

Decolonizing revolution with C.L.R. James

or, What is to be done with Eurocentrism?

Matthieu Renault

Time would pass, old empires would fall and new ones take their place, the relations of countries and relations of classes had to change, before I discovered that it is not quality of goods and utility which matter, but movement, not where you are or what you have, but where you have come from, where you are going and the rate at which you are getting there.¹

This statement from C.L.R. James's classic book on cricket, *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), could be said to summarize his biographical trajectory. Like many other distinguished figures from the colonies, the Caribbean especially, James was a diasporic intellectual, in constant movement, from the margins to the centres of empires and back, travelling along the routes of the black Atlantic, from one pole to another: the West Indies, Europe, the United States and Africa. Furthermore, the above quotation also sums up James's thought, with its repeated emphasis on 'movement', as exemplified in the musical metaphor he draws in his 1948 *Notes on Dialectics* with reference to Lenin: 'I have long believed that a very great revolutionary is a great artist, and that he develops ideas, programmes, etc., as Beethoven develops a movement.'²

The main concern of James's theoretical and political practice is the *movement of the masses* and the *movement of history*, which for him are one and the same. The great revolutionary episodes (English Revolution, French Revolution, Russian Revolution), as the climax of class struggle, make history move. In this respect, the history of unremitting pan-African struggles, which James began to excavate in his seminal work on the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins* (1938),³ is an integral part of world-universal history, by no means something that stands apart from it. James, however, was always very careful not to subordinate these alleged 'minor-minority' struggles to the 'major-majority' struggles of the

proletarian masses of Western countries. What he did was to rethink radically the relations between socialist 'world revolution' and the liberation of 'oppressed nations'; the convergences and divergences, past and present, between struggles for emancipation 'at the centre' and anti-colonial/anti-racist revolts 'at the margins'; and the complex connections and disconnections between the history of the West and the history of non-European societies in a global imperialist context.

Understanding James thus involves breaking with the double spontaneous assumption according to which his main theoretical intervention in the field of the theory and historiography of revolutions consisted in, on the one hand, importing 'from outside' anti-colonial/anti-racist issues into Marxist thought, conceived of as inherently confined within the borders of the Western-white world, and, on the other hand, grafting Marxist-socialist perspectives onto pan-African claims and struggles, deemed to tend naturally towards black nationalist particularism. Positively, understanding James implies analysing the variations he introduced into Marxist thought, 'from within', in order to incorporate the neglected histories and present battles black peoples were engaged in. James did not intend, as postcolonial scholars would put it, to provincialize Marxism, but rather, in Frantz Fanon's terms in *The Wretched of the Earth*, to 'stretch' it in order to *deprovincialize the non-European world*. He strove to redraw the geography of struggles for emancipation, or, put another way, to *decolonize revolution* as a concept and an object of historical inquiry.

In 1980, *The Times* dubbed James 'the black Plato of our generation'. It seems at first a very inaccurate designation, not only because James was a harsh critic of Plato, as the archetype of the 'intellectual', whose reflections are invariably based on the premiss that popular masses are unable to govern themselves, but

also because this sobriquet, in which the comparison amounts to the greatest reward, reproduces the colonial-paternalist idea that the subjects of empire are condemned to comply with the model offered by their white 'elders', and cannot think of anything better than being 'colour copies' of the West's major intellectual products. Regarding James, however, 'black Plato' has the merit of highlighting a constitutive ambivalence, which should not be overlooked, and deplored, as if it were a mere (negative) by-product of his British-imperial education in Trinidad: the result of an unfortunate, but unconscious, residue of Eurocentrism. Indeed, although James established the colonized-racialized masses (who had been systematically excluded from European narratives) as subjects of history, he also insisted on the fact that his own thought was nothing but the fruit of a purely Western genealogy marked by the most classical figures (from Aristotle to Rousseau, Hegel, Marx and others) of an intellectual and political tradition that had its roots in Ancient Greece and only in which, whether we like it or not, he felt 'at home'. No doubt James believed that the following words he used to describe Ghana's leader Kwame Nkrumah applied even better to himself as a Westernized Caribbean:

He could lead the people because his genealogical tree is to be found not among Africa flora but because he is the fine flower of another garden altogether, the political experiences and theoretical strivings of Western civilisation.⁴

Ignoring these kinds of statement, which are recurrent in James's writings, would prevent us from grasping the nature, extent and limits of his displacement of (European) notions of revolution. For there is in James's thought an unresolved, but very productive, tension between a perspective on emancipation that maintains the idea of the necessary antecedence of revolution in the West, and a decentred conception of the independence and 'vanguardism' of black and anti-colonial struggles. In this respect, 'black Plato' should be considered as the name not of an individual, but rather of a problem, or even a paradox: the paradox of what we can provisionally call James's (conscious) *Eurocentric anti-Eurocentrism*.

