THINKING AND ACTING DIALECTICALLY: C.L.R. JAMES, THE AMERICAN YEARS

by GRACE LEE BOGGS

This is the first university-sponsored C.L.R. James conference at which I have been asked to speak. I dare say it's also the last because my approach to James is quite different from that of the professional intellectuals who organize and attend these conferences. The C.L.R. with whom I worked for two decades was, first and foremost, a builder of a revolutionary political organization. For him, being part of such an organization was the best way for the revolutionary to know reality and to become an integral part of the process of changing it.

I first met C.L.R. in 1941-1942 in Chicago where I had gone to live after completing my graduate studies. I had just discovered the power of the independent black struggle through my participation in the March on Washington Movement, which forced F.D.R. to issue Executive Order 8802 banning discrimination in defense plant hiring. C.L.R. had just returned from working with sharecroppers in Southeast Missouri and was bubbling over with that experience and with the stories he was hearing from participants in the sitdown strikes which had led to the formation of the C.I.O. For C.L.R.

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the labor movement of the 1930s and 1940s was Marx's magnificient passage in *Capital* come alive:

Along with the constantly diminishing number of the magnates of capital who usurp and monopolize all advantages of this process of transformation, grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation; but with this too grows the revolt of the working class, a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself.

Like other radicals of the period C.L.R. was also very concerned with the nature of the Soviet Union or what we called "the Russian Question." But because the organization of the CIO had led him to a careful reading of Marx's *Capital*, he was approaching the Russian question not in terms of property relations or the nationalization of industry but from the standpoint of the workers in the process of production. As a result, he was coming to the conclusion that the Soviet Union was a state-capitalist society. When he discovered that I could read German and had studied Hegel, we spent hours reading passages of *Capital* in German side-by-side with passages from Hegel's *Science of Logic*.

That initial experience with C.L.R. has shaped my movement activities for the last fifty years. That today I am still an activist is due largely to what I learned from him about the need to combine practical struggles with continuing exploration of the most profound philosophical questions, because reality is constantly changing and intellectuals especially run the risk of becoming trapped in the fixed concepts of what Hegel called the "Understanding." As a result, I have always been challenged rather than discouraged by emerging new contradictions.

C.L.R. didn't only read Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky. He surrounded himself with books of all kinds—history, literature, art, novels—perusing several simultaneously. They were all over his bed and on the floor next to his bed. But what he liked even better than reading was sitting down with members of the organization (usually at 629 Hudson St.,
the home of Freddy and Lyman Paine) and listening to them talk about their lives and their work. These rank-and-file workers, women, blacks, and young people inside the organization were his transmission belt to reality. They were Shakespeare’s groundlings, the Levellers and Diggers of the English Revolution, the *sans culottes* of the French Revolution, and the rank-and-file workers and peasants of the Russian Revolution whom Lenin called “the third layer.” The C.L.R. I worked with would turn over in his grave if he knew that a conference on his American years was being held without their up-front participation.

The Johnson-Forest Tendency (as we called our organization) was very small—never more than seventy-five and usually fewer. But we were a representative sample of the new human forces that were emerging in the United States during the Second World War, an intergenerational multi-cultural mix of African Americans and Euro-Americans, Asians and Hispanics, workers and intellectuals. Most of us worked in the plant which during the war was like a vast school where people from all different ethnic and social backgrounds exchanged stories of where they had come from and how they viewed their lives. It was like a “Great Awakening,” a rediscovery by Americans of what united them in their diversity. Working conditions were also quite relaxed because defense contracts with the government were cost-plus. For example, in the plant where I worked we held Negro History sessions during our coffee breaks, sauntering leisurely back to our jobs when the bell rang. During the deer hunting season Detroit workers would bring their kill into the plant to roast for lunch. As the war was coming to an end there was a lot of speculation about the future. Workers were very conscious that it had taken the war to get us out of the Great Depression. So they worried about what would happen to jobs after the war. Conscious also that cost-plus was the reason why management was so lax, they wondered how production would be organized after the war.

It was out of this great consciousness-raising experience shared by millions of Americans, along with the discovery by
Raya Dunayevskaya of Marx’s *1844 Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts*, that *The American Worker* pamphlet was written.

C.L.R. plied everyone he met with questions. But it was the members of the organization whom he depended on for continuing accounts of changes and developments in the life of the American people. “One of his great strengths,” as Freddy Paine points out in a recent letter, “was his ability to listen and internalize ideas from the rank and file.” From us he learned how a rich diversity of Americans were thinking and feeling; and in turn, because of his familiarity with European culture and the independence movements in Africa and the West Indies, he was able to satisfy our hunger for an enlarged view of the one world which was emerging during the Second World War.

