

# A CONVERSATION

By Tariq Ali

CLR James is now, by any standards, an old man. He appears somewhat frail, but this impression evaporates when he begins to talk. It is almost as if one is being transported back to the polemical debates and arguments of the Thirties.

James was born in the West Indies some 80 years ago. He came to Britain in the Thirties and soon developed a reputation as a sports writer and historian.

I had last heard him speak at the 'Dialectics of Liberation' conference in the Roundhouse in 1967. On that occasion he had clashed fiercely with the black American leader Stokely Carmichael. 'Race is decisive', Carmichael had thundered, 'No,' James had replied with quiet dignity, 'it is class.'

The same year James spoke at an International Marxist Group meeting in Birmingham, held to pay tribute to Malcolm X.

CLR James was a Trotskyist and a member of the Fourth International for 17 years. His conversations with Trotsky were published under the pseudonym of Johnstone. He left because of differences on the class character of the Soviet Union.

He is presently in London for the publication of a number of his writings by Allison and Busby, including a revised edition of his classic *The Black Jacobins*. I met him last week in his hotel room. He stipulated one condition for the interview. It must end as the Second Test Match began, as he did not want to miss a single minute of cricket.

TA: What were the main literary influences on you in your youth? What were the first books you read and how much impact did these make on you?

CLR: The greatest literary influence on me before I left the Caribbean was William Makepeace Thackeray. I first read *Vanity Fair* when I was nine years old. Subsequently I read it on nine other occasions. I didn't know it was a literary classic.

My mother had a Shakespeare, *Vanity Fair*, and another book called *John Halifax, Gentleman*. These were on the shelf and I was living in the Caribbean countryside with nothing to do, so I read.

Thackeray and his constant attacks upon the aristocracy had more part in shaping my attitude towards the establishment than Marx.

TA: Would you say your views have altered over the last decades at all, or are you still as intransigent as ever on the themes close to your heart?

CLR: My views haven't altered. I left the Trotskyist movement in 1951, but I have remained an independent Marxist ever since.

I do not subordinate myself to any state. I have never been to Moscow, though I have much more sympathy with the Chinese developments. I am attached to no political organisation whatsoever.

TA: But how would you view world politics today? The situation has altered in many ways since the Thirties.

CLR: My view of world politics is based firmly on what Lenin said in 1919. He told us that this was going to be an epoch of wars: imperialist wars, nationalist wars, civil wars. And of course, an epoch of revolution.

I see the old societies falling apart, in severe crisis and I don't think there is any way out except through building a new, socialist society. In that sense I have not changed since 1934, when I first joined the Fourth International.

It was Marx who first stated that the choice confronting humanity was socialism or barbarism. I believe that. I believe that in the last half century we have seen many examples of barbarism. Can I say something to you. I don't wish to start any controversy or polemic, but have you read Solzhenitsyn?

TA: Yes

CLR: Well, how can you still say that the USSR is a workers' state, eh?

TA: But what Solzhenitsyn is writing about is things which surely Trotsky and his supporters knew about in the Thirties?

The Old Man used to often reflect on the fact that the purges and the trials were just the tip of the iceberg. You didn't appreciate the crimes carried out against a mass of the population during the collectivisation?

CLR: Of course, all that I knew and thought and wrote about, but the concreteness and the detail supplied by Solzhenitsyn is still a surprise. How can we see in that any element of socialism?

TA: How would you view China today?

CLR: Now that is difficult for me to say, but I know that up till Mao's death I was always very sympathetic to the Cultural Revolution. Mao said that the two things which mattered most to him were the defeat of Chiang Kai-shek and of Japanese imperialism and the Great Proletarian

Cultural Revolution.

It was, in my view, an attempt to get the proletariat to govern the country. Mao was genuinely interested in that process. He was trying to get the masses to play a greater role in governing the state and building a socialist society.

Since his death they have turned backwards, but I don't believe they can succeed.

TA: But how can you square all this — with which I disagree but let's leave that aside — with Mao's view of Stalin and the fact that the Stalin cult was promoted in China after the limited de-Stalinisation measures of Khrushchev in 1956-7?

CLR: These are details, but nevertheless Mao held a view of Stalin with which I disagree entirely, but despite this he avoided the pitfalls of Stalin's Russia.

**THE slaves received the whip with more certainty and regularity than they received their food. It was the incentive to work and the guardian of discipline.**

But there was no ingenuity that fear or a depraved imagination could devise which was not employed to break their spirit and satisfy the lusts and resentment of their owners and guardians — irons on the hands and feet, blocks of wood that the slaves had to drag behind them wherever they went, the tin-plate mask designed to prevent the slaves eating the sugar-cane, the iron collar.