The issue in examining such a paradox in more depth is not to point out, retrospectively, the supposed failures of a now-dead eminent pan-African thinker in the light of postcolonial-decolonial 'advances', but rather to analyse, *retroactively*, the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism and its dead ends, and hopefully to contribute to its renewal. For, given the

continued resistances to any questioning of 'Western universals', such a critique remains necessary, now more than ever, but it should not be considered as an end in itself, as it often tends to be, but has again and again to prove that it is essential to the building of a truly global theory of emancipation.

Civilization and its contents

From his childhood until his death, James always saw and felt himself as British, a 'British Negro'.⁵ 'I was British. I knew best the British way of life, not merely in historical facts but in the instinctive responses.'⁶ More generally, he liked to repeat that he had a purely 'Western background':

It is in the history and philosophy of Western Europe that I have gained my understanding not only of Western Europe's civilization, but of the importance of the underdeveloped countries. And that is still my outlook.⁷

The notions of 'Western civilization' and 'European civilization' are to be found everywhere in James's writings, and they are most often synonymous with 'world civilization', 'modern civilization', or even 'civilization' per se. The reader who would look into James's work to find 'proto-postcolonial' reflections on the differences between *irreducible* political and cultural histories, *in the plural*, will thus be much disappointed. In many ways, James believed that the destiny of the non-Western world was to be Westernized.

Such a Western-centric approach partly explains why James, after all, maintains the existence of a *dividing line* (within *one* history in progress) between revolutions in Europe and the United States, on the one hand, and struggles for emancipation in colonial and semi-colonial countries, on the other hand. From the 1940s onwards, he fiercely defended the idea that the Bolshevik, and still Trotskyist, notion of the 'vanguard party' had run its course and should give way to the principle of workers' *self-emancipation*. It is clear, however, that for him such pro-autonomy stances apply first and foremost to the West, not to the 'rest'. Writing about Ghana's struggle for independence, he praises the organizational work done by Nkrumah as a leader of the Convention People's Party, a typical vanguard party: 'What he was doing was to lay the rails by which the whole nation could give to its hitherto inchoate strivings concrete forms, to make it fully conscious of itself.'⁸ There is no contradiction here for James, who explicitly states that, while in 'advanced countries' 'the

traditional party [is] outmoded and in fact reactionary', in 'underdeveloped countries' the vanguard party remains (until when?) relevant.⁹ It is true that he also argues that in Ghana, as in any genuine revolution, the people led: they 'mould[ed] the perspective and will' of Nkrumah and showed him the way.¹⁰ But the fact remains that, for him, it was necessary that the most profound desires and aspirations of the Ghanaian masses find expression in the words and actions of a 'great man'. When he finally breaks with Nkrumah, he turns to another African statesman, the Tanzanian Julius Nyerere, who, in turn, alone embodies the hopes of a whole continent. For James, African peoples, unlike Western working masses, still have to be *represented* by outstanding individual leaders, who withstand comparison with the greatest political figures of European history, but of a *past* history, which ended with Lenin.

Unlike other non-European Marxist-socialists, such as M.N. Roy from India and Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev from Tatarstan (Russia), James never felt the need to challenge the 'orthodox' assumption following which the socialist revolution will *first* take place in the West, before expanding to the rest of the world. This is clear in his 1937 book *World Revolution: The Rise and Fall of the Third International*, where he deals with the colonial world in a marginal way only, to the extent that the exploitation of its natural and human resources is a major factor in the conflict between capitalist powers in Europe. The 'old continent' remains the source and the centre of revolutionary initiative:

We may well see, especially after the universal ruin and destruction of the coming war, a revolutionary movement which, beginning in one of the great European cities, in the course of a few short months, will sweep the imperialist bourgeoisie out of power, not only in every country in Europe, but in India, China, Egypt and South Africa.¹¹

In 1960, during a series of lectures in Trinidad, on the eve of independence, James still contends that, although 'the passing of colonialism ... provides ammunition for the breakdown of ... imperialist states', there is no question about the fact that 'the basic opposition must come from the proletariat of the advanced countries'.¹²

