

CLR James on black politics

C L R James joined the Trotskyist movement in the mid-'30s after coming to Britain from his native Trinidad; later he moved to the US and took part in the discussions with Trotsky published in the pamphlet 'Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination' (Pathfinder Press). In this interview James also talks about his contact with James Connolly's daughter Nora, and his work in launching the first agitation for the independence of colonial Africa, in the 1930s, with George Padmore. After 1935, in line with Stalin's policy of a cross-class 'Popular Front against fascism', the Communist Parties had dropped the call for independence for the colonies of the 'democratic' imperialist powers such as Britain and France.



CLR James in the 1930s

I was in the Labour Party. I was a Labour Party man but I found myself to the left of the Labour Party in Nelson, militant as that was. I came to London and in a few months I was a Trotskyist.

I joined the Labour Party in London and there I met Trotskyists who were distributing a pamphlet. The Trotskyists decided to go into the ILP and I went with them.

I was active in Hampstead. I joined the Hampstead group in NW3 and we had meetings almost every evening. In the summer we held meetings along the side of the road. We put up something to stand on and we sold books and spoke. I used to go into Hyde Park and I was a speaker there.

In Ireland they had read about me and sent for me to come because I was speaking against the British Government.

I met Nora Connolly O'Brien. She came to London for the ILP. I had invited her. I remember that woman, because in those days the British Trotskyist revolutionaries were no more than left wing Labour.

So I went to meet her and invited her to come over here and speak and she did. Coming from the railway station we crossed the river by Parliament, and she said, "You should have done away with that years ago, it is easy from the river". So I said "Yes, we were revolutionaries, but bom-

bing the Houses of Parliament was useless." "You're talking of something that you know nothing about!" She instinctively saw the revolutionary possibilities. From this side of the river you could bomb the Houses of Parliament and get away with it.

I knew George Padmore in Trinidad. As boys we used to live in Arima and go and bathe in the river there. When we grew up, he was far more of a leftist than I was. I was a historian, while George had joined the labour movement in Trinidad before I did. Then he went to America and I lost him. Then I came to England and joined the labour movement, and became a Trotskyist.

Then the news came that George Padmore had been expelled from the United States and had come to England. Everyone was talking about "George Padmore" and there was a meeting and "George Padmore" was my old friend, my schoolboy friend from Trinidad! I hadn't the faintest idea that "George Padmore", whom I had written about spoken about and recommended to everyone was the same. That night when we left the meeting we went to eat and finally parted at four o'clock in the morning, speaking the whole time about the revolutionary movement.

Now he was a member of the Communist Party and had been a high official, he had lived in Moscow. I was a Trotskyist, but we remained good friends and when he left the Communist Party we joined together and formed the Black movement which I had started. When Padmore came in, he said that he was a Marxist, but what about the Colonial question? What about Africa? That movement became an African movement, a Marxist African movement. Padmore did that. He educated me and I carried it on.

After he died, people began to think that I had brought Marxism to the African movement. It wasn't so.

Did he ever speak to you about his had experiences with the Communist International

Padmore said when he was in Germany he had been sent to England. They wanted a black man in the Communist International in Moscow and as he was the right one so they sent him. He went to Moscow, he had nobody, but they made him into a big political leader. He married a Moscow girl and on Mayday when Stalin, Molotov and the others would be on the platform reviewing the revolutionaries, they would invite him, and he would be up there with them representing the Caribbean, where they had nobody.

When the Communist Party began to change their line they said that they could no longer be completely for the revolution in the Caribbean. In your country and in America the blacks had democracy, so we are not going to attack them. There are some democratic capitalists. He said, "I come from those countries, and they know me for years as the man who had denounced the 'democratic capitalists'. How do you expect me to go there and write and say that this is democratic capitalism?" They said to him, "Well George, sometimes you have to change the line". His answer was, "Well boys, this is one line I can't change". He broke with them and went to England and we joined together and reformed the Pan-African movement

Marcus Garvey's first wife and. I founded the journal International African Opinion.

I am being cautious here, because I haven't got documents. As I remember it, there was nobody concerned about the colonial movement in Western politics. Nevertheless something was happening. Mussolini had attacked Ethiopia and Mrs Garvey and I said that we were openly to oppose that.

We tried all ways [to get our journal into the colonial world]. We couldn't get it in normally, because many of those colonial governments, and those that came in afterwards, were quite hostile to us. Others if not hostile were sympathetic that James was writing books that brought in the colonial people, but were nevertheless unfriendly because the books were Marxist, Trotskyist. We had one or two people who worked on the waterfront. They gave the pamphlets to seamen and people in boats. In that way it went around.

I am very conscious that most of the African leaders of the independence movement, who were in Europe, orientated naturally towards the Marxist movement which said we are for freedom in the colonies. Later I was often invited to come and speak on the

Marxist movement in Africa.

It was in a very small way influenced by the Stalinists. Normally they would have dominated it. Those leaders who had worked in London hadn't become Trotskyists — but we had so educated them that Stalinism didn't do much to them.

Did you attempt to have conferences with them and try to get them to discuss together the idea of a United Africa, or anything like that?

I must say the idea of a United Africa was nonsense. That was quite obvious. It was not a practical proposition. East Africa was one way, West Africa another and Central a third way. On the coast there were different tongues, and away from the coast you had entirely different African villages and styles. So whilst in every resolution or at the end, you spoke of Africa united at every important part, you knew it wasn't being realistic. It was a general vision, and one that would become an ideal.

I once spoke, and it was very effective, and said that the unity of Africa was closer, theoretically speaking, than the unity of Europe for this reason, that the African states were not organically settled as was Britain, France, Germany. There were large tribal organisations but they didn't have the barriers between them that the European states had. But the policy shouldn't be put forward when people objected. But that was all. There were one or two fanatics who talked about it...

Is there any truth in the statement that Trotsky and James supported a black state in America?

NO! NO! NO! We discussed in some detail plans to help create and build an independent black organisation in the United States. That we did, but we were thinking of a political grouping that would advocate the cause of the blacks. But this was taken up by people to mean that we wanted to build a little black section of the United States — a black Mississippi!

There were people in the United States doing that who were claiming that a part of Mississippi should be a black state, but the Marxist movement had nothing to do with that — absolutely nothing! But our enemies, or one or two of them, took it up when we said, "an independent black organisation". I am sure that if you read the resolution you will see that it makes clear that it was a political organisation fighting for the position of rights in general and the black people in particular. That was misinterpreted to mean something else, but nobody took it seriously, although we had a lot of trouble with it.

CLR James was interviewed by Al Richardson on Sunday 8th June and 16th November 1986 in South London. Also present were Clarence C and Ms Ann Grimshaw. The full text of this interview is to be published separately by Socialist Platform.