones, was a Barbadian trade union activist who chaired the Colonial Seamen's Association and regularly spoke at rallies and at the Speakers Corner section of London's Hyde Park. Like James, he contributed political pieces to *International African Opinion* and other anti-colonial periodicals, and, like James, he was a leftist

critic of Stalinism who believed in the power of the organized working class to change society. In contrast to James, of course, the story of Braithwaite's trans-Atlantic activism has been largely overlooked; Høgsbjerg's characteristically sturdy study goes a considerable distance toward rectifying this oversight. The book includes two obituaries, five black-and-white photos, and eight of Braithwaite's short essays.