De-Westernizing the West

Yet this is only half of the story. The fact that James holds a Western perspective does not mean that he glorified Western-world civilization. About his first stay in England in the 1930s, he says twenty years

later: 'I had not been in Europe two years before I came to the conclusion that European civilization as it then existed was doomed.'¹³ Throughout his writings, James relentlessly speaks of the 'crisis', of the 'decline' and the 'decay' of Western civilization, and even of its death: 'Official society is not in decline. As civilization, as culture, as moral, it is already dead.'¹⁴ Even if this criticism of Western civilization, as bourgeois-capitalist civilization, has roots in Marx and Engels, especially in *The Communist Manifesto*, the main reference for James here is Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, a book he discovered while in England and which had a tremendous influence on him, comparable to that of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*. Like Trotsky, Spengler had a 'strong sense of historical movement, the relation between different historical periods and different classes'.¹⁵

James's deep interest in Spengler, the 'pessimistic' theoretician of the German conservative revolution, may seem surprising at first. Nonetheless, as Karl Korsch stresses in 'The World Historians: From Turgot to Toynbee' (1942) – an essay that early on points at the power-knowledge relationship between colonial expansion and historical writing – *The Decline of the West* did mark the return of the idea of *world-universal history* in an age of extreme division of the historiographical work, paralleling the increasing division of labour. Moreover, Spengler challenged an age-old notion of world history more or less deliberately reduced to European history.¹⁶ Korsch was not the only 'Western Marxist' to read Spengler carefully. It was also the case of Adorno, who in 1928 wrote:

The powerless, who at Spengler's command are to be thrown aside and annihilated by history, are the negative embodiment within the negativity of this culture of everything which promises, however feebly, to break the dictatorship of culture and put an end to the horror of pre-history. In their protest lies the only hope that fate and power will not have the last word.¹⁷

In Adorno's work, however, the (concrete) utopia born in the midst of the decline was soon to give way to 'a pure contemplation of the decay'.¹⁸ James, for his part, never abandoned the 'optimistic' prospect of a coming revolution. Stating that he 'never accepted the decline that Spengler preached',¹⁹ namely a necessary and organic decline, he strove to translate the ideas of *The Decline of the West* into the language of historical materialism.²⁰ James's reading is in line with that of another non-European Marxist of the twentieth century, José Carlos Mariátegui, who wrote in 1924:



Spengler announces the full decay of the West. ... Trotsky merely observes the crisis of bourgeois culture, and the overcoming of capitalist society. This aging and wearing culture, society, vanish; a new culture and a new society emerge from its womb.²¹

For James, as for Mariátegui, the socialist revolution is the end of the end of the decline, a radical new beginning of the history of (Western) civilization. The Westernization of the non-West James deems inevitable thus presupposes a genuine reinvention of the meaning, and being, of 'the West' itself.

As with other non-European anticolonial thinkers, such as Fanon reading Freud and Jung, or the Vietnamese philosopher Tran Duc Thao reading Husserl's *Krisis*, James's appropriation of Spengler's 'intra-European' critique of civilization is not mere repetition; it is a radical displacement that cuts it from its European-imperial matrix. Reinventing the West implies liberating it from itself; and it cannot be the West's *sole* work. James shows that the way out of the crisis of Western civilization depends not only on the success of revolutionary

movements in Europe and the United States, but also, and in close connection with them, of the manifold struggles for emancipation led by non-European peoples, who are generally, and wrongly, considered as *essentially* alien to this very civilization. At the end of the 1950s, he recommends that people who are concerned with 'the future of a world in decay' turn their eyes towards Ghana, where one can observe the seeds of the future not only of Africa, but of world civilization.²² Before that, in *The Black Jacobins*, he had shown that the tragic struggle of San Domingo slaves, which resulted in the independence of Haiti in 1804, was not a mere 'appendix' to the French Revolution, concerning the small and peripheral Caribbean islands only, but a world-historical event which achieved, albeit at the cost of a bloody war, the concrete universalization of the Enlightenment ideals of liberty that many European revolutionaries still considered as reserved for white people.

Throughout James's writings, his Eurocentric notion of world revolution is offset by a decentred or, better, polycentric conception of struggles for emancipation. In *The Black Jacobins*, again, he shows that, notwithstanding that the San Domingo slave revolt was conditioned by the *prior* uprising of French 'white Jacobins', and 'was part of the French revolution',²³ the relations between these two revolutions, separated by an ocean, did not follow a diffusionist pattern, from the centre (the metropolis) to the periphery (the colony), but rather a pattern of connection and non-hierarchical combination between struggles which were, at the same time, intimately *intertwined and independent* from each other. As Edward Said puts it in *Culture and Imperialism*, in James's narrative 'events in France and Haiti criss-cross and refer to one another like voices in a fugue'.²⁴ What occurred in the past is even more true for James's present, where '[y]ou cannot divide the colonial struggle and the metropolitan struggle into separate compartments' and where 'the African revolution (as a process) is no longer to be seen as supplementary to or subordinate to the revolution in Western Europe'.²⁵ What is to be thought of and reinforced is both the autonomy and complementarity of socialist and pan-African struggles:

Such a mutual relation between advanced and underdeveloped countries is beyond the conceited ossification of official mentality. Only its removal will allow the dammed-down currents to flow, *and to flow both ways*.²⁶

This law of combination and mutual reinforcement of autonomous struggles is best exemplified in James's reflections on the 'Negro question' in the United States. The struggle of African Americans, he says, is part of the transnational-transatlantic history of pan-African revolts: 'The Negro revolutionary history is rich, inspiring, and unknown. ... The only place where Negroes did not revolt is in the pages of capitalist historians.'²⁷ Now, this past history throws light on the present battles by revealing that the precondition of the future participation of African-American movements in the socialist revolution is the preservation of their autonomy from Marxist organizations, which means the 'continual deepening and broadening of their independent mass struggles'.²⁸ 'our theoretical position, our analysis of the situation among the Negro people – what they are *thinking* – has got evidence in what the Negro people have been *doing*'²⁹ – not in the heads of enlightened, and predominantly white, Marxists.

Translating Marxism

Such historiographical and political views are conceptually embodied in James's notion of translation. James was deeply aware of the differences between the manifold times and spaces where Marxist analysis applied, and of the consequent need for constantly rethinking and renewing revolutionary theory and practice. In 1944, he argued that '[t]o Bolshevize America it is necessary to Americanize Bolshevism.' As others before and after him, James raises the issue of nationalizing Marxism, since 'every great revolution is a national revolution, in that it represents not only the historic but the immediate interests of the nation and is recognized as such.' The best historical example of such a nationalization, he says, is the work of 'the greatest internationalist of the age', namely Lenin, who, in his *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* especially, 'translate[d] Marxism into Russian terms for the Russian people'. This is precisely what has to be done for the United States:

Every principle and practice of Bolshevism needs to be translated into American terms. Historical Materialism, the Marxian economic analysis, the role of the party, ... every single one of these can be taught, developed, demonstrated from the American economic, social, and political development.

American Marxists have to break with a Eurocentric approach that remains blind to the fact that 'the classics of Marxism are European in origin and content. ... For the average American worker these books as a beginning are alien.'³⁰

For James, translating Marxism is not only a question of practice; it is also a matter of theory. It is not intended only for 'raw workers': 'the party members from the highest to the lowest need it also'. It is precisely because '[t]he principles [of Marxism] have universal application' that everyone has to 'd[i]g [them] for himself out of his own familiar surroundings and their historical past'.³¹ Americanizing Bolshevism implies immersing Marxism in the history of the United States, and, repeating, so to speak, on the other shore of the Atlantic, the monumental work done in the nineteenth century by Marx and Engels on the history of Europe. Universality here is conceived as the product of the very process of translation as universalization. Similarly to Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks*, James holds the double paradoxical view that Marxism is both a universal metalanguage, which allows for the mutual translation of particular non- and/or pre-Marxian languages, and a body of knowledge and practice that ought itself to be translated from language to language, and from nation to nation.

It should be noted here that it is not in reference to the Caribbean or Africa, but to the United States, that James perceived for the first time the need for *provincializing Europe*. The translation he called for remains a translation between two Western 'languages', histories and culture. This 'original' experience of decentring, however, is intimately related to his childhood experience as a subject of the British empire in Trinidad:

From the first day of my stay in the United States to the last, I never made the mistake that so many otherwise intelligent Europeans made of trying to fit that country into European standards. Perhaps for one reason – *because of my colonial background* – I always saw it for what it was, and not for what I thought it ought to be.³²

In many respects, James already conceived of the United States as a *postcolonial society*, deeply marked by a founding political but also 'mental' rupture with British-European rule, as well as by the (colonial) legacy of New World slavery. For him, understanding the rise of American imperialism after World War I, and struggling against it, implied first *decolonizing European (pre)notions of 'American civilization'*. This renders James's Eurocentrism much more complex than it first appears, in so far as it suggests that the

roots of the claim for 'mental decolonization' are to be found in the long process of *internal displacement* and *de-Europeanization*, which established the United States – this 'country of the future' as Hegel said – as the hegemonic centre of the West.

