Rethinking Race, Politics, and Poetics

C.L.R. James’ Critique of Modernity

Brett St Louis
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Brett St Louis
For my grandmother, Mary Lucas
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Introduction
Modern Epiphanies: C. L. R. James and the Reimagining of Modernity

“Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society,” wrote C. Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination*, “can be understood without understanding both.”¹ This simple yet incisive observation emphasises the need for social and historical understanding to survey the entire picture of society with an eye for the intricacies of its human brushstrokes. However, in terms of the larger project of understanding Western modernity, such a clarifying project is complicated by the voluntary, coerced, and forced mass migrations across time, continents, and contexts. As a result, the individual and the social cannot be simply accepted as given entities awaiting explanation; rather, the very question of what they are, or indeed, their very existence as coherent, knowable forms, becomes crucial.

This much has been become clear through the proliferation of critiques of the social and the human parading as global concepts and categories, while they are effectively no more than local ciphers for Europe and the European. Furthermore, these penetrative analyses have been at pains to point out the converse of this normative project—the ideational and physical subordination of those subhuman Others enduring an existence somewhat akin to beasts of burden in a pre-social state of nature. The task facing us, then, is easily identified if difficult to accomplish: modernity must be more profitably rethought as a diffuse and ever-expanding web of contact zones, exchanges, and relations that foreground modern human and social formation as produced by physical human traffic as well as a series of material and symbolic flows. And it is from this panoramic view that we might be able to move beyond the limited understanding of simple dichotomous human and social classifications of “them”/“us” and “here”/“there.” Instead, we may better comprehend the deep entanglements of modernity and account for the ways in which human existence and social formation is produced across time and space. In other words, these modern transnational migratory circuits, and their distended social, public, and private realms, necessitate an expanded critical imagination.

But this does not mean that one might simply jettison a notion of the individual and social for analytical and political purposes in favour of ethnographically charting the plurality of lives and histories that animate modern
human and social conditions. Indeed, as Chetan Bhatt usefully remarks, the opposition between the social as “the frolic of signification” and the political as reducible to “modes of agonistic subjectivisation” now customary within Euro-American intellectual debates heralds a dangerous moment. It signals, for Bhatt, the proliferation of sociological imaginations skilled in crafting cultural representations of the previously marginal, and the uncovering of the opaque sites of hegemonic power that are yet profoundly distanced from hard ethical and political labour.

And so we find ourselves caught between the Scylla of totalising holism and its reductive tendencies, and the Charybdis of a proliferate différance that refuses to remain still for long enough to be brought into the realm of explicit understanding. However, bearing the practical inertia that this dilemma invites in mind alongside Bhatt’s injunction, two key enterprises come into sharp relief: the objectives of analytical understanding and political commitment. The necessity of praxis suggested here provides the point at which the prospect of combining the expansive comparative and historical demands of understanding modernity and the disciplinary tenor of Mills’s project is actually imaginable and coherent. Alongside his typical sociological concern with the anomic impulses of modernity and its enervating human effects, Mills is not simply interested in vocational understanding but also with concrete action and progressive change. Of course, this ideal of socially engaged thought is by no means distinctively or singularly sociological; for example, it might also be perceived as theological inasmuch as clerics (arguably) perform a (quasi-) intellectual social function. Nevertheless, given its non-aligned core social and moral concerns, the sociological enterprise occupies a useful vantage point from which to understand the individual and social, while also summoning enough critical substance to evaluate whether they are what they ought to be and, if necessary, how change might be effected. And, perhaps more importantly, the dangers of restrained thought and political dogma are offset by a sociological tradition of auto-critique that Mills draws on in posing a key self-reflexive question of this imagination: What “quality of mind” can profitably assume such a monumental task?

The life and work of Cyril Lionel Robert James, 1901–1989, illustrates many of the pleasures, prerogatives, and pitfalls of understanding the wide-ranging formation of modernity and human and social life while (re)assembling a viable progressive politics. His biographical details are well documented and his life and work are generally understood within four stages: 1901–1932, Trinidad; 1932–1938, Britain; 1938–1953, the United States; and 1953–1989, when he travelled extensively between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean. While not sociological in the professional and vocational sense, James’s intellectual interest in the relation between social formation and human action, as well as his political commitment and fundamental concern with human freedom and sociability, encapsulates the expansive imaginative spirit that Mills advocates. In short,
the personal, social, and political odyssey of James’s life afforded him a rich understanding of the opportunities and pressures of modernity and its bittersweet promise of human emancipation, to which he gave unique form and expression.

