

# MINORITY REPORT.

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**T**here is an old, tenacious and widely ridiculed idea that all people (and all peoples, for that matter) are at least intrinsically capable of the appreciation of philosophy, poetry and beauty, and are not just to be measured by their attitude to political economy or—as we have further degraded the proposition—by the attitude of political economists to them. There had better be something to this idea. During a utopian interlude in the utilitarian nineteenth century, men like William Morris and John Ruskin attempted to give expression to the yearning for wholeness, an ambition that in other quarters prompted the founding of a working-class college, separated from the high church- and empire-minded university in Oxford. It was in a hall of this institution, Ruskin College, that I first heard C.L.R. James speak, and first began to think that utopianism was too feeble and colorless a term for those few who have the courage to talk of a future we cannot yet fully imagine.

His actual or ostensible subject was Vietnam. This was the fall of 1967, and the fantastic web of official lying and bluff about the war had already been torn irreparably apart. (Don't you hate it, incidentally, when revisionist historians date the awakening of "concern" to the later events of Tet and My Lai? Anyone who cared to know the truth about Indochina knew it well before those crises.) James did not waste any phrases on the revelations of atrocities that were beginning to disturb even cold war liberals. He was a historian of imperialism, and he knew all he needed to know about free-fire zones and strategic hamlets. He understood them by analogy, from his rigorous study of the French in Haiti, the Spanish in Cuba, the British in South Africa and the Italians in Ethiopia. Such conduct toward lesser peoples scarcely rated a raising of the voice. What was impressive about the Vietnamese, he said coolly, was the proven fact that they wouldn't put up with it any longer, and had taken the decision to endure anything. This was how history was made.

He was already old by then, with a nimbus of silver surrounding his anthracite features. He had taken decades to evolve his balanced, synthesized combination of the heart on fire and the brain on ice. From early youth in Trinidad, where he made himself master of Greek classics, Shakespeare and the novel, he had progressed along an astounding number of paths, accepting the role of chance just as he strove to detect the workings of history. He had debated Bertrand Russell on dialectics; had been detained on Ellis Island and deported; had inspired the leadership of at least one Caribbean independence movement; had been the most fluent writer on cricket in the English language; had been the severest and bravest Third World polemicist against Stalinism; had been an example to a nascent generation of immigrants fighting for a place in "the old country."

The real test of a radical or a revolutionary is not the willingness to confront the orthodoxy and arrogance of the rulers but the readiness to contest illusions and falsehoods among close friends and allies. This crux occurred in

James's life in the late 1930s, when the Communist International made a cynical decision to discard anticolonial activity in order to woo imperial Britain and France. With George Padmore and a handful of others, James declared that the struggle of the colonized was not the political property of any party or apparatus. His early critique of this cynicism had a presentiment of the Stalin-Hitler pact, and you can intuit the same point in a different way from his historical masterpiece *The Black Jacobins*, which shows that metropolitan France and its revolution helped emancipate the slaves, but also shows decisively that Toussaint L'Ouverture's fighters had to rely on their own sinews.

This stand, and others like it, condemned James to spend decades among the fragments of the independent, quasi-Trotskyist left. I say "condemned" because the experience was null as far as any definite gain in politics or organization went. But James did not waste even these locust years. He remained in touch with small but significant internationalist groupings, and before the end of his life, which came on May 31, he was celebrated in Africa and the Caribbean in a way that his former detractors of the Stalin period could never hope to be. His last public speech in America was a vindication of Solidarity in Poland and an affirmation of the unguessed-at capacity of an educated working class.

In Paul Buhle's admirable book *C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary* there is a moment from one of James's early cricket columns, written for the *Manchester Guardian* in the 1930s by the only black correspondent then allowed to comment on the great game. James had decided to challenge the quotidian reader with a comparison to the ancient Olympiad:

What would an Athenian have thought of the day's play? Probably that the white-flannelled actors moving so sedately from place to place were performing the funeral rites over the corpse of a hero buried between the wickets.

James had a developed sense, derived partly from Hellenism, of the symmetry and grace latent in art and work. He makes an excellent guide to the increasingly one-dimensional argument over "Western civilization." He needed no instruction about slavery and ethnocentricity. But he had no tolerance either for callow, sectarian diatribes, and shuddered at the philistinism that reduces Shakespeare to "a white male." Some have seen in his early short stories from Trinidad a premonition of the best of Naipaul. Both men benefit by the comparison, if it is honestly made.

In old age he made his home in London, on the Railton Road in Brixton, "front line" between the two declensions of Thatcherism. I called on him there last summer, and found him infirm and rather deaf but still engaged. Handing him my copy of *The Black Jacobins* for an inscription, I was asked what I'd like him to write. "If you just put 'fraternal greetings' I'll be honored." He gave me a searching look. "I do not," he said, "believe in the eternal." To conflate eternity with fraternity seemed a most elegant mistake for a man of his years and of, in every sense, his history.

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