

RD

Black Forum

April 9, 1964

Dear Dave:

It was great hearing from you, and perhaps this time, you actually will come to the convention, which will be the last time it will be held in Detroit.

Your letter of March 4 was quite revealing of the state of CLRJamesism, who unfortunately seems to have influence among Trinidadians and the Caribbean generally, which means that he has forgotten even such past history of his own development in the 30s that it led him to come to Trotskyism instead of accepting the Stalinist slanders. For him to now encourage the New Jewel Movement to act as if counter-revolution had not come out of the revolution itself is on the level of the so-called Left who accepted Stalinism as the Hitler-Stalin Pact was being signed. Do not, however, think that all the Blacks follow that diversionary road, and it is this ~~misapprehension~~ precisely which makes me anxious to make a few comments on Cedric Robinson's Black Marxism, which manages to almost ignore South Africa and act as if CLRJ is the ~~best~~ Marxist, the Third World theorist, who has made only one mistake -- and that was to have been a Marxist for a while, whereas the Nationalist "truth" in its anti-Marxism is supposed to have been proved correct as witness CLRJ's present position.

If that sounds contradictory, consider my great shock when I got Black Marxism and found that, at one and the same time, Cedric Robinson holds a position of "Resident Marxist", interviewed me without revealing one single word of his anti-Marxism, and indeed urged me to reveal my differences with CLRJ. His book had not yet come out. I had no indication ~~when~~ when he introduced me to the audience at my lecture at Santa Barbara, or when he interviewed me on a video-tape, that he was anti-Marxist or in any way thought any analysis of the Black movement was wrong. Quite the contrary. He was not only full of praise but urged the audience to get acquainted with Marxist-Humanist literature, and we made good sales there. He did tell me that he had finished his work on Black Marxism and that it would soon be out, and be a truly independent Marxist work.

You know, dear Dave, I don't think he deliberately tried to mislead me. I think that is their interpretation of "independent Marxism" when it is Marxism that they are independent of.

Now then, the book itself. Its pretense of being very scholarly is so quantitative in footnotes that you think that he is at least "erudite". But, in fact, history in its true sense -- that is, what happened and how it happened -- is not what he records. Rather, the title of the very first chapter is totally subjective and non-objective: "Racial Capitalism: The Non-Objective Character of Capitalist Development." Where exactly did he get such a definition of objective? Secondly, ~~none~~ none of the three parts flow from each other, and the last part is totally "original" and totally wrong... that is to say, DuBois was no Marxist, and I'm not referring to the fact that he didn't join the CP until he was in his 90s, but that that was not Marxism, either. On the contrary, his best near-Marxist work, Black Reconstruction, was when he made no pretense of Marxism. But even that ~~chapter~~ chapter of Part III is not as far removed from the truth as is Chapter 10: ~~and the Black Expedition~~

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"CLRJames and the Black Tradition."

First of all, he begins with his own interpretation of the beginnings of Trinidad in the 19th century without telling you that is his interpretation (his and CLR James') and not either what the history really was or what CLRJames said it was when he was a Marxist. Let me expand this further, because that reveals the two totally opposite phases of CLR James, which have nothing to do with each other, but is the rewritten version that CLRJ has been peddling ever since the break with me. Thus, that great cricket book, Beyond the Boundary, he suddenly presents himself as a Black Nationalist throughout his life, except that at one part he was not conscious of it and only from the 60s did he see the whole truth, etc., etc. At the same time, little stories from childhood or anecdotes relating ~~XXXX~~ to Black leaders (from Nkrumah to Nyerere ... or any other names he can drop) are told as if that is history. This is what Cedric Robinson peddles as objective, multi-faceted history. The one thing that made me laugh especially was the way an ordinary blurb from a Johnsonite is passed off as true history of what happened in the period.

I assume that you have our bulletin For The Record (a mimeographed bulletin we published in July 1972). Worse things have happened since then as CLRJ got himself an English publisher for telling his life story as "The Future in the Present". (By the way, Beyond the Boundary has been getting a lot of publicity here because it has just been published in America.)