Moving fluently across genres and disciplines, James wielded his pen as novelist, playwright, journalist, historian, and social, literary, and cultural critic; and contributed to philosophical, political, historiographical, and sociological debates. Beginning with the novel *Minty Alley* (1936) that ushered in an era of West Indian social realist fiction featuring “the folk” as central dramatic characters, James’s most notable publications include the masterful *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938), a pathbreaking account of the Haitian Revolution; *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin* (1948), a reading of Hegel’s (lesser) *Science of Logic* that sought to explain the centrality of the black struggle to the larger socialist movement as well as the limitations of democratic centralism and the vanguard party; *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (1953), a study of Melville and *Moby Dick* as an insightful critique of the emergence of modern totalitarian regimes and the neurotic and apathetic intellectual and managerial classes who, as impotent spectators to their own lives, were unable to resist this barbarism; and the incomparable quasi-autobiography *Beyond a Boundary* (1963) that seamlessly combines memoir and West Indian social history in a remarkable account of the life of cricket during the summit and fall of the British Empire and the emergent postcolonial future. In addition to these, James wrote and collaborated on many other important books and articles, and remained a committed and tireless public speaker late into his long life.

James’s political interventions actively engaged and informed struggles for radical social transformation in the Caribbean, Europe, the United States, and Africa. He espoused a range of objectives including radical collectivism, racial justice, and individual freedom. A founder member of the International African Friends of Abyssinia (IAFA) and its successor, the International African Service Bureau (IASB) in London during the inter-war years; an organiser of Southern sharecroppers and Midwestern automobile assembly plant workers under the auspices of the Workers’ Party (WP) and Socialist Workers’ Party (SWP) in the United States in the 1940s; and a key figure in Trinidadian nationalist politics, especially the drive for the West Indian Federation during the late 1950s, James’s political engagement was truly diasporic. However, for all this activity, the projects with which James identified and energetically supported were invariably ineffectual. Although the reasons for this are complex and manifold, a key factor is that James was, arguably, an activist-intellectual, equally committed to both sides of this vocational coin. Therefore, while many of his radical and black intellectual peers genuflected towards Moscow and its party apparatus, and the Western Marxist luminaries built an elaborate edifice of ideas, James attempted to live the practical ideal of the “engaged intellectual.” While
this might be taken as either to his credit or the falling between two stools, James appears to have had no choice in the matter: his intellectual formation and political commitment produced this expansive vocation for him where abstractions were only useful insofar as they could be reinserted into the concrete.5

If this portrayal deems James as a sober Marxist oriented towards ideas in the pursuit of political action, the humanistic romantic was never far from the surface. Indeed, James’s sensitivity towards human desire—what people imagined and wanted—is a notable facet of his intellectual approach that compelled him to pay attention to forms of popular culture often considered extraneous to serious intellectual debate and political activism. But his involvement in these disparate spheres was not simply the result of personal predilection. His polymath intellectualism was not a random eclecticism; his political engagement was not rigidly bound to functionalist ends; and his affinity with creative cultures was not an effete aestheticism. Despite various sectarian alignments, James remained a committed ecumenical Marxist, and his distinctive analytical method was as much informed by a formal appreciation of Marxism as were his life experience and allegiance to humanist principles. Therefore, it is as an especial Marxist and humanist that James displayed the qualities of imagination capable of understanding, in Mills’s words, “the intimate realities of ourselves” alongside “larger social realities.”6

This complex diversity makes James’s broad intellectual contribution and legacy difficult to situate. Thinking of his life and work as a series of distinct moments and interventions usefully brings its longevity and scope into focus and breaks it down into digestible portions: the early “literary James,” his “Pan-Africanist period,” the “culturalist years,” and so on. And as with any enduring intellectual figure fortunate enough to produce a substantial body of work, this compartmentalisation is an entirely legitimate enterprise; environments and ideas shift, and the notion of an unchanging, consistent oeuvre is difficult if not impossible to establish.

