

# CLR James and the Place of Marxism, Nationalism and Race in Theories of Pan-Africanism

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses how instrumental C.L.R. James was in transforming Pan-Africanism from a localized practice in the diaspora to a social, political and economic movement on the continent. Through examining a selection of his texts including *The Black Jacobins*, we explore how his prioritizing of political cooperation on a global scale instead of promoting racial insularity in Black liberation movements added another layer to the theory of Pan-Africanism. Through understanding James' Trotskyist ideologies and the historical context which he was steeped in, we can trace his impact on Pan-Africanism as it transitioned from theories of Black identity in the diaspora to definitive political action on the continent.*

**Keywords:** CLR James, Pan-Africanism, Black Political Thought, Nationalism, Race Theory

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Good afternoon from New York everyone.

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This the first instalment of Turning Points in Pan-Africanism.

In this lecture series, we will be discussing three of the most significant intellectual turning-points in Pan-Africanism--concepts of race, nationalism, and Marxism. Though many are introduced to the Pan-African movement in Africa during the second half the 20th century, it was the diaspora in the late 19th and early 20th century that set the ideological foundation that would later evolve into the political movement. In this lecture series, we will discuss this ideological foundation in the early 20th century, rather than the Pan-African movement that came later.

This lecture series seeks to explore a selection of early Black thinkers and how their intellectual work contributed to what motivated the Pan-African world. Each thinker chosen for this series emphasized the role of either race, nationalism, or Marxism in Pan-Africanism. For our first instalment, we'll be talking about Trinidadian Historian and Marxist thinker CLR James. We will begin with James and Marxism, followed by Marcus Garvey and Nationalism, then the Nardal sisters and Race, in an effort to reverse-engineer the political movement to its ideological foundations.

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Starting with James, we will discuss how his Marxist thought prompted the transcendence, but not rejection, of race and nationalism and reoriented Pan-African thinking toward multi- and transnational political and economic cooperation as the ultimate goal. This is opposed to nationalism or a racial identity as the aim of Pan-Africanism.

## I. James and Marxism

The association of James with Pan-Africanism is a recent phenomenon. His work with Marxist thought often eclipses his contributions to Pan-Africanism. However, James made considerable political and intellectual contributions to Pan-Africanism. For example, during the invasion of Ethiopia by Italy in 1935, James founded the International African Friends of Abyssinia, the former name of Ethiopia or the IAFA, to protest against the inaction of the League of Nations which Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I had co-founded. During the invasion, James called for the unification of the Black world to support Ethiopia including by joining the Ethiopian army in the fight against Benito Mussolini; Benito Mussolini being the leader of the Italian invasion. Some members of the IAFA were notable Pan-Africanists like Amy Ashford Garvey, George Padmore, T. Ras Makonnen and Jomo Kenyatta.

In addition to this political organizing, CLR James contributed significantly to the intellectual world of Pan-Africanism. Born in 1901 and raised in Trinidad in the early 20th century, when it was still in the grip of British colonialism, James immersed himself in a range of humanities disciplines, and began writing fiction during his secondary studies at Queen's Royal College in the Port of Spain, Trinidad's capital. He migrated to England in 1932, only 3 years before the invasion of Ethiopia, took up as a cricket reporter for *The Guardian*, and gradually became exposed to the thickening political milieu that was heating up in the developing world and the metropolises. It was during his time in England that he began to develop his Trotskyism, a line of Marxist thought, which would become so influential to Pan-Africanism by proxy of James.

By the time of the Ethiopian invasion, James was fully equipped with his Trotskyist thought. As he networked within the Black intellectual and political world, he called for the political unity of the localized Black liberation movements that were vaguely tied by the solidarity of race and the ideal of nationhood. Trotskyism was a line of Marxist thought named after Leon Trotsky, a leading theoretician in the Russian Revolution. Trotskyism is the Marxist theory of 'permanent revolution' or the idea that a national revolution is not self-sustaining, and that in order for a national revolution to be successful, it must be accompanied by a multinational revolution because of the globalized capitalist economy which is dependent on the oppression of all developing countries.

