

Preface



C. L. R. James's success as a writer has been accompanied by a rather strange twist of fate. His writings have brought him worldwide recognition, even celebrity, among a multitude of different audiences, particularly in Britain and the United States. However, because many of his best-known texts focus on the advanced countries, recognition came without an adequate understanding of his work as a whole and of its firm roots in his native Caribbean. This volume addresses the lesser-known Caribbean aspects of James's oeuvre, as well as his influence upon the politics and culture of the region. *C. L. R. James's Caribbean* was planned, it should be noted, with the advice and cooperation of James himself for more than a year before his death in May 1989. Rather than attempting a more comprehensive assessment of James's work, we have remained with the original scope of the book.

James's intellectual importance rests, in no small part, upon his formulation of differences and similarities in the "developing" and "advanced" worlds. To his analyses of both types of societies James brought a special sense of urgency. Rooted in the increasing ability of human beings to intervene in the transformation and reproduction of society, the prospects offer both a new chance for decisive improvement and a danger of widescale collapse.

In the case of advanced countries, the capacity for economic or social intervention has long been established. The crises of these societies are underlined by the continuing inability or unwillingness of leaders to mobilize the capacities toward ending class exploitation or race and

ethnic domination and toward halting the erosion of normative foundations. The persistence and worsening of resolvable problems is, in James's view, the major source of authoritarian and totalitarian tendencies since the 1920s and 1930s. The advanced countries, James insists, will either resolve the problems through some form of participatory socialism—or face barbarism. This is the central theme of *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* (1953), which focuses on the advanced capitalist societies. It is also the theme of *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (1950), which highlights the crisis tendencies of state socialist societies. The dramatic changes seen since the rise of the Solidarity Movement in Poland, and of Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union, have proved important confirmations of James's hopes and of his warnings.

In Third World societies, such as the Caribbean, the unfolding post-colonial crises further dramatize the need for vision and strategies of participatory reconstruction. "The West Indies today," James said in 1964, "face a future that closely relates them to the present of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, or, on the other hand, upheaval of the type in Cuba."¹ Events in the region since the mid 1960s have certainly validated the claims of his statement. However, in the Caribbean and other Third World areas the problems to be resolved are quite different from those of the advanced societies. There they include the preliminary establishment of adequate capabilities for societal intervention and regulation. These tasks are, in turn, linked to the broader difficulties of transforming colonial and predominantly agricultural societies into modern industrial nations. Although this process of transformation gives rise to a number of problems common to much of the Third World, the particular difficulties to be overcome are shaped by the nature of the pre-colonial phase and the specifics of their particular colonial experience. To understand James's Caribbean, it is necessary to grasp clearly the nature of the region's colonial society as he portrayed it, and his proposals for its transformation.

In addition to *The Black Jacobins* (1938) James's views of Caribbean society and its transformation are to be found primarily in *Party Politics in the West Indies* (1962) in his various essays on the failed attempt at a federation among the English-speaking territories, and in other essays on the region as a whole. In these works, James wrote from the perspective of one who saw a Caribbean still in the process of being born. The personality and identity of this area were first embodied in the expressive actions of writers, singers, intellectuals, ideologues, musi-

cians, and cricketers from the various but fragmented parts of the region. In the strokes, texts, words, and rhythms of these creative individuals, James saw a prefiguring of the original experiences around which the post-colonial Caribbean would crystalize. Such experiences were most clearly expressed in the achievements of the cricketers and the writers. In his essay "A National Purpose for Caribbean People" James explicitly compares them to the great Russian writers Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and others, who helped give birth to the identity of the Russian nation.² In a similar fashion, Vic Reid, George Lamming, Wilson Harris, V. S. Naipaul, Everton Weekes, Derek Walcott, Garfield Sobers, Mighty Sparrow, and others are great artists who have made possible the emergence of a distinct Caribbean identity. Through their work the region began to see itself as a nation.