Another way to approach the conundrum of situating James is to consider him in the various incarnations that constitute his intellectual persona: as theoretician, critic, journalist, activist, historian. Clumsy as it might sound, each of these designations could be legitimately prefaced with the word “Marxist.” While far from establishing the defining feature of his intellectual career, the “Marxist” prefix suggests distinctive methodological approaches and fundamental political concerns that remain relatively continuous throughout James’s substantive shifts in subjects and ideas, genres and practices. But at the same time, the methodological, analytical, and organisational discontinuities within his Marxism pose a different question: what provides the stimulus for such changes? In other words, what acts back dialectically on James’s Marxism and forces him, for example, to reconsider the status of racial oppression within broader class struggles or to develop a critique of the vanguard party?
This issue is crucial because it highlights a delicate balance posed within the challenge of the sociological imagination refracted through James’s Marxism. To adapt Mills, James suggests that neither the intimacies of human life nor the historical laws of social development can be understood in isolation; material forces and human vitality are complimentary productive forces. Although such claims to a concern with qualitative human existence are implicit within Marxist analysis, as long as they do not lapse into utopian sentimentality or romantic idealism, James’s assertion has a different feel about it. His concern with moral life and unabashed delight in human creativity, imaginative expression, and emotional fulfilment is far removed from the quotidian life of Marxist preoccupation. With this in mind it is my contention that James’s life and work bear the hallmark of another prefix: that of “humanist.” The dialectical relationship between his humanism and his Marxism shapes the rich contours of his social thought, and informs my understanding of James as a humanist Marxist and provides the analytical foundation of this book.

This dialectic between Marxism and humanism is immensely important to understanding James’s distinctiveness. The preoccupation with immiseration at the foundation of Marxist critique fundamentally relates to the human experience of economic exploitation and its inhumane psychic and social effects, and is (tacitly) dependent on a moral justification. This means that exploitation and alienation are not simply objectively noteworthy as incidental consequences of the capitalist mode and relations of production. Instead, the critique of capital is a subjective evaluation of the contravention of an absolute moral value that accepts exploitation and alienation as wrong without the validating authority of sacred Truths.

Even though Marxism is antipathetic to religiosity, the notion that it is also “the god that failed” testifies to the deified status of its secular morality: for example, Erich Fromm reads Marx as an articulation of a Messianic atheism aiming towards human (social) salvation, and similarly, Leszek Kowalowski recognises what might be understood as an eschatology within Marxism as trusting “the final judgment of history.” On the other hand, it is perhaps unsurprising that much literature presents humanism as a form of secular spiritualism-cum-value system that offers a moral guide or insight into individual and social life. Such synergy between Marxism and humanism is not lost on James: John Bracey recalls an occasion when James “cut short a discussion of Marxist humanism by saying that the phrase was redundant. To be a humanist in the twentieth century was to be a Marxist.”

But this is not to place James among the “Marxist humanists” such as Theodor Adorno and Jean-Paul Sartre, dually characterised as pessimistic critical thinkers, from the pantheon of Western Marxism, or Eastern European Soviet dissenters who positively identified with the ideal of a communist society or later New Left figures. Indeed, as his first biographer Paul Buhle argues, James’s optimism distinguishes him from the Western Marxists who had “defeat” etched on their foreheads. Furthermore, despite the critique
of capitalism as the undermining of the modern promise of universal human progress, the Euro-American arena provided the human subject and social theatre for Marxist humanism: for example, in a 1961 lecture, Erich Fromm bases the expansion of the category “modern man” to include Asians, Africans, and others from non-industrialised parts of the globe on the basis of their contact with and increasing resemblance to “Western man.”

Against this evolutionary history of the modern germinating in Europe, writing in 1969 in reference to the 1967 Tanzanian Arusha Declaration and Julius Nyerere’s African socialist Ujamma project, James restates the dialectic between Marxism and humanism with an important clarification that bears repeating at length:

It is sufficient to say that socialist thought has seen nothing like this since the death of Lenin in 1924, and its depth, range and the repercussions which flow from it, go far beyond the Africa which gave it birth. It can fertilize and reawaken the mortuary that is socialist theory and practice in the advanced countries. “Marxism is a humanism” is the exact reverse of the truth. The African builders of a humanist society show that today all humanism finds itself in close harmony with the original conceptions and aims of Marxism.

