

Andrew Smith. (2010). *C.L.R. James and the Study of Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Pages 174.

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The Trinidadian intellectual C.L.R. James (1901-1989) was one of the twentieth century's most prolific writers on leftist political struggle, colonialism and black history, perhaps best known for his history of the Haitian revolution of 1791-1804, *The Black Jacobins* (1938). In this short and accessible book, Andrew Smith, lecturer in Sociology, Anthropology and Applied Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow, offers an interpretation of James' writings about issues of culture, including high literature, popular film and sport – especially cricket, of which James' *Beyond a Boundary* (1963) is widely considered the greatest literary account.

The central theme that Smith finds in James is that culture is never separate from political history. For Smith, James was one of the first intellectuals to recognise the importance of popular culture as a component of larger social and political conditions and to interpret it in that context. In this he points the way forward to the early formulations of Cultural Studies, in which culture is no longer understood as only art and literature but as “a whole way of life” (Williams, 1961: 122). Smith highlights James' ability to think contextually across conventional cultural and national boundaries, but emphasises that he consistently grounded this thinking in the local determinants of people's lives. He also positions James as an early proponent of the view that mass culture is open to appropriation by its audience, rather than something cynically force-fed to compliant consumers. And he emphasises that much of this has to do with James' refusal to separate the personal experiences of one's life from the political.

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Although born into the Trinidadian middle class, which would often send its gifted students overseas to be educated, James remained in Trinidad for the first thirty years of his life before emigrating to Britain, then leading a peripatetic life including time spent in America, Mexico, Ghana and returns to Trinidad and London. Smith suggests that this different trajectory was important in preventing James from internalising a sense of himself as racially inferior, as other members of the Caribbean diaspora often did. James' political convictions were Marxist but anti-Stalinist. Smith suggests that an early identification with Trotskyism floundered in the 1940s on, amongst other things, its inattentiveness to questions of mass culture, and he detects a strain of something akin to anarchism in James' work around 1950 as he became disillusioned with the broader idea of political parties as the vanguard of social change.

At that time James' interest in culture was unconventional and a target of much criticism. Others active on the political left accused James of formalism in his interest in culture, seeing it as a decadence which offered nothing to the real business of politics. Interestingly, Smith shows that James saw a historical contradiction in this criticism: the tendency to separate art and politics, mental and manual labour, was a false one, imposed on society by the structuring processes of capitalism. By contrast, James refused this separation. He believed in culture as both a matter of personal experience and an instrument with which to do politics: were it not meaningful to individuals in itself, he realised, it would have no such instrumental value. His particular insight was to recognise that the close analysis of the *form* of a game such as cricket could reveal the politics inherent in it. This could then indicate the potential of the game to become a space in which the expression of political possibilities could take place. Moreover, in *Beyond a Boundary* he attempts to draw a specific historical connection between the rising public desire to participate in organised sports and the emergence of popular democracy.

Claims of such magnitude as these need to be considered carefully. In a book such as Smith's, over-reading is a significant danger: either an over-reading of James' claims for culture or a celebrating of James' own over-readings. The discussion here of the style of English cricket in the 1930s – dull, defensive batting combined with hostile quick bowling, the combination of which James is said to have seen as evidence of the fundamental ugliness of rationalist Western modernity in both its Stalinist and Fordist versions – may be an instance of both. Similarly when Smith claims that the playing style of Sir Garfield

Sobers “encompassed, for James, an entire history of political struggle and popular creativity in the Caribbean” (44) and tries to apply a comparable metaphor of his own to Brian Lara. Such rhetorical flights do not always sit comfortably alongside the observations of concrete practice from which they spring.

As these examples suggest, Smith’s book concerns itself with James’ writing about cricket rather more than his thoughts on literature, film and music. This is a shame as the few instances provided suggest James to have been a perceptive observer of the cinema and its audience (the comparison of his approach to film with that of Theodor Adorno reflects poorly upon Adorno). And it would have been nice to include more discussion of James’ reading of Trinidad’s most famous cultural form, calypso.

In his declared eagerness to provide an accessible text not weighed down by academic theory and jargon, Smith declines to spend much time comparing James to other sociological accounts of cultural practice. This runs somewhat contrary to his stated desire to emulate James’ efforts towards the comprehensive contextualisation of cultural circulations. And Smith’s incessant desire to justify the study of culture as ‘useful’ seems unnecessary. This, and occasional digs at Cultural Studies as jargon-laden postmodernist ‘smoke and mirrors’, suggests he is writing from and for a tradition of sociology which retains a lingering suspicion of the significance of popular culture. This is unfortunate as its defensive tone prevents the book from being a significant intervention into Cultural Studies or the sociology of culture. Instead it is best taken as an effort to re-align the study of James himself. To this end the book is only partially convincing in its main revisionist ambition, an attempt to reverse the common perception that James’ cultural writings are largely a product of his later years after a softening in his political engagement.

Readers of Smith’s book will certainly come away with a renewed understanding that many of James’ ideas about culture were ahead of their time. But the ways in which they have influenced and in some cases been left behind by more recent cultural theory are under-elaborated here. From Smith’s readings, and despite James’ caveat that the uses of culture are both opened up *and limited* by social and historical contexts, James comes across as a little too optimistic about the extent to which political struggle and agency are inherent in the consumption of and participation in cultural activity. This weakness also afflicts Cultural Studies and in this sense James, as Smith presents him, does not really

provide an alternative model for the study of contemporary culture. As an account of part of the pre-history of academic Cultural Studies, *C.L.R. James and the Study of Culture* is of considerable interest. But the *uses* of studying culture in a Jamesian way – to which Smith devotes the whole of his final chapter – are perhaps less certain than the book suggests.

References

Williams, R. (1961). *The Long Revolution*, London: Chatto & Windus.