~~THE~~ His Notes on the Dialectic is played up by Robinson as if it were the greatest work on Dialectics; to pretend that it is so accepted by either Hegelians or Marxists is the greatest untruth of all, and shows Robinson's ignorance of the dialectic. If you have our For the Record you will note in "Letter to a Professor", who had received "Notes on the Dialectic" from CLRJ as he was searching for a publisher, that the professor (John O'Neill) had not even bothered to read the mss. but sent it on to me for comment. I would have loved to have seen CLRJ's face when he got a note from O'Neill telling him what he had done -- that is, that he had sent it to "Raya Dunayevskaya, a great Marxist". What is important to you, in my letter to O'Neill, is that I do go through "Notes on the Dialectic."  
~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~

I decided against doing any review of Black Marxism myself both because we are not ready to start a public debate with Cedric Robinson and because CLRJ too has no influence here. However, if he has the influence you describe in England and you wish to undertake a review, you can try. Whether we wish to combine CLRJ on dialectic and CLRJ on New Jewel Movement I don't know. Olga says that she did not think we should assume that the BCM would necessarily have the same attitude as others and that it would be important to keep up that dialogue. Are you in touch with them?

Because there are so many different aspects involved in your letter, from NJM to Castoriadis and from the Crimean War to Bukka Rennie, I would like to see a draft of ~~XXXX~~ your intended essay. Looking forward to seeing you in person in July.

Yours,

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Bl News  
Lizama  
G. F. M.  
History  
Darcus Howe, ed Race Today  
very close to CLRJ  
1 Westbeech Rd, London N22 2 4th March 84.

Dear Raya,

I recently read 'Black Marxism' by Cedric Robinson and I'm excited to hear that you have been looking at it too and that you have debated with the author in person. As 'Black Marxism' is so long and has such an ambitious scope, I'd like to share some of my reactions with you and await contributions from you and the N&L comrades before writing my intended review.

As you know, Jamesianism is something of a Hegemonic force amongst Black activists in Britain. Trotskyism and Euro-Communism have made significant inroads in the Labour Party in recent years but have got nowhere in the Black Movement.

Our activity here around the Grenada pamphlet has taken us to several meetings. Dick was given a cool reception by New Jewell when he raised the question of Bishops' murder and in London Nigel was accused of being a counter-revolutionary when he spoke of Coad and Austin's counter-revolution. What counter-revolution they snapped, what was its programme, how do know how many people were killed before the US invasion?

At a meeting which launched a film called Talking History (this features CLRJ and EP Thompson discussing world politics, EPI plays the pessimist and CLRJ the optimist) Fred Halliday mentioned Grenada almost in passing, effectively tailending the NJM with an agnostic 'It's too soon to know' position. This was immediately taken-up by Darcus Howe, who as you will know is editor of Race Today and very close to James. Darcus said that western leftists might not know what went on but 'everyone on the island of Grenada knew that the clique who purged Bishop were ardent followers of the dialectic of Joseph Stalin.' The mobilisation of the masses to free Bishop proved this. But I'll return to this point later and get to Robinsons' book.

For Cedric Robinson, CLR James seems to be the figure in Black Marxism - the key figure. But the nearest we get to any real discussion of of the crucial three-way Philosophical debate in the Johnson-Forrest Tendency (from the late forties onwards), is where Robinson quotes Lenin on Essence; as quoted by James in NOD;

"The essence of a thing is the fact that it must move, reflect itself, negate the reflection, which was nothing, 'become being, and then become nothing again, while the thing itself must move on because it is its nature to do so.... The essence of the proletariat is its movement to incorporate in itself experience of the evils of capitalism until it overcomes capitalism itself' Black Marxism p393.

From then on we just get all those passages from Notes on Dialectics like "There is nothing left to organise" and of course "The proletariat will smash Stalinism to pieces" What Darcus Howe said reminds me of this. He seemed to be saying only the US invasion thwarted the masses victory over the Coad-Austin clique. I'm also thinking of Bukka Rennie saying Caribbean Stalinism and Revolutionary Marxism "are not hostile to each other" in "the concrete situation in the Caribbean" with practice as the "deciding factor". Does the Darcus Howe position represent a real shift from Rennie's astounding naivety or does it mean dumping responsibility on the masses (and not just US Imperialism) who surely should have been involved in the struggle between Revolutionary Marxism and Stalinism from the beginning.

Cedric Robinson deals with the JFT as follows.

"They were renegade bourgeois ideologists trained in the ruling ideas"

I find myself asking what about the miners in Virginia? and more importantly What about Charles Denby in book called Black Marxism?