This Trotskyist ideology became central to Pan-Africanism as it evolved into a political movement on the continent. James became a proxy for Trotskyist thought in Pan-Africanism, believing that Black liberation movements on the continent and in the diaspora must also in the same way be multinational to be successful. Pan-African political leaders like Kwame Nkrumah had also adopted this perspective as they led their individual nations to independence. Nkrumah embraced and adapted this Trotskyist outlook specifically to the African context and urged for Transnational revolution, or the

synthesizing of independent African nations into a politically and economically unified Africa.

James had met Kwame Nkrumah at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in the 1930's. As Nkrumah returned to lead Ghana to independence in 1947, James, like many other Pan-African thinkers who were witnessing Ghana's uprising, felt that Ghana would lead the way to this political-economic unification of Africa. Trotskyism in Russia arose as a response to the bureaucratic, tyrannical approach of Stalinist-Marxism. In that Trotskyist vein, James was wary of a top-down approach to revolution. However, in Ghana, James saw the potential for grassroots revolution:

*'Such then were the people, they produced from themselves and their own resources the great body of their leaders. These were native-born and native-taught. Their very backwardness mobilised the people for the mighty self-propulsion forward. But to do this they needed all that the modern world had to teach them. This is what Nkrumah brought...'*

This grassroots approach in Trotskyism is one of the most significant contributions to Pan-Africanism, by proxy of James. This is not to say that the grassroots approach was non-existent in Black liberation before, but while in the diaspora, Pan-Africanism was once a theoretical exercise cultivated by a privileged class of Black intellectuals, James' Trotskyist ideology and relationship with Nkrumah and other African leaders helped to bring Pan-Africanism out of the theoretical and into the practical.

In a sense, James and his contemporaries were right not only about the wave of national independence movements Ghana would inspire across Africa, but about the Pan-African economic and political cooperation that would manifest after. Organizations like Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and of course, the Organization of African Unity (OAU)--which is still functioning today as the African Union (AU)--were all manifestations of this aim. The OAU was in part founded by Kwame Nkrumah and Emperor Haile Selassie, a true testament to the intellectual work of CLR James in the Pan-African movement.

## II. James and Nationalism

But Trotskyism, like other lines of Marxist thought ran into significant contradictions in its migration to Africa. Marxist thought is predicated on a 'proletarian' or a 'workers' class. Despite the extraction of raw materials in Africa, industrial growth within the colonies was seldom encouraged and thus a proletarian class never existed in a strict sense. Thus, the focus was shifted from the 'proletariat' to the 'peasant' in many developing countries, including much of Africa. James recognized this contradiction, and wrote about the issues that arose.

*'The states which the African nationalist leaders inherited were not in any sense African. With the disintegration of the political power of the imperialist states in Africa, and the rise of militancy of the African masses, a certain political pattern took shape. Nationalist political leaders built a following, they or their opponents gained support among the African civil servants who had administered the imperialist state, and the newly independent African state was little more than the old imperialist state, only now administered and controlled by Black nationalists.'*

James had to expand past the political-economic cooperation imperative of Trotskyism and revisit the importance of national organization. While leaders of African independence movements began to build a new political class, the structure of the economy remained the same as pre-independence and African civil servants who worked in the colonial government simply rotated into new positions, pushing the grassroots element out of the revolution. In short, James believed this was a coup d'état of the revolution by African politicians who only sought to nationalize, or 'Africanize' the existing colonial structure, and not the total reorganization of society.

James argues that if our political and economic existence is only sustained by Paris or England, an ocean's length away and hostile to our 'independence' then that is no nationhood at all. The peasant, unorganized and without an economic and political system that looks beyond exporting one or two crops to Paris, England or the United States, will inevitably fail. Thus, he advocates for acknowledgment of individual historical contexts within Pan-Africanism. For instance, in his essay 'The Voice of Africa,' a review of Jomo Kenyatta 'Facing Mount Kenya,' James writes that:

*'The whole [Kenyan] civilisation, however, not only industry, but social organisation and religious practices, rested on land tenure and the description of this is the most valuable part of Mr. Kenyatta's book. In taking the land away, the Europeans have done more than rob the native of his means of livelihood.'*

Each nation and people had to respond to the specific historical context that gave rise to their oppression. But at the same time, he saw the struggles and oppression of all peoples and nations inextricably linked.