James was no mere distant spectator observing these symbolic births, however. On the contrary, he was an active participant. At different points in his life, he has been one of the writers, cricketers, intellectuals, and ideologues who have helped the birth process along. This organic involvement is clear in James's early fictional and expository writings. Among other things, the writing embodies the liberatory hopes and aspirations of the Caribbean working class. It is this commitment to the Caribbean that explains James's periodic returns, and his later writings on the region. In these writings, both as ideologue and intellectual, James relentlessly deconstructed the meanings and arguments that legitimated colonial rule, while he helped to create the new meanings and arguments that would sustain and legitimate the new Caribbean nation. In short, James had deep roots in the Caribbean; he was one of the creative artists in whose imagination the identity of the region came to be.

However, because of the colonial context in which this identity emerged, it was rather ambivalent. This ambivalence stemmed from the fact that colonial cultures tend to be hybrid formations—the results of processes of cultural penetration and control. In the Caribbean, these processes were both extreme and extended, which resulted in comparatively high degrees of Westernization. This Westernization is evident in the game (cricket), the genres (novels and plays), and the ideologies (liberalism and socialism) through which the identity of the emerging nation has been formulated. The very strong European component in the culture of the new nation led James to the extreme but often-repeated statement that "the populations in the British West Indies have no native civilization at all."³ In less extreme formulations of his position on Caribbean

culture and identity, James acknowledged the hybrid nature of Caribbean cultural formations. In "The Presence of Blacks in the Caribbean and Its Impact on Culture," he wrote that "the African . . . had to adapt what he brought with him to the particular circumstances which he found in his environment. . . . But, being a developed person, and with his past, it was natural for him to develop a philosophy and a religion. His philosophy and religion proved to be a combination of what he brought with him and what his new masters sought to impose on him."⁴ In either case, the new identity of the Caribbean nation turns out to be highly Westernized.

The ambivalence produced by this asymmetric pattern of cultural hybridization has been the source of two competing interpretations of the recently emerged identity. On the one hand, the extent of de-Africanization has produced images of a people marked by cultural dispossession who have been forced to inhabit cultural worlds that are not their own. Such images of cultural exile as having to write in English or worship in Christian form flow from this interpretation. Although it was not prominent in his works, James took note of this aspect of the Caribbean experience on occasion.

Much more prominent in James's works is an interpretation of Caribbean identity that associates a high degree of Europeanization with a corresponding degree of modernity at the symbolic level. Instead of focusing on the losses that resulted from de-Africanization, James considers the potential gains of Europeanization. Consequently, his scholarly and ideological works constitute a mode of literary praxis that boldly appropriates for the Caribbean nation the modern possibilities that Westernization opens. One never feels that English is a language of exile for James. This is just as true, if not more so, in the case of cricket. On the contrary, one feels that confident claims are made upon these cultural forms as they were being pressed into the service of new Caribbean realities. This attitude toward language and cricket can be extended to such other cultural areas as science, religion, art, and philosophy. James confidently appropriated them for Caribbean service, too. Consequently, the cases of both language and cricket are good indicators of the interpretation of Caribbean identity and culture in James's works.

As early as 1933, in "The Case for West Indian Self-Government," James provided the following portrait of Caribbean people: "Cut off from all contact with Africa for a century and a quarter, they present today the extraordinary spectacle of a people who, in language and social custom,

religion, education and outlook, are essentially Western and, indeed, far more advanced in Western culture than many a European community."⁵ Twenty-five years later, in "On Federation," James reiterated this view: "People (in the British West Indies) live modern lives. They read modern cheap newspapers, they listen to the radio, they go to the movies. The modern world is pressing in on them from every side, giving rise to modern desires and aspirations."⁶ In short, it is not the images of dispossession and exile that predominate in James's work. Rather, it is that of a people actively appropriating the modern possibilities left them by a heritage of Westernization.

No matter how Caribbean identity is interpreted, its prefiguring in the works of great artists is not enough to produce its national realization. Along with such creative embodiment must come institutional and cultural changes of great difficulty and complexity. Colonial institutions must be uprooted and new ones put in their place at the same time that the masses are being educated and acclimated to modern forms of social organization. This is particularly the case in the Caribbean, where the modernity that James recognized at the symbolic level was absent at the institutional and organizational level.