Whipping was interrupted in order to pass a piece of hot wood on the buttocks of the victim; salt, pepper, citron, cinders, aloes, and hot ashes were poured on the bleeding wounds. Mutilations were common, limbs, ears, and sometimes the private parts, to deprive them of the pleasures which they could indulge in without expense.

Their masters poured burning wax on their arms and hands and shoulders, emptied the boiling cane sugar over their heads, burned them alive, roasted them on slow fires, filled them with gunpowder and blew them up with a match; buried them up to the neck and smeared their heads with sugar that the flies might devour them; fastened them near to nests of ants or wasps; made them eat their excrement, drink their urine, and lick the saliva of other slaves.

One colonist was known in moments of anger to throw himself on his slaves and stick his teeth into their flesh.

From *'The Black Jacobins'*

TA: But there was no socialist democracy in China under Mao, no rights for the masses unless they happened to agree with Mao.

CLR: I accept that, but they were doing their best to prevent the decline into barbarism that took place in Stalin's Russia. But what has China got to do with the question I asked you about Russia?

TA: Quite a lot. For me there no qualitative difference (there never was) between the mode of production in China and in the Soviet Union, regardless of whether it was under Lenin and Trotsky, Stalin or Brezhnev.



# WITH CLR JAMES



Despite many other differences the mode of production in both countries is the same. You would not call Mao's China a capitalist or state-capitalist society. That is why I asked you about China.

CLR: For me the cultural revolution was important. I don't know how I would characterise China. It's difficult for me. But China is not Russia. So when I ask you about Russia you shouldn't ask me about China.

TA: Well my views are not so important...

CLR: No. Your views are important because they are the views of an organisation to which I have 17 years of my life.

TA: On a related subject, could I ask you what is your attitude to Fidel and the Cuban Revolution. In the revised edition of 'The Black Jacobins' you make what I think is a rather attractive comparison between Fidel Castro and Toussaint L'Ouverture. Would you care to expand on that?

CLR: There was a great revolution in the Caribbean in the heat and the excitement following the French Revolution and in the wake of the crisis of the imperialist world today there emerged in the Caribbean another great revolution, the Cuban Revolution.

You ask me about Fidel. There are two things which come to mind. He made the revolution first and then the Russians helped him. They were not for the revolution before it was an accomplished fact.

But secondly there are things about Fidel which I read which I'm not too happy about. But I know another thing which for me is very important.

If it were not for Fidel's army, Angola would now be under the control of the South African whites. The Cuban intervention in Angola was a tremendous event in the history of the world. I think Fidel is doing the best under the circumstances.

TA: 'The Black Jacobins' has been regarded by the revolutionary left as a classic for a long time, but it must have been galling for you that because of your politics it did not receive a wider recognition.

Today it is being acclaimed in much wider circles. To me it has been obvious since I first read the book that it was tailor-made for an epic film. Not a Hollywood epic, but a Peoples' Epic. Why has that never happened?

CLR: Many people have talked about it, but where is the money to come from? A lot of people say that, and an American film-maker is studying the possibility today.

I am prepared to write a film script provided we can find a capable film-maker and the finance. But most of them are not too happy about the idea of making a revolutionary film.

TA: What about the Cubans? They have a collection of very talented and very radical film-makers. Don't you think they might be prepared to collaborate on a film?

CLR: There was talk at one stage of translating the book into Spanish by the Cubans. But the book has a few sharp attacks on the Russian regime and when they reached those pages they

stopped the translation.

They were saying before they reached those two pages that the book would be out in one or two months. But they stopped.

TA: When I heard you talk many years ago in London, you polemicalised sharply against Stokely Carmichael. Are your views on race and class the same or have you altered them in some way? At that time you were extremely emphatic that class was the ultimate arbiter.

CLR: I still believe that. I have not shifted, but it would be a great mistake to ignore the race question or the racial dimension.

I am on the side of all those who are using their racial subordination as a means of getting together because in that way they can make as powerful an impact as possible. But for me the class question is still the dominant and crucial one.

TA: These days there is a lot of talk about the 'crisis of Marxism'. Have you ever seriously questioned your Marxism or doubted its use as a method of investigation?

CLR: Never, never! In 1932 I came to this country for the first time. I looked around. I was very well read in history and literature. I had musical interests: Bach, Beethoven and Mozart were known to me. But my thought had no order about it.

