

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Christian Høgsbjerg, *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780822356127 (cloth); ISBN: 9780822356189 (paper)

Were it possible for us to walk through the doors of Lahr's, the radical bookshop at 68 Red Lion Street in London, in the summer of 1933, we may just have found ourselves in the midst of something of a spectacle. For it was there that the Trinidadian activist and intellectual C.L.R. James met and regularly conversed with Charlie Lahr, a German anarchist and the proprietor of the bookshop. Perhaps we might have arrived as James was purchasing Stalin's book *Leninism*, which he bought in the shop only to find himself "appalled" by Stalin's "factual history, his analysis, and his style". Or maybe we might have arrived whilst Lahr was introducing James to radical pamphlets or other material from the French or American Trotskyist movements. Lahr, it seems, took a keen interest in James' research and writing in 1930s London, and would frequently put aside material that he thought would interest him. The two would discuss at length the political issues of the day, especially the rise to power of Hitler in Lahr's native land. "Charlie did not so much argue a political issue", James recalled, but rather "he disseminated information". So important to James were his conversations with Lahr that they were to have a significant impact on his analysis of Hitlerism in his 1937 book *World Revolution, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International*.

These details of the close relationship between James and Lahr are just some of the fascinating insights into the early life of C.L.R. James provided by Christian Høgsbjerg in his remarkable new book, *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain*. Despite its title, Høgsbjerg's book in fact begins prior to James's arrival in imperial Britain, tracking his engagement with the politics of empire whilst at home in Trinidad, and the intellectual roots of his early thought in classical British literature, Romanticism, and the aesthetic and moral theories of Matthew Arnold, amongst others. In Trinidad, James taught and read literature and also wrote for a periodical called *The Beacon*, the foremost journal of a small group of Trinidadian writers

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and artists who would meet regularly to read and discuss their developing ideas. Having grown up in a colonial society whose educational institutions were suffused with the teaching of British values and traditions, not to mention the British literary and historical canon, these middle class writers nevertheless began to mould this intellectual inheritance to fit their colonial surroundings. In particular they began thinking through ways in which to contest some of the racialised assumptions that underlay Britishness as an identity, while at the same time refraining from providing too stern a challenge to the norms of imperial rule. In doing so, these intellectuals adopted and shaped an identity that Anne Spry Rush (2011) has termed “imperial Britishness”.

James left Trinidad in 1932 on board the HMS Columbia, arriving in London in March of that year. Over the next few weeks, he filed a series of articles capturing his initial perspectives on London for the *Port of Spain Gazette*. These articles captured the way that James circulated around Bloomsbury in particular, frequenting such institutions as Student Movement House, conversing with students from Britain and other parts of the empire, particularly India. Yet within a matter of weeks, James travelled north to stay with his Trinidadian friend, the cricketer Learie Constantine, then living in and playing professionally for Nelson in Lancashire. In ‘Red Nelson’, James became close to local Labour Party members and began, initially with Constantine and then on his own, to lecture at local political societies on life and politics in the West Indies. In Nelson, James was to see first hand the stirrings of the British working classes, witnessing strike action—including the ‘Great Lancashire Cotton Strike’ of 1932, when 16,000 Nelson cotton workers struck—starting correspondence with William Gillies, the Labour Party’s first spokesperson on international issues, and coming into contact with more critical political perspectives that sat to the left of Labour. James would return to London on and off in late 1932, but was back in Nelson in early 1933, addressing the local branch of the Independent Labour Party on the theme of ‘Coloured people under British rule’. Later in 1933, James left Nelson to begin writing

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professionally as a cricket correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* and *Glasgow Herald*, with the great advantage that professional journalism gave him the freedom both to continue his wide reading, and also to pursue his specific research on the historical topics that most came to fascinate him, especially the Haitian Revolution. James would use the off-season breaks from journalism to pursue historical research in French archives; this further enabled him to make political contacts both with African-diaspora activists and the French radical left.

Høgsbjerg does a masterful job of recounting this history in tremendous detail. James himself is now an increasingly well-known figure, particularly in the fields of literary and postcolonial studies. Yet, as Høgsbjerg argues, the details of his life, particularly his political transformations and commitments, have preoccupied recent scholars rather less, and often to the detriment of their scholarship. It seems remarkable, indeed, that Høgsbjerg's is the first detailed study of James's years in Britain, building on a brief yet insightful chapter by Robert Hill (1986) and other, more recent studies that have tangentially addressed his life in the 1930s, such as David Scott's (2004) *Conscripts of Modernity*, but pursuing James's life deeper into the archives and oral historical record than anybody has heretofore done.