According to their interests and backgrounds individual members of the group made specific contributions. Raya Dunayevskaya, aka Freddie Forest, had arrived independently at the state-capitalist analysis and remained the confident exposition on what was taking place in the Soviet Union. Lyman Paine, a descendant of one on the signers of the *Declaration of Independence*, represented a significant strand in the American Revolution. Freddy Paine shared her experiences as a labor organizer and Unemployed Leagues activist in the thirties and also introduced C.L.R. to American jazz. Paul Romano, Johnny Zupan, Marty Glaberman kept us up-to-date on developments in the auto plants. James Boggs and Si Owens (aka Charles Denby/Matthew Ward) were especially helpful because they were among the growing number of black workers from the South who had been radicalized by their experiences in the plant and in the Detroit black community. Constance Webb used her literary skills to write up Si Owens’ life story in *Indignant Heart*. From Selma Weinstein (later Selma James) and Filomena Daddario we got a sense of how working women were beginning to see a woman’s place as anywhere they wanted to be.

Inside the Workers Party and the Socialist Workers Party the Johnson-Forest Tendency was what we might today call a
"collective." We weren’t trying to build a party to lead the workers. As we put it in *Education, Agitation, and Propaganda*, "Groups of Virginia miners, West Coast sailors, Southern sharecroppers, Pittsburgh steel workers, all sorts of ‘left’ formations” will “in time coalesce and hammer out a unified organization . . . .They will bring their qualities.” Our special contribution will be a “method of thought and a conception of social development which makes their own lives and efforts intelligible to them in national and international terms.”

In any radical gathering members of our Tendency stood out because of the seriousness with which we combined practical and disciplined activity in real struggles with philosophical exploration. Unlike most radicals we believed that in politics morals mattered. As we said in the section on C.L.R. in our “Conversations in Maine:”

Among us the habit of the investigation of the philosophy that lay behind past history, present movements, etc. had been established. We were extremely conscious that without a notion of philosophical and historical basis of what you are doing, you don’t understand anything. Some of us were philosophically trained but the workers among us had also developed this habit. In the other tendencies this was not true.

What also distinguished our group was the continuing challenge to intellectuals to listen to the rank and file, empowering rather than holding forth and dominating them. In the fall of 1952, while he was still on Ellis Island, C.L.R. spearheaded the creation of the “Third Layer School,” where rank-and-file workers, women, and youth did the talking and intellectuals did the listening. It was at the Third Layer School that I met James Boggs, whom I would later marry.

C.L.R. knew and said on many occasions that the organization was the source of his political creativity. After he had to leave the country, he tried to maintain the organization and his leadership of it through a flood of letters and by bringing various members of the group to London to work with him for extended periods. Filomena Daddario and I
spent the Spring of 1954 in London. Selma came the next year. In 1956 Lyman visited for several months. Jimmy and I were there in 1957. In 1960 we spent five weeks with him in Trinidad. But letters from London and extended individual stays in London could not provide the ongoing dialogue with Americans engaged in real struggles which had made the 1940s and early 1950s such a productive period in C.L.R.'s life.

During those years C.L.R. had been quasi-underground, known to a very limited circle because he wrote under various pseudonyms and only for the newspapers and magazines of the party. After he left the United States he was much freer physically and intellectually, speaking and writing brilliantly under his own name on a wide range of topics for the mainstream press and mainstream organizations. He could and did travel all over Europe, fly to Africa and the West Indies, even return to the United States after the rebellions to teach in Washington, D.C. and lecture at universities all over the country. But he was never able to recreate the organization of the forties and fifties which had provided him with a method of knowing reality and a way to become a part of the process of changing it. As a result, he began to become increasingly self-centered and arbitrary, convinced that he could continue to lead the organization from abroad, so full of himself that he began to conflate his own personal history with the history of humanity.

Meanwhile, tremendous changes were taking place in the United States. In the middle and late 1950s management in the auto industry began introducing the hi-tech which would eventually lead to today's situation where the working class, instead of always increasing in numbers, is being decimated. Instead of labor being liberated from capital, capital is being liberated from labor. In the face of this metamorphosis, which some economists call the "dissac- cumulation of capital," the labor movement which had had such an impact on C.L.R.'s thinking was turning out to be a paper tiger.
At the same time the black movement was gaining momentum. But white workers in the plant, instead of being galvanized into revolutionary action by the independent black struggle, as we had anticipated in our resolution on what was then called "The Negro Question," were either passive or downright hostile.