Only later will James extend these theoretical and strategic insights to the struggles for emancipation in Africa and the Caribbean. About Ghana's struggle for independence, he writes:

Nkrumah did not create. He did not have to. What he did was take all that he had absorbed during the years in Europe and America, and translate it into terms of the Gold Coast and the struggle for freedom of Africa, but without ever degrading or emasculating it.³³

Back in Trinidad at the end of the 1950s, James took a deep interest in Caribbean popular culture, from cricket to calypso and carnival. Such an emphasis is part of his effort to 'transpose broadly socialist themes into a native idiom';³⁴ in other words, to *nationalize-translate* them for the West Indian masses. For James, whose thoughts here echo Gramsci's notion of the national-popular, the building of Caribbean consciousness is the prerequisite of the struggle for socialism. Again he is concerned about not merely opposing the 'national' and the 'international', but thinking of their dialectics, which would finally lead to their synthesis. While praising the then-new generation of Caribbean writers (George Lamming, Wilson Harris, V.S. Naipaul and others), he criticized them for writing for a foreign (British) audience. They should take inspiration from nineteenth-century Russian writers who finally proved that 'the universal artist is universal because he is above all national'.³⁵ Although rooted in a global conjuncture that has passed after bringing its share of disillusionment, James's conception of inter-national translations of political theories and practices still remains relevant to thinking of the building of what Merleau-Ponty once called a 'lateral universal', which he opposed to the 'overarching universal' and conceived of as nothing but the intersection of an infinite series of perspectives on a common single world.³⁶

A world in miniature

James's own perspective, however, was not only a Western one; it was a distinctive *Western-Caribbean* one, which escaped the divide between Europe and the non-European world. He wrote in 1964:

The Caribbean territories have a universal significance far beyond their size and social weight. They seem to be a slice of Western civilization put under

a microscope for the scientific investigation of the fundamental predicates and perspectives of that civilization itself.³⁷

The Caribbean people, wholly composed of 'expatriates', is an 'international people',³⁸ forming a 'microcosm of world civilization'.³⁹

This trope of the miniature – which, in *Beyond a Boundary*, is redoubled by James's metonymic view of the role the game of cricket has played in the making of the history of Caribbean societies – was already at work in *The Black Jacobins*, where James established the New World slave plantations as a 'scale model' prototype of the capitalist industries of the following centuries: 'working and living in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar factories that covered the North Plain, [the slaves] were closer to a modern proletariat than any groups of workers in existence at the time.'⁴⁰ In the eighteenth century, the ancestors of the working revolutionary masses of the twentieth century were to be found not in Europe but far away, in the slave colonies of the Caribbean and North America, where the relations of production prefigured the future of class struggles on a global scale. From this perspective, the Haitian Revolution appears as a general rehearsal for the Soviet Revolution – and *The Black Jacobins* as a sort of preface to Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*. The Caribbean is thus a miniature of 'world civilization' first and foremost because it has been a laboratory of capitalism, as James clearly put it later:

the [Caribbean] islands have been an epitome of capitalist development. ... It is as if on these islands history had concentrated in tabloid form the story of four hundred years of capitalist civilization.⁴¹

Analogously, in *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, his book on Melville, James makes of the *Pequod*, the whaler in *Moby Dick*, the archetype of nineteenth-century capitalist factories. Melville, who called the crew members 'manufactured men', depicted the 'conversion of the ship into a factory': 'This is really modern industry.'⁴² In accordance with what whale fishery was at this period, and with what the United States itself was for Melville, namely a (non-)nation, a *world society* essentially composed of minorities, the crew is made up of 'ordinary people' coming from all over the world, the West and the non-West, who are already engaged in a common struggle against the barbarism embodied by Captain Ahab, himself the true fictional ancestor of Hitler and Stalin. This floating society contains all the tensions and contradictions of modern civilization, and foreshadows

its terrible future: 'The voyage of the *Pequod* is the voyage of modern civilization seeking its destiny.' This prediction has been confirmed: Melville, says James, 'saw the future'. The only hope now lies in the revolutionary alliance between working masses and colonized-racialized people, who are the genuine descendants of the *Pequod* crew. Drawing a parallel, at the distance of a century between the *Pequod* and Ellis Island – where he has been imprisoned following his arrest by the United States Immigration and Naturalization Services – James writes: 'The island, like Melville's *Pequod*, is a miniature of all the nations of the world and all sections of society.'⁴³

James's trope of the miniature is thus the medium of an *original conception of historical time*, stemming from both his historiographical work and his literary criticism, according to which the future of civilization unveils itself, in advance, far from the centre of this very civilization, whether it be in the remote colonies or in the high seas. For James, the *future anterior* is the fundamental tense of historical understanding.