In 1938, James wrote *The Black Jacobins*, a rewriting of the history of the Haitian Revolution. James argues that the Haitian Revolution was the first significant national revolution amongst Black people, and that it had significant historical implications toward what would happen in Africa in the 20th century. He saw a parallel in the way that the Haitian revolution 'had been directly inspired by the French revolution' and 'had developed side by side with it', and the Trotskyist idea that 'the African revolution would be similarly contingent upon the socialist revolution in Europe.'

Thus, there was a constant conversation between revolution in colonial societies and revolution in the metropolises. This is referred to as 'dialecticism,' a central idea in Marxist thought that supposes the idea that two opposing forces that are also dependent on one another for their existence. In other words, although we would like to think of colonized peoples and colonialists as two opposing forces, from the Marxist perspective of James, the evolution of one means the evolution of the other. This Marxist perspective accommodates the idea of individual nationhood within a multinational revolution--it allows for the exploration of national histories of places like Ghana, Kenya or Haiti in tandem with multinational histories that he believed would be equally impacted.

### III. James and Race

James argues for a Pan-Africa that is economically and politically cooperative while acknowledging the importance of individual states using their own historical context to dismantle the colonial system and emerge as a new nation ready to be integrated into a unified Africa. As such, national identity within the concept of Pan-Africanism became

another complex layer James grappled with. As it pertained to his Trotskyist thought, James believed that a Pan-Africa would inevitably have to unite not only with the rest of the developing world which is composed mainly of people of color, but with poor, working class whites as well. Although James had harsh criticism of hard race thinkers like Marcus Garvey, he did believe in the concept that each race was unique and would contribute that which reflected their specific historical context and cultural essence. Thus, for James, discussions around nationhood and historical context were also marked by racial identity.

In the 1930's when James began to gain intellectual traction in the Pan-African movement, the Négritude movement was also happening. The Négritude movement, which was largely cultivated by the Nardal Sisters who we'll discuss in the third and final instalment of *Turning Points in Pan-Africanism*, was an exploration of Black identity in the Afro-Francophone world. It looked to legitimize one's citizenship in the diasporic context they were in, while still acknowledging their African heritage--mirroring James' ideas on the relationship between Pan-Africanism, nationhood, and historical context.

At first glance, this centering of Black identity within Pan-Africanism seems to go against the deracialisation of the Marxist revolution that James advocates. However, James embraced Négritude and the role that race would need to play in the unification needed for liberation, writing that 'Negritude is what one race brings to the common rendez-vous where all will strive for the new world of the poet's [Aime Césaire] vision.' (Black Jacobins)

In contemplating Negritude and its relationship to Pan-Africanism, James writes that when famous Négritude poets like Aime Césaire center their intellectual work in Paris, there is 'nothing national to be aware of' as it pertains to his original home in the Caribbean. Frantz Fanon, who was also from Martinique and heavily influenced by Césaire, wrote that

*'The settler makes history and is conscious of making it. And because he constantly refers to the history of his mother country, he clearly indicates that he himself is the extension of that mother country. Thus, the history which he writes is not the history of the country which he plunders but the history of his own nation in regard to all that she skims off, all that she violates and starves.'*

In other words, an imperialist country does not look to create feelings of nationhood within their colonies, they seek only to enrich their own history, culture, and patriotism. This is why James' rereading of the Haitian Revolution was so significant. Toussaint L'Ouverture was a catalyst for the first feelings of nationhood based on race in the Black world after being forcibly migrated, which was opposed to the interests of imperialist nations who made numerous failed attempts to re-capture Haiti. L'Ouverture and his contemporaries led Haiti in its break with serving the history of France, instead creating a completely new national history that contributed to the history of the Black world.

