

# Notes on Dialectics: C. L. R. James's Hegel

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## Abstract

Hegel's philosophy has been a fundamental reference point for a broad network of mid-twentieth century anticolonial thinkers and activists, a major inspiration for figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, C. L. R. James, Martin Luther King Jr. and Angela Davis, among others. James's *Notes on Dialectics* (1948) constitutes one of the most significant textual engagements with Hegel from within that internationalist tradition. Even though James considered *Notes* to be his most important work and one of his lasting contributions to Marxist theory, it remains the least read and studied of his books. In comparison to the abovementioned thinkers, all of whom drew inspiration from Hegel's social and political philosophy, in his monograph, James turns instead to Hegel's most difficult text, the *Science of Logic*, as the true locus of Hegel's critical theory. Situating James's study within the Marxist philosophical tradition, this essay explores how James interprets, appropriates and makes use of Hegel's dialectic.

## Introduction

In the summer of 1971, C. L. R. James delivered a series of lectures at the Institute of the Black World in Atlanta, where he spoke at length about his most well-known book, *The Black Jacobins* (1989 [1938]). Over the course of several days, the then 70-year-old James discussed a range of topics pertaining to the circumstances—political, social, historical, biographical and intellectual—that had enabled the production of his pioneering account of the Haitian revolution. Among other things, James emphasized the influence of Marxist theory on his approach to the study of the first successful black slave revolt in human history; he speculated about whether he would write the book differently were he to write it again today; he spoke about the theory of history that informed the composition of the text; and compared his work to W. E. B. Du Bois's monumental *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935). Reflecting on his motivation to write about the fateful events that took place in San Domingo between 1791 and 1803, James explained that he had written *Black Jacobins* with the impending 'African revolution in mind'



(James 2000: 74). At the time of the book's publication in 1938, James recounts, only he and a handful of his close associates at the International African Service Bureau anticipated the imminent decolonization of Africa.

As James proceeds to clarify in a brief aside, it was Hegel's 'speculative thought' that enabled him to see in the historical self-movement and self-activity of Haiti's revolutionary masses the as-yet-unrealized possibility for the continent-wide liberation of Africa. That James should link the name of Hegel with the impending emergence of Africa 'as an independent force in history' (James 2000: 72) makes for a startling association. After all, this is the same Hegel who infamously excised Africa from the dialectic of world history, thereby denying African people freedom and humanity.<sup>1</sup> Although James was deeply opposed to the Hegelian idea that Africa had no history, nowhere in his writings did he ever directly address Hegel's treatment of Africa and Africans.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, readers would be hard-pressed to find in James's own work the same kind of stinging criticism of Hegel's racism and Eurocentrism that characterizes the Hegel scholarship dedicated to this topic published in the last three decades. Instead, what one finds is a return to and an original engagement with Hegel's dialectic, the fullest exposition of which James locates in Hegel's most abstract and difficult text, *The Science of Logic*.

In identifying Hegel's philosophy as an important resource for the coming struggles for colonial independence and self-determination, James joins a broad network of Black radical thinkers who not only drew on Hegel's concepts and transformed them into tools for decolonization but also helped shape and produce Marxist theory during a tumultuous period in twentieth-century world history.<sup>3</sup> Crucially, what distinguishes James's reading of Hegel from similar endeavours by other leading internationalist figures of the period is the sustained attention he devotes to Hegel's *Logic*, a text that even today continues to be one of the least studied parts of Hegel's philosophy. By privileging the *Logic*, James follows an older tradition of thinkers who used this monumental work to develop critical theories of society and politics under capitalism, a tradition that extends all the way to Karl Marx.<sup>4</sup> It is well known that in his early writings, Marx struggled doggedly with Hegel's idealism and offered a devastating critique of his *Philosophy of Right*. And yet, despite his relentless public criticism of Hegel and the Left Hegelians, Marx remained fascinated by the speculative logic of the 'mighty thinker' (Marx 1976: 103) throughout his life and used it (albeit in an inverted form) to develop the materialist dialectic that lies at the basis of his own scientific critique of political economy. But Marx's dialectical method and the ways in which it draws on Hegel's philosophy remain among the most controversial and least well-understood aspects of Marx's work. I wish to suggest that a similar ambiguity characterizes James's effort to recover Hegel's dialectic as well. Not only is this the least well-understood aspect of James's eclectic corpus; it is also the least studied.