Finally, the fascination James feels for Ancient Greece, from the 1950s onwards, as a model of direct democracy, is inseparable from a fascination for the city-state form of government, embodied by Athens, this 'world in little',⁴⁴ whose total population 'could be contained in ... a dozen football grounds in England', and that produced a more 'varied, comprehensive and brilliant body of geniuses' than the huge modern metropolitan centres.⁴⁵ In his 1960 lectures in Trinidad, James also praised the achievements of the city-states that flourished in Italy and Flanders during the Middle Ages.⁴⁶ And it is no coincidence, he says, if Rousseau, the modern thinker of radical democracy, came from Geneva, 'the closest thing in Europe, structurally, to the city-states of Greece'.⁴⁷ He then draws a fascinating parallel between the topographical, demographic and linguistic situation of the West Indies in the middle of the twentieth century and that of the Greek archipelagos more than two thousand years earlier. Both are/were territories divided into a multitude of small islands and coastal areas, where the

population is low, where there are close relationships between city and country, which have come to share a unique language. James thus suggests, in a very idiosyncratic way, that the Caribbean might be the centre of a *historical recommencement* of world civilization. And yet, as powerful as it is, such a de-centring is profoundly ambivalent, not only because James remains silent on the intrinsically imperial nature of Ancient Greece, but also since, by returning to the (presumed) origin of Western civilization, he reproduces the age-old assumption that Europe, even if deterritorialized, transplanted elsewhere, is the only source from which a culture and a history of universal value can spring.

Counter-Eurocentrism: the 'privilege of backwardness'

We are now coming to the heart of 'James's paradox', namely his notion of history. James's Eurocentrism is most apparent in his widespread and apparently unquestioned use of the binary divide backwardness/forwardness. Even if in his writings the word 'backward' is almost deprived of any anthropological meaning, which would render it synonymous with 'primitive', and is limited to its (Marxian) economic and political sense, the fact remains that such a divide was the touchstone of historicism, an evolutionist framework of historical reasoning according to which non-European peoples are always 'lagging behind', and are thus condemned to follow, *step by step*, the stages European societies passed through



before them. As is well known, historicism has been one of the main targets of subaltern and post-colonial studies, and James seems not to escape the criticism.

Nonetheless, while maintaining its terms, James subverts the backwardness/forwardness divide and the linear-homogeneous conception of historical time it relies on. In *The Black Jacobins* he takes inspiration from Trotsky's 'law of uneven and combined development' – and, presumably, from Lenin's reflections on world economy and 'uneven development' in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. As Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu have recently argued, 'it is though the idea of "combination" that Trotsky provides a nonstadial, multilinear understanding of development that explicitly denies essentialized and externally related dichotomies of pre-capitalist and capitalist'.⁴⁸

According to James, the law of uneven and combined development perfectly applied to the case of eighteenth-century Haiti, as both a laboratory of modern capitalism and a society governed by highly backward master-slave social relationships. Now, as Trotsky argued in reference to Russia, 'backward countries' are 'compelled to make leaps'.⁴⁹ Is it exactly what happened in Haiti, where, in a few years, the black slave masses made a tremendous leap that, by reversing backwardness into its opposite, placed them at the very vanguard of revolutionary forces on a global scale. As James puts it in the 1950s:

The theoretical basis [of *The Black Jacobins*] is that in a period of world-wide revolutionary change, such as that of 1789–1815 and our period which began with 1917, the revolutionary crisis lifts backward peoples over centuries and projects them into the very forefront of the movement of the day.⁵⁰

In his thoughts on the 'Negro question', James is following in the footsteps of Trotsky, who, as soon as 1933, declared: 'The Russians were the European Negroes. It is very possible that the Negroes will proceed through self-determination to the proletarian dictatorship in a couple of gigantic strides, ahead of the great bloc of white workers. They will then be the vanguard'.⁵¹ Even in his *Notes on Dialectics*, a book where, on the basis of a rereading of Hegel's philosophy, thirty years after Lenin, he strives to break definitively with Trotsky's heritage, James remains indebted to him when he formulates what he now calls the *law of historical compensation*:

Its importance is that in bringing up to date a delayed reaction, it projects into the future, and

backwardness is transformed, making its very backwardness the dynamic of transition into vanguardism, its opposite.

But James's achievement here is to sever all the links between Trotsky's notion of the 'privilege of historic backwardness' and his idea of the necessary leadership of a 'small' advanced industrial working class. Moreover, surprisingly enough, James argues that the law of historical compensation had previously applied to eighteenth-century '[p]olitically backward France', which produced 'the French revolution', as well as to nineteenth-century '[e]conomically and politically backward Germany', which 'produced the classical philosophy and marxism'.⁵²

James thus endorses a theoretical schema originally built for thinking of the revolution at the periphery of the capitalist West, in Russia, conceived as a semi-colony of Western Europe, and, even more than Trotsky – who from the end of the 1920s had tended to interpret 'the entire history of mankind' in the light of the law of uneven and combined development⁵³ – he establishes it as a universal law of world history, which is thereby radically decentred, the exception becoming the norm, *the margins becoming the centre*.