This statement crucially asserts the indivisibility of humanism and Marxism and reverses Fromm’s Eurocentric diagnosis of the modern human and social environment for an anticipated humanist renaissance on the basis of objective African political and social conditions instead of an inverted ethnocentrism. But it also offers an even more astounding implication: As a secular morality, the principles of humanism are, for James, distinctively and irrevocably modern. The modern project to dissolve divine providence and realise the non-theistic possibility of human freedom and social equality is a yet-to-be-made radical spirit rather than an already existing essence or latent capacity to be found. As such it is not a question of whether or not the modernist project can be rescued, but rather that it must be reimagined. For James the necessary framework for such an undertaking is both Marxist and humanist, and must entertain a more expansive vision of modernity and its unfulfilled promise that is acutely aware of its wide-ranging formation and the vital contributions offered beyond the discrete borders of its heretofore principal European theatre. Thus two startling insights are established here: the indivisibility of humanist and Marxist principles, and a strident faith in the yet-to-be-realised promise and opportunities of modernity.

Inhabiting the twentieth century and yet, at his admission, formed in the nineteenth, James straddles the high moment of modernity and its contradictions. The political promise of democracy and human freedom compromised by colonial and totalitarian domination; the immense productive power of industrial and technological advancement increasingly reserved for the wealthy few; and the pernicious myths of racial inferiority that falsified
evidence of a collective human condition, were all apparent to James. And yet, unlike Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s critique of brutality and inequity as logical corollaries of the core impulses to dominate and master within modern rationality, James retained faith in reason and progress as viable and worthy principles. For James, the deployment of progress as an instrument of cruelty and liberation and the link between enlightenment and domination that Adorno and Horkheimer saw as dialectical were material expressions of competition for resources and concomitant ideological effects. Although there are various possible explanations for this difference, including his preference for explanatory tools other than the psychoanalytical, James’s refusal to accept a necessary link between the ideals of democracy and progress and their brutal degradation reflects existential and political instead of philosophical precepts. While the Western Marxists concentrated on modernity in terms of the Euro-American arena, James occupied a different personal and intellectual position that recognised the instrumental deterioration of reason into terror, evident within the Holocaust as previously practised, albeit in different form, during the Atlantic slave trade and formation of plantation societies. His commitment to reason and progress is, therefore, a political gesture that enables him to situate resistance: the application of reason enables the black Jacobins to acquire a revolutionary consciousness, and their will to action was not vengeful ire but a progressive attempt to realise a better, more equitable existence.

In its various forms, James’s social and political thought is based on a diagnostic critique of modernity that remains sympathetic towards its humanistic and political principles of freedom and equality. Despite the manifest failings of modern Enlightenment, its egalitarian and progressive ideals remain compelling for James and stand out as indubitable, secular revelations for modern times; they are “modern epiphanies.” This framing of James’s understanding of and relationship to modernity can be usefully fleshed out through Norman Denzin’s discussion of experience and life history through the concept of epiphany as the location of a series of “interactional moments that leave marks on people’s lives,” which potentially generate individual “transformational experiences.” Invoking Mills, Denzin expands on this conceptualisation, pointing to epiphanies as incontrovertibly linking the individual and the social by highlighting the relationship between private troubles and public issues. Thus while epiphanies are individual experiences situated within moments of crisis instead of strictly constructive divine revelations, given the significance of individual crisis and profound revelation as formed within broader contextual moments they are at once biographical and structural. This is suggestive of two important issues: first, although epiphanies present themselves as individual crises, they are also symptomatic of larger social pressures; and second, they lead to varied consequences that are neither necessarily coherent nor satisfactorily resolved. In this sense, James’s individual compulsion towards freedom and equality that are also publicly and structurally manifest as modern
epiphanies initiates a profound analytical and political struggle instead of a triumphalist point of resolution.