As for Césaire, it is only upon his return back to Martinique and the reorientation of his intellectual work from Paris toward the Martinican people that he discovers that, as James writes, 'salvation for [the Caribbean] lies in Africa, the original home and ancestry of the Caribbean people.' He began to disengage from the European experience and work within the historical context of Africa and the diaspora. It was during his return to Martinique that Césaire wrote his seminal poem, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, which is a poem about Africa by proxy of Martinique

*And these tadpoles hatched in me by my prodigious ancestry!  
Those who invented neither powder nor compass  
those who could harness neither steam nor electricity  
those who explored neither the seas nor the sky  
but who know in its most minute corners the land of suffering,  
those who have known voyages only through uprootings  
those who have been lulled to sleep by so much kneeling  
those whom they domesticated and Christianized  
those whom they inoculated with degeneracy  
tom-toms of empty hands  
inane tom-toms of resounding sores  
burlesque tom-toms of tabetic treason*

*Tepid dawn of ancestral heat and fears  
overboard with alien riches  
overboard with my genuine falsehoods*

*But what strange pride suddenly illuminates me!...*

*My negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the clamor of the day  
my negritude is not a leukoma of dead liquid over the earth's dead eye  
my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral  
it takes root in the red flesh of the soil  
it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky  
it breaks through opaque prostration with its upright patience.*

*Hoorah, for those who never invented anything  
for those who never explored anything  
for those who never conquered anything  
but yield, captivated, to the essence of things  
ignorant of surfaces but captivated by the motion of all things  
indifferent to conquering, but playing the game of the world*

James' belief that Caribbean identity lay through Africa, as illustrated by Césaire is a profound argument, if we briefly recall the once strenuous relationship between Africa and the Caribbean. Until WWI, the Caribbean people were misled in their belief of their supremacy over African people. When Black people all over the world were called to fight in or accommodate the armies of their colonizers during WWI, it became evident that discrimination against Black people was all encompassing and undifferentiating.

James writes that this false supremacy 'confined Black [people] to a very narrow strip of social territory.' This narrow strip of social territory lay between the hegemony of the white-western experience and an undesirable African identity. 'The first step to freedom,' James continues, 'was to go abroad. Before they could begin to see themselves as a free and independent people, they had to clear from minds the stigma that anything African was inherently inferior and degraded. The road to [Caribbean] national identity lay through Africa.' This argument was crucial to Pan-African thought. For many, their first introduction to Pan-Africanism is the political movement on the continent; but without

the work of those in the Diaspora like James, the ideological orientation that drove Pan-Africanism, which lies at the intersection of identity and nationhood, would not exist. For if in the African diaspora, our concept of nationhood is only perceived through Paris or England, an ocean's length away and hostile to our 'African Personality' then that is no nationhood at all. It is only through the connection to Africa, a realization of our Blackness that we can foster feelings of nationhood, citizenship, and solidarity which are all elements of Pan-Africanism.

In other words, without the awakening of the diaspora, the evocation and demand for nationhood in connection with Africa, and the solidarity based on race in the Black world, Pan-Africanism would not exist. Thus, while James was cautious of racialized thinking, and ultimately thought that the dismantling of the global capitalist economic system was the key to liberating all people from oppression, his experience in the African diaspora, particularly in the Caribbean signified the importance of cultural and historical context.

## IV. Conclusion

CLR James is a unique figure in Black history. While the lives of many intellectual and political leaders of the 20th century were often cut short, James left a long legacy of intellectual finesse and political leadership all the way up to his death at the age of 88.

The Marxist influence of CLR James on Pan-Africanism is finally receiving recognition. But as we have just discussed, his Marxian analysis took on much more complex dimensions at the intersection of race and nationhood. James helped to move Pan-Africanism from an exploration of identity in the diaspora to a political program on the continent. As a result of his Trotskyist thought, James saw multi-national political and economic cooperation as the final aim of Pan-Africanism. As he witnessed the collective shortcomings of post-colonial Africa, he began to advocate for understanding individual historical contexts in the fight for total liberation, and arguably saw the fight for nationhood in the Black experience a necessary precursor to Pan-Africanism. While he decentered race as the motivator of Pan-Africanism in favor of a political and economic outlook, he did not reject the importance of race. More precisely, he saw race as a means to a Pan-African end, but not an end in itself. In other words, he saw race and identity as necessary unifiers in nationhood and ultimately Pan-Africanism.

Thank you so much everyone. Again, I'm Kai Mora the senior fellow here at the African History Project and this was the first instalment of Turning Points in Pan-Africanism where we spoke about the influences of CLR James on Pan-Africanism. The next lecture will be on the Nationalist influence of Marcus Garvey on Saturday 22 January 2022, hope to see you there.