Of what interest should such a study be to contemporary radical geographers? James, of course, is a towering figure in the history of radical thought, and it was in these years that he was to publish a variety of important works. *World Revolution*, though misplaced in some of its analyses, was still one of the earliest theoretical contributions to emerge from the British Trotskyist movement, of which James rapidly became one of the foremost agitators and intellectual-activists. The book won praise from many, including George Orwell. James also produced a play, *Toussaint Louverture*, in which Paul Robeson played the lead role.¹ Out of the research for the play would come a short, panoramic book entitled *A History of Negro Revolt* as well as *The Black Jacobins*, James's masterpiece of historical composition that marvellously seeks to balance the relationship between individual historical actors and the

¹ Høgsbjerg himself rediscovered a draft of the play in 2005 in an obscure archive, and recently published it (see Høgsbjerg 2013).

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wider structural political and economic forces that shaped the choices available to them in turbulent and revolutionary times. Høgsbjerg praises *The Black Jacobins* for the contribution it made to the development of “the law of uneven and combined development” through its illustration of the “fundamentally modern” dynamics of the economic system of slavery, and the constitutive role played by slavery and the revolutionary upheavals of the enslaved both in the formation of European capitalism and in the shaping of the political and economic relations of Europe itself.

It is here, perhaps, that Høgsbjerg could have gone further, and where radical geographers may have hoped for more from his book. James’s work did indeed make a remarkably creative contribution to the history of Marxism, but in order to do so it had to overcome some of the most fundamentally taken-for-granted aspects of the geographical imagination of many in 20th century Britain. If one of James’s accomplishments was to situate the contemporary Caribbean and Africa as places with a profoundly modern past, intimately tied to uneven capitalist development, he also made an enormously significant contribution through the way that he positioned the imperial metropolis and colonial possession in the same analytic frame, tracking the dynamic networks through which each shaped the other. Uneven development is, after all, a thoroughly spatial process. In doing so, as Dave Featherstone (2008: 24-25) has argued, James in *The Black Jacobins* “challenges Eurocentric geographies and histories” by managing to “dislocate and challenge the story of the bounded emergence of Western civilization”. In Featherstone’s words, “the political and theoretical project of *The Black Jacobins* is completely dependent on this challenge to the dominant geographies through which ‘history’ was constituted”. What Høgsbjerg’s work enables us to see, though, is that this impulse to challenge bounded and Eurocentric conceptions of geography was present in some of James’s earliest work in Trinidad. Though Høgsbjerg does much to hint at the contributions made by James in this regard, much more could have been done to draw out the ways in which he worked to challenge the separation of colony and

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metropole in much of his work throughout the 1930s. Indeed, such a radical geographical imagination was to be central to James's developing anti-imperial activism, represented most centrally in his founding of the International African Friends of Abyssinia—a protest group that campaigned against the Italian invasion of Abyssinia but which also indicted other European imperial powers for their own responsibilities on the matter—but also in his major role in the International African Service Bureau, alongside his childhood friend and lapsed Communist Malcolm Nurse, better known as George Padmore, as well as other radical African-diaspora activists in London, including Amy Ashwood Garvey (in whose Florence Mills Social Parlour these organisations would meet and socialise) and the working class seaman's activist and fellow West Indian Chris Braithwaite (about whom Høgsbjerg [2014] has recently written an important pamphlet).

Yet it may be asking too much for Høgsbjerg to have engaged so directly with the spatial dimensions of James's thought in a book which is only partially concerned with theoretical examinations of James's work. Instead, he has made a major contribution through his reconstruction of James's life and times in imperial Britain. Recovering James's ventures into radical bookshops such as Lahr's, his time spent in Nelson and Bloomsbury, his touring Britain as a cricket reporter, and much more, Høgsbjerg does a supreme job of reconstructing the historical geography of a distinct, and distinctly radical, life. In this sense, his book is an example to geographers, historians or other radical intellectuals pursuing the study of previously neglected biographies. Høgsbjerg writes that James underwent a “dramatic ... transformation during the crisis of the 1930s from an Arnoldian liberal humanist into one of the most able and important revolutionary socialists in Britain during the Great Depression”. The tale of this transformation, and of the creative Marxist revolutionary that was to emerge from it, has for too long remained untold. It now remains for us to use Høgsbjerg's work in order to further explore the spatial dynamics of James's thought, and to continue to develop

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the kind of activist unity of cultural forms and historical materialism that James himself endeavoured to achieve.

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Daniel Whittall²
dan.whittall@gmail.com

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² Daniel Whittall teaches at Ranelagh School, Bracknell, and has a PhD from Royal Holloway, University of London—[‘Creolising London: Black West Indian Activism and the Politics of Race and Empire in Britain, 1931-1948’](#).