The precise character of this struggle is transparent within the quintessence of James’s activist-intellectual engagements. In explaining the capacity of the epiphany to combine the personal/biographical with the social/historical, Denzin instructively draws on Sartre’s notion of each individual as a “universal singular” which recognises an individual as irreducibly so and demands that they are understood “as a single instance of more universal social experiences and social processes”—we are, therefore, distinct and yet similar. In terms of the interpretive interactionist model he advances, Denzin foregrounds the relationship between the subject’s life experiences and their historical moments as mutually productive, which is useful for understanding the method and concerns of James’s social and political thought as allied to his personal and intellectual development. In other words, there are simple questions to be asked: How did James arrive at his epiphanies as individual crises? And how are these individual experiences translated into a meaningful and useful method for social and historical analysis? A consideration of the biographical is unavoidable here. The world that James was born into and inhabited presented freedom and equality to him as personal and social paradoxes at almost every turn. And as if the blatant iniquities of crown colony government were not enough, the intellectual personality James developed through its pedagogical principles placed him in that dilemmatic interstitial position occupied by the black Jacobins who were simultaneously included and excluded from modernity.

There is another important point of note: James’s modern epiphanies are developed through a principled commitment to Marxism and humanism and subject to a thematic core. As a result, this book is structurally and analytically informed by the triangulation of race, politics, and poetics that I understand as central themes within the Jamesian oeuvre. This is, of course, rather schematic, as James engages more than these three subjects throughout his work. However, it is not my contention that these themes are all with which he engages in a narrow sense. My point is twofold: first, that as broad categories, race, politics, and poetics are recurrent throughout his work, not necessarily all three at once but more often than not any two work in articulation—*Beyond a Boundary* and *American Civilization*, for example, might be animated by all three, while James’s anticolonialist and Pan-Africanist writings might be seen as more concerned with race and politics more specifically; and second, these broad categories each incorporate many different, specific concerns—for example, in the wider sense, James’s historical and social analyses can be understood as political, as his literary and further humanistic concerns such as in *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* can be taken as poetic in the Aristotelian sense of a productive human culture for edifying and pleasurable purpose. The thematic triumvirate of race, politics, and poetics is a good substantive foil for James’s Marxist and humanist principles and approach; they provide a useful framework for
articulating his concern with the material conditions of social existence, as well as his conceptualisation of moral and emotional life as a holism instead of as discrete facets of the social and human condition.

If, as Primo Levi wrote with Jean Améry in mind, “To argue with a dead man is embarrassing and not very loyal,” then *Rethinking Race, Politics and Poetics* respectfully aims to be a disloyal embarrassment. There is a straightforward reason for this: James is, to my mind, one of the most innovative and significant Marxist intellectuals of the twentieth century but is seldom recognised as such which has had an understandable effect. In light of this oversight, many discussions of James have a restorative rationale and concentrate on asserting his intellectual and political importance as an iconic figure in black, anticolonial, and Third World liberationist struggles. However, this tendency has also incurred some of the regrettable consequences of hagiography. As a result, and inspired by Stuart Hall’s suggestion that James’s “work has never been critically and theoretically engaged as it should be,” this book takes Hall’s assertion that “major intellectual figures are not honoured by simply celebration [but] . . . by taking his or her ideas seriously and debating them, extending them, quarrelling with them, and making them live again” as a clarion call and point of departure. And although I aim to be sympathetic in this task, such a critical appraisal is unavoidable as this book’s intention of making James’s ideas “live again” presents assiduous critique as a necessary and desirable enterprise.

Of course the project of understanding the entirety of James’s corpus demands justification. Martin Glaberman, a longtime comrade of James, has notably remarked that “Everyone produces their own James. People have, over the years, taken from him what they found useful and imputed to him what they felt necessary.” Although, unlike Glaberman, I do not claim to have “lost the patent” to James that requires having to “share him with others,” I do appreciate the difficulty facing his interlocutors and comrades when confronted with the distanced observations and interpretations such as those offered in the pages below. Nonetheless, I offer two main justifications for this book’s ambition to engage with James *in toto*. First, as Michel Foucault suggests, the analysis of the author’s oeuvre requires the interpretative operation of (re)constructing it as a coherent unity out of a series of experiential, imaginative, and unconscious fragments that are also shaped by historical forces. While this might suggest the identification of James’s corpus or even a Jamesian perspective as inherently problematic, Foucault’s concern is that the unity and meaning of the oeuvre is neither given nor immediate but emerges from the interpretative operation of “transcribing” and “deciphering” what is both manifest and concealed within the text. This informs the hermeneutic approach in this book that attempts to engage with James’s work in its historical and textual specificity, as well as to interpret its meaning and evaluate its implications. Such an interpretative venture is further justified when one attempts to understand the entirety of James’s corpus and is confronted by the various inconsistencies, weaknesses, and