James's analysis of Caribbean institutions was consistent. In terms of productive capacity, the institutions all lagged behind the symbolically shaped expectations and aspirations of Caribbean people. In "The Artist in the Caribbean," James analyzed the nature of regional artistic institutions. He began by suggesting that great artists were products not only of the talents they possessed, but also of the artistic traditions in which they matured. He then posed the question of whether any artistic medium in the Caribbean rests upon a tradition fertile enough to bring an artist to full maturity. James's answer was an unequivocal no. The traditions and institutions upon which artists are reared in the region do not allow them to be "supreme practitioners."⁷ To achieve this, artists must go abroad and complete their development by drawing on the traditions of other societies. It was in this context that exile became an important problem for James.

Similarly, in *Party Politics in the West Indies*, James analyzed Caribbean political institutions in terms of the tension between the presence of a modern symbolic orientation and the absence of modern institutional structures capable of meeting the expectations generated by this orientation. At the symbolic level, the defining and ordering of political

life had been rooted in the modern ideologies of liberalism, socialism, and Pan-Africanism. However, the institutions and traditions that have supported these experiments in modern politics have not been able to bring them to full maturity. On the contrary, because of their limited governing capabilities, their short histories, and their fragile foundations, such institutions have tended to abort the growth of modern politics.

A final example of this view of Caribbean institutions is the less detailed analyses that James makes of regional economies. In 1958, he described Caribbean people as having “a £500 a year mentality”⁸ at a time when local economies generated per capita incomes of about £50 a year. For James, the source of this contradiction was the old plantation system, an outmoded, noncompetitive system of agriculture whose patterns of ownership and external control generated contradictory patterns. In addition to being noncompetitive, the plantation system generated low wages and high levels of unemployment that forced large numbers of Caribbean workers into exile. Consequently, like the artistic and political institutions of Caribbean societies, the economic ones were also in need of systematic modernizing.

In addition to these institutional problems facing the emerging Caribbean nation, difficulties also arose from the fragmentation and balkanization of the region. Insularity, cultural differences, foreign interests, and differences in political status at one time or another have blocked the emergence of the integrated Caribbean nation that James had envisioned. Thus attempts at integration had always been subregional (within linguistic groups), while the continuing colonial or semicolonial status of such territories as the Virgin Islands, Guadeloupe, Aruba, and Puerto Rico posed serious obstacles to regional development. But in spite of such failures as the 1958–62 attempt at federation among the English-speaking territories, James remained hopeful about the prospects for national unification of the entire area. Such a regional federation was, in James’s view, the only political framework in which the Caribbean could participate as a genuinely independent member of the modern international community.

In short, James’s emerging Caribbean nation had been challenged by a number of major obstacles. Among these, two remain particularly important: the crisis of regionalism and the crisis of post-colonial institutional transformation. Without bold and creative solutions to these problems, the potential nation may not succeed. If the countries of the region do

not rise to the challenges that these problems present, they will face the prospect of their own brand of barbarism. Thus, to complete a sketch of James's Caribbean, his contribution to the debates on the transformation of the region must be examined.

Contemporary scholars have analyzed regional transformation in a rather fragmentary fashion. Problems of economic change have been analyzed separately from those of political change, and these two quite separately from problems of cultural change. Since the fifties, a substantial body of literature has emerged in each area. However, with no systematic efforts to translate across the economic, political, and cultural paradigms in use, a comprehensive and integrated vision of post-colonial transformation has been lacking.

Although primarily political in its specialization, it is precisely such a comprehensive and integrated vision of national reconstruction that has been James's major contribution to the problem of Caribbean transformation. The uniqueness of this contribution derived from the fact that James employs a common conceptual framework and a number of common themes in all of his writings on Caribbean transformation. Consequently, systematic continuities and discontinuities occur between the various institutionally specific texts that constitute James's analyses of transformation problems.

Central to all of James's writings on these problems is the necessity to educate the masses so they can participate fully in the responsibilities and privileges of a modern self-regulating society. The theme is present whether James is commenting on economic, political or cultural development. By education, James does not have formal schooling in mind. On the contrary, for the masses it is the educative significance of practical action that is crucial. In making this claim for action, James has been rivaled by only one contemporary thinker, Hannah Arendt, author of the important works *Origins of Totalitarianism* and *On Revolution*. Like Arendt, James views action as a creative medium in which any individual, regardless of social origin, can come to a fuller realization of self. Prior socialization in a number of shared rituals and language games is all that is necessary to start. With these capabilities for speech and action, individuals can come to a deeper knowledge of who they are and what they want by determinate or effective participation in various forms of collective activity. This self-knowledge is further tested by the confirmations and disconfirmations that these actions and self-definitions will

evoke from others. This educative potential of collective action is at the foundation of James's argument concerning the social significance of cricket for the Caribbean working class.