It was after reading Marx and Lenin and studying Trotsky's polemics against Stalin that I began to develop a coherent view of the world. In 1933 came Hitler and 'socialism or barbarism' appeared the only alternatives.

In the 1914-18 war capitalism killed 8 million men, then it went to pieces in 1929 with the depression and as the economic recovery took place fascism was triumphant in Germany, Italy, and, a few years on, in Spain, and then came the Second World War. Today they don't go to war because it would be suicide given the power of nuclear weapons.

But I have no confidence in capitalism. None whatsoever. I have never entertained any serious doubts about Marxism over the last five decades of my life. Capitalism offers nothing that I want.

But I want to come back to the Soviet Union. You lot still stand by the 'workers' state' thesis. I see that Mandel still keeps on writing about it.

TA: Well, I'll give you my views on the matter, which may or may not be orthodox. I don't regard the Soviet Union as a socialist state..

CLR: But a workers' state?

TA: Yes, but a workers' state which is utterly degenerated and deformed, has to be overthrown and totally re-organised from top to bottom. My basis for that is the objective role of the USSR in world politics.

There is an objective tension between the USA and the USSR, which is based on the fact that capital is not allowed to circulate in the USSR as a commodity. Neither foreign capital nor any other form of capital.

Simply in order to prevent that happening the Soviet bureaucracy has to be on its guard and when accommodation fails or where it sees a possibility of scoring points at the expense of imperialism, it moves.

You have said yourself that the Cuban intervention in Angola was a 'tremendous event'. But without Russian weapons and Russian transport planes, that intervention would have been impossible. I repeat, impossible.

CLR: But I understand that when Fidel accepted the MPLA's invitation to Angola he did so without the knowledge of the Russians. That is what I heard.

**'BROTHERS and friends, I am Toussaint L'Ouverture, my name is perhaps known to you. I have undertaken vengeance. I want Liberty and Equality to reign in San Domingo. I work to bring them into existence. Unite yourselves to us, brothers, and fight with us for the same cause, etc.**  
**Your very humble and very obedient servant**  
**(Signed) Toussaint L Ouverture,**  
**'General of the Armies of the King, for the Public Good.'**  
**From 'The Black Jacobins'**

TA: That is possible, but I find it difficult to believe that he could have sent the troops without lengthy consultations with the Russians. Their motives were probably very different, but I don't believe that the Russians were not involved. It is also the case that in the months preceding

the fall of Saigon the supply of Soviet weapons (especially the rocket launchers) was not an insignificant event.

CLR: But the Chinese gave weapons too...

TA: Sure, in the early stages in particular. But the FI called for a united front of Moscow and Peking to defend the Vietnamese revolution. It is when one sees the Soviet Union in a global context that one cannot but be forced to the conclusion that there are some fundamental differences between the USA and the USSR.

CLR: That I can accept, but can we ask people to sacrifice themselves for Russia as one did in the day of Lenin? If you are supporting them then you have to defend them.

**CLAIRVEAUX, the Mulatto, was in command, and with him was Capois Death, a negro officer, so called on account of his bravery. From early morning the national army attacked. In the afternoon under a crossfire of musketry and artillery Capois led the assault on the blockhouses of Bréda and Champlin, shouting 'Forward, forward!'**

The French were strongly entrenched and drove off the blacks again and again only to see them return to the attack with undiminished ardour. A bullet knocked over Capois' horse. Boiling with rage he scrambled up and, making a gesture of contempt with his sword, he continued to advance. 'Forward, forward!'

The French, who had fought on so many fields, had never seen fighting like this. From all sides came a storm of shouts. 'Bravo! Bravo!'. There was a roll of drums. The French ceased fire. A French horseman rode out and advanced to the bridge. He brought a message from Rochambeau. 'The Captain-General sends his admiring compliments to the officer who has just covered himself with so much glory.'

Without a shot fired from the blacks, the horseman turned and rode back to the blockhouse and the battle began again. The struggle had been such a nightmare that by now all in San Domingo were a little mad, both white and black.

From 'The Black Jacobins'

TA: But defend whom against what? In any confrontation between the masses and the bureaucracy we are with the masses. It is only when there is a confrontation with imperialism that we refuse to remain neutral.

In my opinion the sovereignty of the Cuban Revolution was guaranteed by the existence and the military strength of the USSR. The withdrawal of the missiles by Khrushchev also guaranteed that there would be no military attempt to overthrow Fidel.

Of course, his enormous popularity was the major factor, but Cuba is only a small island. Anyway let us agree to differ on this old, old debate.