It is especially true of colonial margins, as James shows in *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution*: 'Ghana from the very start takes its place in the very vanguard of the middle of the twentieth-century.' The terms of the 'colonial myth', the myth of the inherent backwardness of colonized people, must be reversed:

The story of the Ghana revolution is a tract for the times and not an episode in the history of backward Africa. ... The backward, the barbarous, the politically ignorant, sat in the Colonial office and in the Colonial Administration.

Colonial Ghana, says James, was actually backward, but, by means of historical compensation, this 'very backwardness mobilized the people for the mighty self-propulsion forward'.⁵⁴

Like the Cuban Revolution a little later, the struggle for decolonization in Ghana demonstrated the futility and falseness of the 'backward idea' that backward countries 'must be brought forward in graduated stages' with the help of advanced capitalist countries, and that it will take centuries for them to catch up with the West.⁵⁵ In sum, rather than deconstructing Eurocentrist-historicist assumptions, as postcolonial scholars would expect of him, James appropriates them, subverts them, and finally *turns*

them against the (colonial) relations of power they serve to legitimate. Rather than being the 'Eurocentric anti-Eurocentrism' we called it in our introduction, James's approach might be better (positively) defined as *counter-Eurocentrism*.

The fact that James never saw a need to discard 'backwardness' and other Eurocentric categories should thus not be considered only as negative, as if, after all, he had remained 'mentally' imprisoned in what he struggles against on the political and historiographical battlegrounds; in other words, as if he never entirely achieved the *decolonization of his own mind*. For him, historicism was not a purely ideological invention one can get rid of by 'merely' removing the psychic obstacles inherited from colonial history. It was the product of centuries of domination that had established the 'lateness' of colonial countries as the actual condition of possibility of capitalist accumulation to the exclusive benefit of imperial centres. Throughout modern history, imperialism has never ceased to *materially* produce the very conditions of truth of historicism, which could not be undone/deconstructed – except through victorious 'physical' struggles for emancipation.

Thenceforth, James's theoretical strategy was not to postulate, in a 'postcolonial vein', the existence of irreducible differences between Western and non-Western histories and modes of historicity, but rather to challenge historicism *on its own ground*, by breaking the identity between world history and Western history, and revealing the plurality of subjects and geographical places of revolutionary uprisings, as well as the often unexpected links between struggles over times and centuries, and through distant spaces, from Greece to the Caribbean and France, from Russia to Africa and black America. In particular, in James's writings, the example of pre-revolutionary Russia, European but also backward, like the (semi-) colonial countries, comes to play the role of *conversion–translation operator* between struggles for emancipation in the West and the non-West. The same applies to the Caribbean – Western but in turn backward and very largely black – as well as to black America, which James conceives as *interfaces* between revolutionary movements in Europe and anticolonial struggles in Africa. In this respect, James laid the foundations of a *global geohistory of revolutions* that remains to be developed further.

What separates James's thought from later postcolonial approaches is its unflinching reliance on a notion of philosophy of history, now most often discarded as teleological and/or Eurocentric.

Rethinking the philosophy of (world) history

In a critical article on the African-American historians gathered around the *Journal of Negro History*, James stated that 'historical facts ... have to be organized in the light of a philosophy of history', more precisely 'of a correct philosophy of history', since 'whether a writer knows it or not, he is using a philosophy of history'.⁵⁶ For James, the 'correct' philosophy of history was historical materialism, as it expresses the viewpoint of working and popular masses; and he had nothing but admiration for the 'French historical school of the French Revolution' that, from Jules Michelet to Marxist historians such as Daniel Guérin and Georges Lefebvre, has placed the 'ordinary people', rather than their presumed leaders, at the very centre of the historical stage.⁵⁷ Surprisingly, James finally found such a conception of self-emancipation best anticipated in Hegel's 'philosophy and history and necessity'.⁵⁸

It is important to understand that James's Hegel is still alien to the 'postcolonial Hegel', whose (historicist) philosophy completed the confinement of non-European peoples in a zone of infra-history, and, in the case of Africa, its pure and simple exclusion from history. For James, Hegel, the philosopher of 'logical anarchy',⁵⁹ is rather the one who revealed the fundamental law of the (self-)movement of history; a world history which, by necessity, is endowed with a unique direction, but is no less necessarily made of apparently irrational explosions, brutal interruptions, gigantic leaps, and unceasing flows and counter-flows.⁶⁰ In 1940, speaking of the rise of fascism as a product of 'the crisis of decadent capitalism', James writes:

shocks, catastrophes, sudden reversals and annihilations, drawn-out agonies, events unpredicted and unpredictable follow and will follow each other with bewildering speed. As we look at the film of history it seems that the operator has gone mad.⁶¹