However, action is not always educative. Whether or not it is depends on how it is structured, and the terms under which participants are allowed to make contributions and interventions. In James's view, the common factor that links the various institutional approaches to transformation is the educative potential implicit in the organized action that each will require. The more specialized literatures have overlooked this factor. More directly, what James is saying is that an educated population is a necessary foundation for developed or modern institutions. The building or strengthening of the latter in the Caribbean cannot rest only on having the right elites and organizational mechanism in place, but on educating the masses so that they are both willing and capable of participating in the life of these institutions. Without such a popular base, collapse, stagnation, or regression remain possible. Institutional development must rest upon a corresponding growth in the consciousness and self-projection of masses, which can only be achieved through the learning experiences of organized, participatory action.

However, this process of education and growth cannot be separated from specific attempts at post-colonial economic, political, and cultural reform. On the contrary, as the major arenas of organized activities, they can be important agencies for either the education or miseducation of workers. To be educative, the interactive life of the organizations that make up these institutions must develop some of the self-formative dimensions seen in the organization of cricket. For example, the absence of these self-formative and educative experiences from the internal life of the Peoples National Movement (PNM), a popular Trinidadian political party then headed by Dr. Eric Williams, particularly concerned James. In spite of the party's successes at the polls, the absence was the reason James saw it as backward. That is, it was not a genuine mass party. For James, a mass party was one that saw itself not only as a political, but also as a social organization. It operated as a door to a new community social order. However, its leaders recognize that the people rarely know exactly what they want. Consequently, the destination beyond the door the party opened is often only vaguely formulated. Further, this type of party also recognizes that, for the majority, the needed clarification is less likely to come from reading books and more likely from participatory activities that challenge party members and demand cre-

ative responses. In this special sense the mass party is a social and not a narrowly political organization.

In a similar fashion, James's critique of the strategies for developing Caribbean economies reflected this concern with the educative significance of organized institutional activity. Given the colonial and plantation nature of these economies, they produced large classes of peasants ("agro-proletarians") for whom economic activity was a process of self-deformation and whose wages were extremely low. Economic transformation for James would have to go beyond just better wages for these peasants; it would not be achieved by simply shifting them into industry. Transformation must also include the reorganization of agricultural production into an educative and self-forming praxis for this class.

In short, James tended to stress the social and educative aspects of whatever mass organizations were needed for institutional transformation. These aspects—especially important for a Caribbean with a comparatively short history and shallow institutional roots—contrast to many post-independence strategies of transformation stressing the manipulation of technical and organizational efficiency in specific institutional areas. We can both figuratively and literally sum up James's critique of existing Caribbean institutions and their urgent need for their reform by saying that, as they exist, "they are not cricket."

Here in essence is James's Caribbean—potentially a federated nation in the making, yet one where societies desperately need institutional transformation, and people need education through both formal instruction and participatory action. Earlier, we saw the important role that James gave to this type of action in the resolution of normative and organizational crises of the advanced societies. Its parallel importance for the transformation of Caribbean societies demonstrates the centrality of the concept for the whole of James's thinking. In the context of the periphery its function is quite different. And yet the significance of participatory action remains the major link between James's theories of transformation for the advanced and developing countries. If the underlying unity of his thought—so often missed because of the unavailability of his writings on the periphery—becomes clear at last through this volume, our hopes for the project will have been fulfilled.

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Notes

- 1 C. L. R. James, *At the Rendezvous of Victory* (London: Allison and Busby, 1984), 152.
- 2 James, *Rendezvous of Victory*, 143–50.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 97.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 5 C. L. R. James, *The Future in the Present* (London: Allison and Busby, 1977), 25.
- 6 James, *Rendezvous of Victory*, 97.
- 7 James, *Future in the Present*, 184.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 97.