Leaving politics aside for the moment, could we discuss your other passion, cricket. Could I ask two initial questions: why is it that cricket in the Caribbean and India-Pakistan is a mass sport like football in Britain, and secondly why did it not catch on in some of the other colonies such as Canada?

CLR: In Britain there is a very wide range of things that the people can be interested in, but the impact of cricket in India and the Caribbean was different. The overwhelming majority of the masses were illiterate. They saw cricket, which is a marvellous game altogether, as an art form.

It was the easiest and most accessible part of Western civilisation that they could identify with and it was also participatory.

In my book *Beyond the Boundary* I develop this theme in greater detail. Western literature, music, painting was only for the élite, but cricket the masses could adopt and take over. Instinctively they appreciated the artistic quality of the game.

The great critics of the fine arts have yet to realise the fact that when 100,000 people go to see a football or a cricket match it is, even if they do not articulate it, an artistic event.

TA: Could it not also be said that in some ways sport is the new opium of the masses?

CLR: Trotsky used to say that the working class was far too interested in sport. He said that far too much of their energy and interests were devoted to sport rather than in the organisation

of their own class. But I disagreed. I don't think so.

I played cricket and football till I left the Caribbean and cricket has always meant a great deal to me. It has never interfered with my Marxist view.

As to why it never caught on in Canada, I think the answer is simple: climate. You can't have a season in Canada. That's the chief reason.

TA: Whom would you regard as the most attractive cricketer today?

CLR: Viv Richards. The way he plays is something new. I used to think that George Headley was the greatest, better than Sobers or the three W's, but this boy Richards is a marvel.

His batting is something we haven't known before. He is an extraordinary batsman altogether. The way they drop the ball on the off-stump or just outside and he keeps on hitting it through the on-side fieldsmen to the on boundary. The precision of the shot is such that he could be playing billiards. I've never seen anything like it.

TA: Do you regret any part of your life. Is there anything you would have done differently?

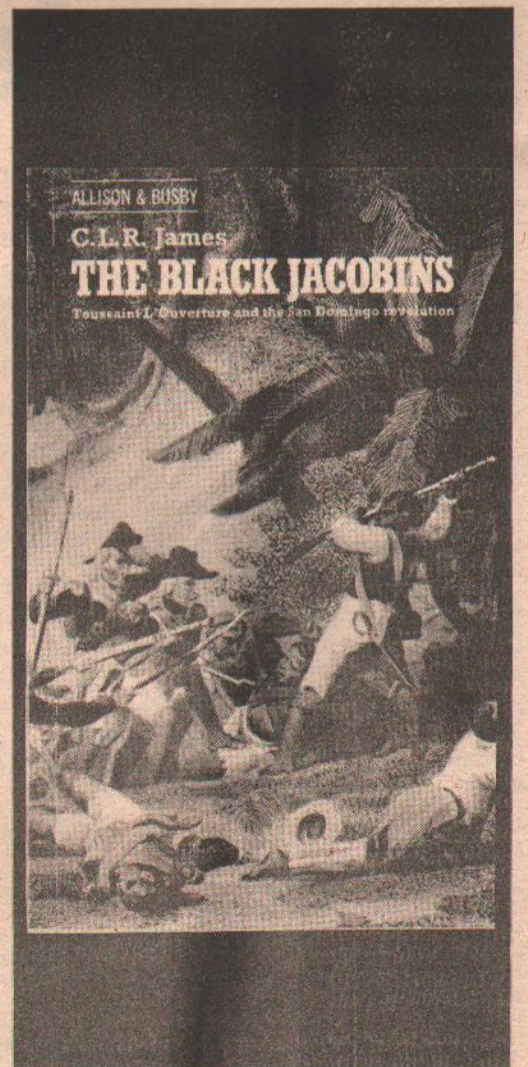
CLR: No. I have enjoyed reading books, which is what made me a Marxist.

TA: And what lies ahead? What are your plans now?

CLR: I am writing my autobiography in Trinidad and I will go back and finish that. After that I would like to go to Florence and spend two or three weeks there.

I am fond of that city. Michaelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci... It is a beautiful city. I'm a little bit scared as it's now controlled by the Italian CP (laughs), but I doubt they'll do anything to me now.

As the Test match started the interview ended, with CLR grumbling about the inclusion of Boycott in the English side. If he were an English selector: 'I would get rid of Boycott. He just demoralises the rest of the team. Pick two new openers and let them play in all five tests. They'll ruin one or two, but they'll be good at the end.'



'The Black Jacobins' by CLR James is published by Alison & Busby at £4.95 pbk.

It is available from The Other Bookshop, 328 Upper St, London N1. Add 10% if ordering by mail.