

labor, environmental, and human rights groups in a way that had never happened before.

The third wave occurs in the midst of declining US economic power. As laws such as “Right to Farm” invite non-US corporations to dominate the well-being of those in Missouri and other states, it dramatizes the way US business practices have decimated the status of US workers. It emphasizes that the fight against capital is international and that struggles here must join hands with those across the globe if they are to succeed. It is time to ask why we must work overtime so that our neighbors lose their jobs while we produce goods that fall apart sooner and are manufactured through industrial processes that poison our communities.

Forging a coalition that is strong enough to win will likely require struggling within many labor, human rights, and environmental organizations to change their orientation from choosing the least bad politico to one of actually confronting economic and political powers. It may even mean Sierra Club members dragging their local leaders kicking and screaming into meaningful battles. If we can build the sort of coalition we need to stop the right wing onslaught, we will be setting the stage for that coalition to ask what sort of new society it needs to midwife.

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## Cricket, Literature, and Revolution

review by R. Burke

*Modern Politics* by C.L.R. James, Introduction by Noel Ignatiev, PM Press/Charles H. Kerr Publishing Co., Oakland/Chicago, 2013, 167 pages, ISBN: 978-1-60486-311-6 \$16.95.

In 1961 C.L.R. James, the great Left-Marxist and Pan-Africanist, gave a series of lectures before leaving his native Trinidad. Having just won independence from Britain, Trinidad’s Prime Minister was Eric Williams, a former student of James. However, a rift had developed between James and Williams when the latter abandoned a crucial demand of the independence movement for a return of the US naval base at Chaguaramas. When James’s lectures were published under the title *Modern Politics*, Williams had the book suppressed, the edition kept under guard in a warehouse. When James later returned to Trinidad, he was placed under house arrest. Now PM Press, in conjunction with the legendary Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, has released a new edition of *Modern Politics*.

Today, James is probably best known for his classic *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. Ironically, in his early years he was best known as a sportswriter covering the sport of cricket, for which he had a lifelong passion. It is reported that James’s love of literature began when his mother forbade him from watching cricket games on Sunday, and he turned to reading books to pass the time. As an adult he would also become known as a literary critic and historian who wrote about the works of Herman Melville. Involved with the Trotskyist movement, James broke away from the Fourth International over Trotsky’s categorization of the Soviet Union as a “degenerated workers’ state.” Along with his fellow members of the “Johnson-Forest tendency,” James instead identified the Soviet system as “state capitalism.” Working with giants of the libertarian left such as Grace Lee Boggs, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Raya Dunayevskaya, C.L.R. James would pioneer an interpretation of Marxism which rejected the Leninist concept of the vanguard party in favor of an approach based on workers’ self-management.

*Modern Politics* is one of the most unusual introductions to Marxism ever written. One could in fact describe it as almost being the *Cliff Notes* to Western Civilization 101. James places Marxism squarely within the larger development of Western

history and philosophy. Beginning with his vision of the life of the Greek city-states, particularly Athens, James calls attention to the direct democracy which flourished there. Contrary to representative democracy, which in our contemporary society is identified with democracy itself, the Athenian citizen played a direct role in the running of the city government. Each month a group of citizens would be chosen by lot and would enter the government offices to govern the state for that month.

Despite being materially poor, Athens laid the foundations of Western Civilization, producing great philosophers, poets, dramatists and scientists. James sees this as being rooted in Athenian direct democracy. Turning his attention to the *Revelation of St.*

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*John*, he emphasizes the vision of a harmonious society that the book projects. James reads *Revelation* as an anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist text. He then discusses the city states of the Middle Ages, highlighting the cooperative labor practiced there which was the foundation of their wealth.

The medieval city-states, like those of Greece, were the homes of great poets and artists, and the collapse of those societies James attributes to the class conflicts within them, pointing to failed attempts to create what he considers could have been genuine workers' states. The birth of parliamentary democracy is seen by him to be rooted in the English Civil War, a time when radically egalitarian religious groups such as the Levelers laid down its principles. Frightened by the challenge presented by the Levelers, the British ruling class backed the dictatorship of Cromwell, paving the way for a restoration of the monarchy. With the Age of Reason a concept

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of applied reason was advocated which would sweep away the superstition, corruption, and privilege of the Ancient Regime. Yet it was one of the "men of reason," Rousseau, who came to recognize the shortcomings of this way of thinking.

James displays a great admiration for Rousseau, considering him to be the greatest thinker since Aristotle and especially admiring his book *The Social Contract*. The importance of Rousseau for James lies in his rejection of representative democracy because of the way in which citizens give up their power to representatives who then rule according to their own interests rather than those of society. Rousseau recognized that all government derives from an implicit contract between the members of society, expressing their general will. While James rejects Rousseau's concept of a legislator, a man of ability who can divine the general will of the people, he is also scornful of those who would dismiss him as a totalitarian. In Rousseau, via the works of Kant and Hegel, James traces the roots of Marxism.

This historical and philosophical background provides a basis from which James goes on to discuss the political developments of his time. James proceeds to show that throughout the 20th century, from the barbarities of fascism through world wars to the deformation of socialism in the USSR and the Cold War, the underlying secret has been the contradictions of the capitalist world-system in the form of class struggle. James takes the Marxist concept of class struggle as the motor of history seriously, and shows how it applies to world events.

James's perspective can here come under some criticism. In placing the emphasis on the spontaneous struggles of the working class, one might ask if he has gone too far with this tendency, and has overlooked the ways in which capitalism, via organized labor, has co-opted workers into becoming a part of the established system, as Herbert Marcuse pointed out in *One Dimensional Man*. One can also compare the example of André Gorz, who like James stressed the autonomous activity of workers, and the impor-

tance of advocating worker self-management, in his early writings.

Later Gorz came to realize that contemporary capitalism has arranged production precisely in such a way as to hinder self-management, and began advocating for reforms such as a guaranteed income and a reduction of the work week precisely in order to create the environment in which efforts to create workers' councils and develop a self-managed society can be successful. We also find nothing about the ecological crisis, not yet a major concern of the left at the time that James wrote *Modern Politics*.

Yet even here C.L.R. James has some important things to say to us today. This comes from his critique of the bureaucratic, technocratic attitudes that are an inherent part of state capitalism—a term which James applied to both "actually existing socialism" and monopoly capitalism. This is a mindset in which the endless increase of production, and of consumption, is seen as an unquestioned good. James rejected any concept of "socialism" in which workers' abilities to democratically self-organize their activity were given up for increased consumption opportunities and subordinated to the increase of productive forces. Instead he presents an alternative concept of progress, one which asks, "What is the good life?" and places greater importance on the pursuit of happiness rather than on an increase of technological mastery. The organization of democratic self-management through workers' councils is critical for this project. For any successful, environmentally sustainable socialist alternative to emerge in this

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century, this concept will need to be a vital component. Some things are just too important to be left to the experts.

As James himself has pointed out, "Anyone who tries to prevent you from knowing, from learning anything, is an enemy, an enemy of freedom, of equality, of democracy." These words apply to the capitalist world-system, which through its mandarins, its media, and its mouthpieces of established discourse would have us believe that socialism is what existed in the USSR and has been proven unworkable in practice. Reading the works of C.L.R. James is important for keeping alive the memory, in these times when we are encouraged to forget, of those socialists who rejected this conception. Many of their ideas remain fresh and relevant today. Thankfully, PM Press, in cooperation with the Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, has made this a little easier by publishing a new edition of *Modern Politics* as well as other C.L.R. James writings such as *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, *A New Notion*, and *A History of Pan-African Revolt*.

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