Anyhow Robinson goes on;

"despite their sometimes feverish activity they were essentially contemplative didactics coupled with revolutionary action. James could not escape these contradictions any more than Grace Lee (Boggs) or Dunayevskaya. (Neither could Notes on Dialectics)

Robinson attempts resolve the 'dilemma' of the JFT by hauling in Cornelius Castoradis to hit Marxism with.

"as Cornelius Castoradis has made clearer than any one, since the appearance of the bourgeoisie was historically the origin of the category class it would be philosophically and historically impossible to recapitulate the social and ideological experience of the bourgeoisie. It could not become a class in those terms"

(Incidentally A non Marxist reviewer of CLRJ repeated this point in the London Paper the "Caribbean Times", one Henderson Dalrymple.

Turning to the ~~telos~~ Article by Castoriadis that Robinson refers to 'On The History of the Workers Movement' we read "what value Marx has had for the workers movement is difficult to see". And as for the working class it "continually recedes and disappears into the crowd of social actors". As for intellectuals, "We find ourselves in the paradoxical situation of discerning better and better what is implied in radical-social transformation, but knowing less and less who can accomplish it". I must say to me this just sounds like intellectual arrogance. The core of his argument is to lump together Aristotle, Hegel and Marx as a sort of evil trinity whom the movement "of the overwhelming majority of men and women" must dump for the "revolutionary project" to have any chance of success. Marcuse would have <sup>told</sup> Castoriadis the difference between Aristotle and Hegel (in Reason and Revolution). Aristotle sees the Absolute as having only an ontological relationship with reality not a creative one., and as you have said Hegel's Absolutes are not empty Aristotelian Absolutes. Substance is also subject. The totality must be concrete.

Anyone writing about Black Marxism has to look at Marx's relationship to the Black struggles in the US and the Civil war but no, instead Robinson singles out Marx versus Lassalle on the Question of Piedmont Sardinia in 1859! This was when Cavour of Piedmont did a deal with Napoleon III to force Austria out of Lombardy and Venetia. Rather than the German Confed should <sup>agreeing that</sup> get involved in the fighting to get at Austria, Marx thought the Germans should take their stand with Austria on the River Po otherwise they would find themselves fighting Bonapartist Armies on the Rhine. Emperor Plon-Plon (as Marx called him) was of course opposed to German unity but Robinson says it all means that Marx supported the German but not the Italian National Democratic cause. He says Lassalle and Mehring were right to see the position of Marx and Engels (who wrote Po und Rhein) as 'confused'. Lassalle thought Marx was pandering to 'anti-French feeling in Germany, but Robinson says nothing about Lassalles pandering to Bismark.

In 1860 Marx <sup>took</sup> almost a year off <sup>Herr Vogt</sup> from writing Capital to expose the work of Bonapartist agents. His book 'Marx's forgotten Work' has been translated and brought out by Gerry Healy's Press. Engels was rather cool towards Marx's spending so much time answering "Herr Vogt" but Marx was so concerned about penetration of the workers movement by corrupt petite-bourgeois politicians that as well as taking legal action against Vogt in the German courts he published a full literary reply - "Herr Vogt".

Marx was not only concerned with Decembrist intrigue in popular movements he he saw the evils of Plon-Plon in relation to Franco-Russian treaty following the Crimean War in which Piedmont joined France and Britain and Turkey. Marx writes: "The first fruit of the Treaty of Paris was the sacrifice of the 'Circassian' nationality' and the Russian annihilation of the Crimean Tartars, and no less the dashing of the national hopes that the Poles and Swedes had linked to a Western European crusade against Russia." Against Vogt's claims that Frances renewed Holy Alliance with Russia had at least helped the Rumanians Marx replied: "the Rumanian people still languish as they did before under the most terrible feudal bondage, such as could only be organised by Russians."

So Marx was very clear on National liberation struggles. He obviously was not into tailending Cavour who sent Italians to fight in the Crimea & in return for getting French 'help' against the Austrian Empire agreed to hand over Savoy and Nice (Garibaldi's birthplace) to the Second Empire.

There are many other parts of Cedric Robinson's book that need taking up but I think that'll be another letter. For instance why is Richard Wright given a chapter while Franz Fanon is barely noted?

I hope to see you in the States this year. For a revolutionary spring, in the meantime.

Yours  
Dave

P.J. The collected letters of the Marx Daughter's have been brought out by Penguin. If you want a copy and/or "Vogt", let me know.

P.P.S. Thanks for the draft of the miners pamphlet which has arrived in the middle of the miners strike in Britain.

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