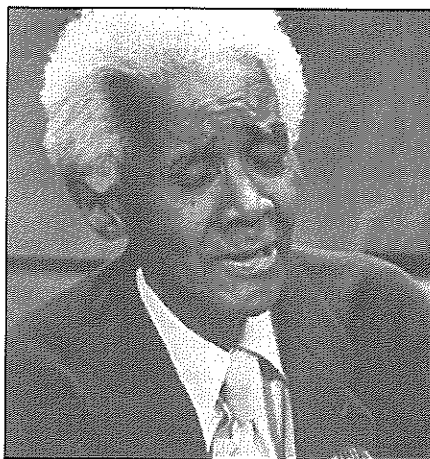


# The artist as revolutionary

James D Young reviews 'CLR James: a political biography' by Kent Worcester (State University of New York Press, 1996)



AS a result of the pioneering work of Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: the History of Black People in Britain* (1984) and the biography of James by Paul Buhle *The Artist as a Revolutionary* (1988), the space was opened up in the teeth of the Euro-centric cultural domination of the Marxism of the Frankfurt School and the *New Left Review* for a reappraisal of the life and times of Cyril Lionel Robert James. Moreover, the most interesting aspect of the new context that helped to stimulate the revival of interest in the life and work of James was the anti-imperialist cultural critiques developed by such diverse writers and literary critics of the left as the Palestinian Edward W Said and the Kenyan African Ngugi Wa Thiong'O.

While they were all clearing away the accumulated ideological rubbish and debris which concealed the critical importance of James's many-dimensional contribution to internationalist socialist thought, scholars like Buhle, Anna Grimshaw and Kent Worcester were gathering in the vast harvest of the very scattered writings of the man described by the *Times* newspaper in London as "the Black Plato" of our century. By reconstructing James's political biography and life and times during "a bitterly disappointing century", from a socialist-humanist standpoint, Worcester has written a stimulating, workmanlike and often perceptive book.

Though he belongs to a generation of socialists who have come to political consciousness during a period of comparative defeat for the democratic left, Worcester possesses several advantages that my generation of socialist writers did not enjoy. He understands in a way that was not sufficiently appreciated in the past that the process of interpreting the world from a socialist viewpoint is a critical aspect of the struggle to change the world from the bottom up.

When I met Raya Dunayevskaya, who was one of Trotsky's secretaries in the 1930s, in 1958 she said: "it is easy to write good history books and biographies when the proletariat is chalking up victories." I was not convinced of that in 1959; I am sure now that she was wrong.

Ironically, it may actually be easier in some ways to write good socialist biography in the teeth of the counter-revolution: the biographer must be very critical, detached and analytical. Worcester succeeds very admirably in being critical, analytical and detached, though the inevitable price that he pays for a certain detachment from an admittedly dwindling international constituency, is the unavoidable inability to produce a biog-

raphy with the inspirational exhortation that coloured some of the pages of James' book *The Black Jacobins* (1938) and Dunayevskaya's *Marxism and Freedom* (1958).

Observing that the young James was not driven or motivated by the desire for money or fame, Worcester has understood the importance of his subject's formative experiences at Queen's Royal College in Port of Spain within a West Indian family context of ambitious grandparents. At an early age knew that he was destined to make his mark on the world; and during his non-'political' years of the 1920s before he ended up in London in 1932, James was already a writer who had had several short stories published in influential magazines.

The vast expansion of western universities after the Second World War would play a critical role in defining James as a 'culturalist' or cultural critic. Workers' movements were increasingly separated from their status outside bourgeois civil society. Narrow academic specialisation of history and the social sciences accompanied by estrangement from early 20th-century socialist workers' idealism and capacity for struggle and self-sacrifice opened up the space for a new elite of scholars.

Edward Said is justified in saying that 'the technocrats' of the new world order are "competent to solve local problems, not to ask the big questions set by the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment." The biggest bonus of Worcester's impressive biography is that it allows the reader to see how a major socialist thinker developed in response to the unique challenges of his own times.

When the young West Indian came to London in 1932 to help Leonie Constantine to write his book *Cricket and I*, James was much more interested in imaginative literature than in politics. Dealing with James's hectic life, including his "love life" in England between 1932 and 1938, when he went to America, Worcester is an excellent guide to the James who lived, worked, loved and agitated in the United States until his deportation during the McCarthyite hysteria in 1953. Sen-

sitive to James the speaker, agitator and producer of large internal documents inside small groups like the Socialist Workers Party and the Workers Party, on the "Negro question", the "woman question" etc, Worcester is at his best in uncovering these buried treasures.

He devotes attention to the novel *Mintey Alley* that James brought to England in 1932. Completed in the West Indies by the mid-1920s, it was published only in 1936. Focusing on the important books researched and written during this period — *World Revolution*, *The Black Jacobins*, *A History of Negro Revolt* etc — Worcester writes well and perceptively. However, in paying insufficient attention to James in England between 1932 and 1938, he has not grasped the importance of the old-fashioned and non-specialised literary criticism that James developed in the West Indies.

Unique among revolutionary socialists of his generation, James was always willing to interrogate, listen, and probe into the daily lives of working people and peasants. The fact that he was a short story writer and novelist before he became a politico was the key to what he was about as a socialist. It explained his irrepressible belief in the capacity of working people to create socialism from below. But although his spell in England was the most narrowly political phase in his long life, James had not abandoned his interest in imaginative literature.

Capturing an important truth about James in the expressive phrase "the artist as revolutionary", Buhle's insight might have been more carefully considered by Worcester. Not even Franz Mehring's excellent book *The Lessing Legend* (New York 1938) could compare with the brilliant literary criticism that James developed in America in his articles on Richard Wright and Norman Mailer in the *New Internationalist* and the *Fourth Internationalist* and others between 1940 and 1950.

Worcester is particularly good on the Johnson-Forrest tendency; and he acknowledges the important role played by Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee in allowing James to develop his critical intellectual style and comprehensive critique of world capitalism, including the new state capitalism in the Soviet Union without soviets. Worcester is not at all uncritical of the role James played in the Caribbean in the 1960s, but he provides a brilliant defence against the savage caricature of the 'Black Plato' in VS Naipaul's quasi-autobiographical book *A Way in the World* (1994). As the left beings to re-build itself out of the chaos of the capitalist new world order, the example of James will be there. A prefigurative figure of the better socialist world to come — unless humankind succumbs to barbarism — his spirit reminds us men make their own history — even during a period of sloth and reaction.

By helping to rescue the memory of a major historian of the left, Worcester has put us all in his debt. ■