

# NEWS

## C.L.R. JAMES (1901–1989)



C.L.R. James died on the 31st of May, 1989, at his home in Brixton. He was eighty-eight years old. Known to his family as 'Nello', Cyril Lionel Robert James became one of the most appreciable radical thinkers of the century, making a mark in numerous communities outside his own. He was a profoundly *international* figure. He lived and worked in several different countries, and influenced figures as diverse as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, E. P. Thompson, Leon Trotsky, George Padmore and Aimé Césaire. Circumstances conspired to make him an habitual émigré: his time in America was cut short by deportation; his former pupil, Eric Williams, prime minister of Trinidad, put him under house arrest; and he was never accorded the respect due to him by the British Left. The last few years of his life were relatively contented ones; he was cared for by Anna Grimshaw, who edited his late writings and, practically singlehandedly, negotiated the republication of his books which had been shamefully long out of print. At the time of his death he was enjoying a resurgence of interest in his work. Walter Benjamin, whom James admired enormously, once wrote, 'Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.' With James' passing, it will remain a concern to all of us to defend from the enemy his gift to us.

James has left an extraordinary body of work. The sheer breadth of his interests is quite remarkable: his insights into West Indian literature, his fiction about ghetto life in Trinidad, his *Notes on Dialectics*, his writings on Shakespeare and Melville, his work on Pan-Africanism, Trotsky, Paul Robeson, cricket, and the Ghanaian revolution. No synoptic account of the totality of James' work and thought can do justice to its constituent parts. Certainly more than any British Marxist this century, James embraced the interdisciplinary nature of Marx's theory, refusing to settle upon any single aspect of society or any specific scholarly concern. His tremendous thirst for knowledge complemented his acute sense of history. Ever alert to the distinctiveness of his colonial origins, James once portrayed himself as having 'come to maturity within a system that was the result of centuries of development in

another land ... transplanted as a hot-house flower is transplanted and [which] bore some strange fruit'.

His childhood in Tunapuna, Trinidad, was a rich one. He was encouraged to study Greek, Latin, French, and English literature (he said he had read *Vanity Fair* some twenty times between the ages of eight and fourteen). When, in 1932, at the age of thirty-one, he left for England, he was by his own estimate a seasoned middle-class intellectual. The story of James' first years in England is a noteworthy one. Learie Constantine, a fellow Trinidadian and a cricketing hero, paid for James' passage; the plan was for James to settle with Constantine and write his biography. Aside from the cricketer's family, he and Constantine were the only blacks in their tiny Lancashire town, nicknamed 'Little Moscow' for its tradition of working-class radicalism. Travelling with Constantine throughout the country, James emerged as a major public speaker and anti-colonial activist. In 1938 he boarded ship for the U.S.A. His last years in England had produced no less than five books: *World Revolution; A History of Negro Revolt; The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L' Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*; a play about Toussaint's life (with Robeson as the lead); and a translation of Boris Savvine's *Stalin*.

It seems likely that, for all his diverse activities during this period, the James of the 1930s will be remembered chiefly as a leader of the burgeoning Pan-Africanist movement, labouring in tandem with George Padmore to inject the issue of colonial liberation into mainstream British Marxism. This commitment brought forth the scintillating originality and immense passion of *The Black Jacobins*, his classic account of the first triumphant black struggle for decolonization: the late 18th-century revolt of San Domingan slaves against French, British, and Spanish efforts to perpetuate a people's thralldom in the world's most profitable colony.

James' American years, from 1938 until his internment as an undesirable alien on Ellis Island in 1952 and his deportation the following year, were as dramatic as any previous ones in his life. He was later to speculate on the influence he might have exercised in the '50s and '60s had he been allowed to remain in the States. Although he helped infuse the American Left with a sharper sense of the primacy of African-American and global anti-colonial resistance, chance might have offered him a more propitious phase of American history, one with a style of radical struggle he could have better stimulated and drawn upon. Nonetheless, at the start of the 1950s he worked on the manuscript of *The Struggle for Happiness: an Essay on American Civilisation*, an astonishingly ambitious mid-twentieth century response to de Tocqueville's classic study of early American life. He sought to understand the ways in which the desire for a qualitatively better form of life, embodied in the founding document as 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', continues to survive in the modern American society. The early sections of the manuscript include a reading of Melville's *Moby-Dick* as an allegory of class struggle and the industrial revolution; it typifies the startling insights made possible by James' tangential vision of

America and by the unpredictable spread of his intellectual passions. It was only at the very end of his life that James learned that *The Struggle for Happiness* would, nearly forty years after its completion, be published; it will almost certainly become James' most widely-read volume, providing a powerful introduction to that distinctively Jamesian reading of social, cultural and political issues which manages to appreciate their dialectical nature without ever ignoring the seriousness of their possible consequences.