By the early 1960s, it had become obvious to some of us in the organization that in order to participate in real struggles, we needed a serious re-evaluation of the political positions which we had developed in an earlier period.

In 1961, James Boggs, who had been working on the motor line at the Chrysler-Jefferson plant for more than twenty years, was the chair of Correspondence, the organization we had formed in 1951 after leaving the Socialist Workers Party. In this capacity he was responsible for drafting the annual evaluation which we called "The State of the Nation: State of the Organization." Analyzing the changes taking place in production and in the country, the powerlessness of the unions and the growing militancy of African Americans, the document concluded that the next eruption in the United States was going to come not from the workers in the plant but from the "outsiders" especially blacks. (In 1963 this document was published, with minor changes, by Monthly Review Press as The American Revolution: Pages From a Negro Workers Notebook. Copies are available from the Monthly Review office for $2.95, plus $2.00 postage and handling.)

As usual we sent the document to C.L.R. in London for his comments. His immediate response was to denounce the document, saying that what the organization needed was education in Marxism and proposing that we publish articles by him on Marxism in Correspondence. Boggs' response was that what the organization needed was "not a reaffirmation or education in Marxism but a serious study of the development of American capitalism, the most advanced capitalism in the world." Towards that end he submitted a resolution that C.L.R.'s articles on Marxism and his views be "discussed inside
the organization along with other documents before the organization."

To our utter amazement (in retrospect we should have paid more attention to the warning signs) C.L.R.'s reply to Boggs' proposal was an ultimatum. "From henceforth," he wrote back on January 15, 1962, "I break all relations, political and personal, with all who subscribe to this resolution."

After the break I saw C.L.R. only a few times and we had very little to say to one another. In 1976 he came to the party in Los Angeles which we held in honor of his and Lyman Paine's seventy-fifth birthdays. In 1986, when I went to London to speak at the weeklong festivities in his honor, I visited him a couple of times. By then the de-industrialization in Detroit and the ensuing epidemic of violence were being discussed all over the world. But C.L.R. never asked me about the situation in Detroit or what I was doing politically. Like many radicals of that period he was convinced that if you broke with him it was because you were looking for a way out of the movement. A couple of years before his death he wrote me a brief letter asking me to come to London to work with him on his autobiography. Particularly because I am a woman, it never occurred to him that I might have a political life of my own which I was not about to abandon to work on his.

Nevertheless, I shall always be grateful for what I learned during the years we worked together. What has remained in my heart and mind are not the political positions we took which were in response to the realities of the time, not the differences which developed after he had to leave the country, but a method of thinking and acting. What I internalized during those years was the importance of always keeping one's ear to the ground to hear the new questions that are being asked at the grass roots; always combining real struggles with philosophical exploration; always struggling to think dialectically. In other words, always being on the alert for the changes taking place in reality that force us to break loose from the fixed concepts that have come out of earlier struggles; always recognizing that everything and everyone contains contradic-
tions so that what was progressive at one stage can become reactionary at another.

Pursuing this method of thinking and acting, it is obvious that the questions we are being challenged to answer today, as we approach the twenty-first century, are very different from those which people were asking in the 1940s and 1950s and even the 1960s and 1970s. Today people all over the United States are asking, “What is going to happen to our young people now that they can no longer get jobs in the plant? What kinds of jobs must we create for ourselves now that the multinational corporations no longer need our labor? What kinds of cities and communities can we create that will enable us to live in harmony with one another and with the Earth?”

Some people, it is true, are still waiting for the corporations to come back to Detroit, Los Angeles, et al., and build factories employing thousands of workers, who, “disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of production” will then revolt and take them over. But in Detroit, because it is so clear that we can no longer depend upon one industry or any large corporation to provide us with jobs, it is also becoming increasingly clear, as we say in this Detroiters Uniting brochure, that, it is up to us to put our hearts, our imaginations, our minds and our hands together to create a vision and project concrete programs for developing the kinds of local enterprises that will provide meaningful jobs and income for all citizens.

One way in which we are doing this is by organizing Detroit Summer, an intergenerational/multicultural youth program movement to rebuild, redefine, and re-spirit Detroit from the ground up. Just as young people mobilized thirty years ago for Mississippi Freedom Summer because civil rights was then the main challenge, so they need to be mobilized today to meet the main challenge of the nineties—rebuilding, redefining, and respiriting our cities. That is what is involved in thinking and acting dialectically.