For him, this applied all the more so to the historical process in the Caribbean, which 'consists of a series of unco-ordinated periods of drift, punctuated by spurts, leaps and catastrophes', but is nonetheless governed by an 'inherent movement [that] is clear and strong'.⁶² Paradoxically, then, it is *with* Hegel, rather than *against* him, that James conceived of, in Sandro Mezzadra's words, a history at a 'syncopated rhythm', 'breaking with the idea of linear progress imagined by the mainstream of modern philosophy'.⁶³

James's 1969 introduction to the reissue of the book of his Trinidadian fellow, John Jacob Thomas, *West*

Indian Fables Explained (1889), is significant here, a virulent criticism/deconstruction of the racist and pro-colonial statements of the British historian Anthony Froude in *The English in the West Indies; or the Bow of Ulysses*. Describing the essay as a ‘clear surgery’ and a ‘necessary medication’, James praises Thomas’s ‘sense of history’ and ‘historical method’, and opposes them to the ‘historical prison’ Froude remained locked in. By conceiving of history as governed by a ‘controlling LAW’, Thomas was able to understand the role played in world history by the Caribbean people, ‘a people more than any other people constructed by history’.⁶⁴ The following year, in *History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas*, the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris challenged James’s reading by arguing that Thomas’s essay was still a sign of ‘the kind of historical stasis which has afflicted the Caribbean’.⁶⁵ Such an intellectual dispute between men who deeply respected each other reveals the gap between James’s notion of history and that which was then emerging in the midst of the new Caribbean literary criticism, which was soon to inspire the genesis of postcolonial studies. For James, indeed, the main challenge is not to escape from the ‘Muse of history’ that, according to Derek Walcott, traps the spirit of resistance into the perverse logic of imperial history; it is ‘to place ourselves in history’.⁶⁶ In order to achieve this, a scientific conception of history is necessary, since in the absence of it, says James, ‘anything is what you choose to make it, and history almost automatically becomes not only non-sense ... but is usually a defence of property and privilege’ – that is to say, precisely what colonial historians have made of it.⁶⁷

In this period, James often refers to W.E.B. Du Bois, especially to his book *Black Reconstruction* (1935), which he considers an unsurpassed example of Marxist historiography applied to black struggles. Du Bois, he argues, was not ‘a man primarily concerned with blackness’ as some would have it, but ‘was always driven by the need of expanding and making clear to black people in what way they were involved in world history’.⁶⁸ And, like James, he was convinced that only a true scientific knowledge could release history from the grip of racial-imperial logics. Although issuing a sharp critique of the white institutional-disciplinary production of historical knowledge and of its role in the reproduction of racial power relations in the United States, Du Bois wrote that

the object of writing the history of the Reconstruction ... is simply to establish the Truth, on which Right in the future may be built. We shall never have a science of history until we have in our

colleges men who regard the truth as more important than the defense of the white race.⁶⁹

For Du Bois and James, deracializing–decolonizing historical knowledge does not mean rejecting its claim to be a *truth discourse* by acknowledging the (postmodern) existence of multiple conflicting historical narratives, but, on the contrary, achieving its still dormant promises of knowledge and objectivity as promises of justice and emancipation. The main issue for them was not to deconstruct the master narrative of modernity, but to *rewrite it from the margins*. Did they remain locked up in a Eurocentrist-imperial logic for that reason, or did they find a more genuine, and partly forgotten, way to escape it? The question still needs to be answered.

James’s work invites us to rethink the complex ties between political–material struggles of decolonization and the long process of decolonizing mind and knowledge, by challenging both the assumption that the former are necessary and sufficient conditions of the latter and, conversely, the idea that without a *prior* psychic–epistemic liberation there can be no true social and political emancipation, but only a never-ending rehearsal of neo/postcolonial relationships of dependency. To that end, the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism must be renewed; since, while Eurocentrism is undoubtedly an obstacle to the genesis of global theories of emancipation, it is not self-evident that *anti*-Eurocentrism is the best way to overcome it. It might also be the case with James’s counter-Eurocentrism, but it has the great merit of showing us that the critique of Eurocentrism should be conceived not only as a ‘negative’ activity of tracking down, deconstructing and condemning Eurocentrist assumptions and theses, wherever they are to be found, but also, in a somewhat Kantian mode, as an investigation of the limits of the ‘Eurocentric understanding’ of the world.

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