James returned to Britain in the early '50s, and found the society had undergone some considerable changes: a crumbling empire, a new welfare state, and a nation slowly adjusting to a sudden inflow of Caribbean and Southeast Asian immigrants. Although he would become a cultural magus during the rise of the black British community, he took some time before he found his niche. Although ever respectful of working-class traditions of activism, he recognized how atrophied and anachronistic they would become if they failed to draw in the new energies of the black immigrant and feminist radicalism. James started to write less about the prospects for global revolution and widened his interest in culture as an insurrectionary force. His most striking work from this rich period is *Beyond a Boundary*, a delicate combination of autobiography, the aesthetics of cricket, class and race in the West Indies, and the political importance of popular culture. Its famous line – 'What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?' – could be adapted to reflect James' position on any particular subject; he abhorred the tendency amongst academics to become willing slaves of their 'specializations'. James remained a true philosopher, absolutely fascinated by all aspects of social and political life and the ways whereby they relate to each other.

In the last years of his life he lived in a small flat above the *Race Today* office in Railton Road, Brixton. One would never visit him without being struck by the sheer intellectual energy and critical alertness which belied his physical frailty. He was always the most charming, and challenging, of hosts, greeting one with a playfully intimidating flurry of inquiries concerning one's family background, education, interests and values. Within a single afternoon he could discuss a range of subjects that included Marxism and aesthetics, an encounter with Orson Welles, a conversation with Trotsky, the significance of Michael Jackson, American movie stars, Aeschylus, his love of Thackeray's prose, *Die Zauberflote*, *Moby-Dick*, and memories of a childhood in Trinidad. Sometimes pausing out of fatigue, frustrated at a body which could no longer match the liveliness of his mind, he would make one feel guilty for causing him to use up so much energy, but he remained an instinctive communicator, an inveterate teacher, forever eager to encourage and educate his audience. His thin, elegant hands would make graceful little gestures to complement the storyteller rhythms of his voice. His small room was full of books, all carefully notated, and whenever I brought him some new volume he would take it from me with an almost child-like excitement and start gazing at its pages; he read (to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche) 'slowly, profoundly, attentively, prudently, with inner thoughts, with the mental doors ajar, with delicate fingers and eyes'. He 'came alive' when he was free to enjoy, as he put it, 'the privilege' of reading and writing. T. W. Adorno, writing of his experiences as an émigré, observed:

For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live. In it he inevitably produces, as his family once did, refuse and lumber. But now he lacks a store-room, and it is hard in any case to part

from left-overs. So he pushes them along in front of him, in danger finally of filling his pages with them. The demand that one harden oneself against self-pity implies the technical necessity to counter any slackening of intellectual tension with the utmost alertness, and to eliminate anything that has begun to encrust the work or to drift along idly, which may at an earlier stage have served, as gossip, to generate the warm atmosphere conducive to growth, but is now left behind, flat and stale. In the end, the writer is not even allowed to live in his writing [*Minima Moralia*].

James never ceased to heed the warnings in Adorno's comment. Although he liked to make many disparaging remarks about 'those damned intellectuals', he was himself an intellectual one will always admire and never forget: sincere, compassionate, constructive, and, most memorably, with an indomitable capacity for *wonder*. He was one of the most distinctive figures of twentieth-century Marxist theory and practice. One will miss his enthusiasm, his wit, and his courage; as he liked to say as his birthday wish, 'May I continue to grow more dangerous by the year'.

Graham McCann



## A.J. AYER (1910–1989)

The death of A. J. Ayer on 27 June, at the age of 78, aroused a lot of media attention. As far as the general public was concerned, Ayer had personified British philosophy for forty years, exciting admiration for his overpowering intelligence, if not deep wisdom. He seemed confident that he could win any argument against all comers, without needing to pause for thought.

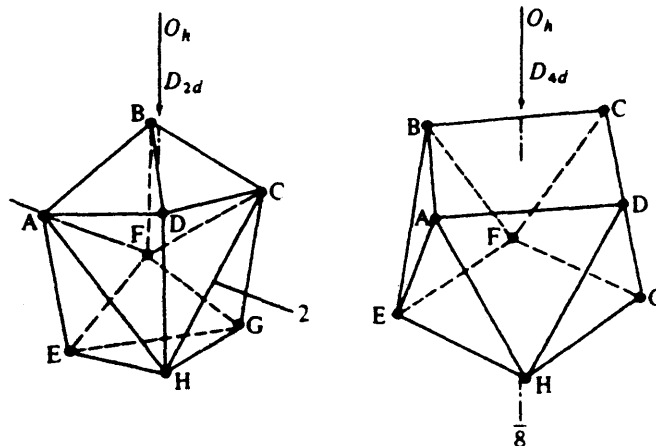
Like many other analytic philosophers, Ayer identified with the little boy in Hans Andersen's story about the emperor's clothes, asking the simple devastating question which others were too sophisticated to ask. For Ayer, this struggle against prejudice and mystification had decidedly progressive and leftist implications. He was well known as an articulate and telegenic broadcaster, and a campaigner for secularism, the Labour Party, and Homosexual Law Reform. In the 1950s the *Times Literary Supplement* warned its readers that his work had 'successfully carried the red flag into the citadel

of Oxford University'.

Ayer's radicalism, together with his enduring commitment to scientific philosophising in the manner of Russell, made the rest of the British philosophical establishment uneasy, and his philosophical work was widely regarded as obsolete by the 1950s. (His masterpiece, *Language, Truth and Logic* was published in 1936.) Still, he had 'the qualities of his defects', as one Oxford professor sniffed; and his 'talents' as a teacher and populariser were condescendingly admired, especially when he turned them against the Common Enemy: he could always be relied on to lampoon 'Continental Philosophy' as 'preposterous', 'unintelligible' and 'chiefly an exercise in misusing the verb "to be"'.

The obituary which appeared in the *Independent* was by Richard Wollheim, who succeeded Ayer as Professor at University College London. Wollheim mourned Ayer not only as a thinker and a friend, but also as a representative of an epoch 'when British life was still permeable to wide-ranging, free-floating argument' – a period which had come to an end, Wollheim said, in the late 1970s. This comment on the cultural effects of Thatcherism provoked Robert Jackson, Secretary of State for Higher Education, into the ungentlemanly act of denouncing not only the obituary and the obituarist, but also their generally respected subject. In a barely literate letter to the *Independent*, Jackson deplored the 'poverty and superficiality' of Ayer's thinking, and accused him of having 'enormously narrowed the range of philosophical inquiry'.

Both sides have a point. The Professor is right to say that



Ayer wrote readable, popular books devoted to serious philosophical argument. In fact his sales were matched only by Sartre and Colin Wilson (whom Ayer thought almost as bad as each other). Whatever one may think of their doctrines, Ayer's books represent an age in which professional philosophy held itself answerable, philosophically speaking, to a non-professional public. On the other hand, as the Minister sees, Ayer's dogmatic negativism, allied with his imperturbable Eton-and-Oxford snobbishness, contributed largely to the destruction of this desirable cultural habitat. We shall not see his like again.

Jonathan Rée

## IMAGES OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

A fascinating and disturbing exhibition was on show at the British Museum this summer ('The Shadow of the Guillotine: Britain and the French Revolution', until 10 September). The exhibition was one of the main British bicentenary events. As the title suggests, however, it was not the usual celebration. Certainly, it differed completely from the big bicentenary exhibition in Paris ('The French Revolution and Europe: 1789–99', Grand Palais, until 26 July). There, the focus was on the Revolution's positive achievements. In London the emphasis was almost entirely negative. The French are reported to be angry about this; but it is we who should be upset. For the exhibition forces us to face up to some of the uglier aspects of our attitudes to France and Europe.

The subject of the London exhibition was the British response to the French Revolution. This was portrayed through a great variety of objects: prints and cartoons, paintings, sculptures, medals, pottery, posters, and textiles. Initially most people in Britain were sympathetic to the events in France. Radicals were predictably enthusiastic; but even moderate and conservative opinion was well disposed. The Revolution was regarded as a belated re-enactment of the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688.

However, it soon became clear that something far more 'dangerous' was afoot. With the enormous success of Tom Paine's revolutionary pamphlet, *The Rights of Man* (1791–92), there was fear of a home-grown revolution. Alarm increased as events in France gathered momentum. In 1792, the monarchy was abolished and a Republic declared. In England, a concerted, government-supported propaganda campaign was organized. With the outbreak of the war with France in 1793, the full force of this campaign was turned

against radicals and revolutionary sympathizers. The mood was violent and ugly. When Joseph Priestley and some friends held a dinner to mark the anniversary of the Revolution, his house was burned down by a 'Church and King' mob. Prints, and even a plate and a jug, were produced to celebrate the event.

The ideas of the campaign were crude and simple. There is no difference between reform and revolution. Any challenge to authority leads inevitably to chaos and mob rule. Above all, the very idea of revolution is foreign; and English radicals are mere puppets, controlled and manipulated from France. The violence and hatred of the assault on the Revolution and its British sympathizers is startling. France is depicted as a place of terror, mayhem and madness. Despite the title of the exhibition, however, the guillotine is not a predominant motif (until much later at least). Perhaps this is because visually it is too geometrical, too clinical, to serve such crude propaganda, which requires an altogether lower and more barbaric kind of imagery.

Gillray's work stands out. He is revealed as an artist of remarkable and savage power. He exploits national stereotypes and chauvinistic prejudices quite brilliantly to produce a stream of vitriolic, grotesque and hate-filled caricatures. He portrays the Revolution as a time of senseless brutality and madness, destruction and chaos. The revolutionaries are shown quite literally devouring their own children.

Many of the pictures, by Gillray, Rowlandson and others, are familiar; but seeing them all together heightens their impact. One is reminded of the vilest of Nazi anti-semitic caricatures. The only thing that ultimately saves much of Gillray's work from being mere propaganda is the all-perva-