Situating his study within the Marxist philosophical tradition of which James understood himself to be an exponent, in what follows, I explore C. L. R. James's philosophical work on Hegel, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin*. My primary aim is to examine how James interprets, appropriates and makes use of Hegel's speculative dialectic. The value of such an endeavour is at least twofold. First, it can help shed light on an important but neglected Marxist text that, with a few notable exceptions, has not received the attention it deserves. Second, an analysis of James's distinctive appropriation of Hegel could go some way towards helping us grasp the power and continuing import of dialectical philosophy.

James completed *Notes on Dialectics* in 1948, a decade after the publication of his influential history of the Haitian revolution. Even though James considered *Notes* to be his most important work and one of his lasting contributions to Marxist theory, it remains the least read and taught of his books. Initially written as an internal document meant for fellow members of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, James's *Notes* differs from more typical academic treatments of Hegel's philosophy in that, here, James engages both in a systematic reading of Hegel's categories as unfolded in *The Science of Logic* and an application of them to the historical evolution of the international labour movement. The book culminates in a devastating critique of Trotskyism as an inadequate revolutionary theory and signals James's own definitive rupture with the Trotskyist movement in the United States.

The central political thesis that *Notes* defends is the abolition of the vanguard party as a progressive political organism. In place of the mediation of the party, James foregrounds the lives, agency and autonomous activities of ordinary human beings as the true catalyst for historical and political change. Via his unique appropriation of Hegel's dialectic, James's task was to move beyond the dogmatism and ossified categories that were holding the international socialist movement back in order to establish the new revolutionary universals of the labour movement for the period. In Hegel's *Science of Logic*, James discovered a philosophy of movement—already latent but never fully articulated in his early work—that would leave an imprint on his writings until the end of his life. In his reconstruction of the Hegelian dialectic, James placed emphasis on three motifs, explored more fully below, that he believed are the key to Hegel's dialectic and that James viewed as indispensable for an adequate analysis of politics, history culture and society: (1) *contradiction* as the basis of historical motion; (2) the *spontaneity* and self-movement of the masses as a creative and transformative force in history; (3) freedom as the embodiment of creative *universality*. Of these three, it is the self-activity and spontaneity of the masses and how they negate the need for mediation by the party, bureaucracy, etc., that becomes pivotal in James's writings and politics.

## I. 'The Nevada Document': Context, Form and Critical Reception

James's *Notes on Dialectics*—informally known as the 'Nevada Document' in reference to the place where it was first composed—originated as 'a series of impassioned and still somewhat inchoate formulations' (Rosengarten 2008: 31) in letters written in the autumn of 1948 that James sent to two of his key associates—Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs—from Reno, Nevada.<sup>5</sup> We know from later writings by his close collaborators of the electrifying impact that *Notes* had on the Johnson-Forest Tendency, the small radical left organization of which James was a founding member.<sup>6</sup> In his review of the book, Martin Glaberman recalls the excitement James's colleagues felt as they received instalments of the manuscript:

I can still remember when I saw the first draft of *Notes on Dialectics*. I was drilling holes in crankshafts at the Buick Division of General Motors in Flint, Michigan. It was such a devastating critique of Trotskyism that it had to be circulated surreptitiously—one typing on thin onion skin paper, about six or eight copies, sent around in sections, each section having to be read and returned so that nothing was left lying around. The impact was unbelievable. Reading it over thirty years later, it still makes a powerful impression. On the days that a section of the document came in the mail, we would sit up late into the night, reading and discussing it. Each day, we would wait for the mail to see if another section had come. That was pretty remarkable for a book that was difficult then and is difficult now (although it is not as difficult as taking Hegel neat. (Glaberman 1981: 97)

And yet, the critical responses to *Notes on Dialectics* from those not affiliated with the Tendency have been mixed.<sup>7</sup> In *Black Marxism*, one of the first books to engage in a sustained examination of *Notes*, Cedric Robinson describes the 'Nevada Document' as James's 'masterpiece' (Robinson 1983: 279), second only to his *Black Jacobins*. In sharp contrast to this assessment, Timothy Brennan, who is otherwise an admirer of James's work, refers to the book as an 'overrated study of dialectics' whose content is 'largely, although not entirely, derivative' (Brennan 1997: 223). Despite his dismissal of *Notes* as 'a ponderous and ultimately sectarian performance' on the part of James, Brennan (1997: 223) nevertheless concedes that 'this work is most impressive today as a model of method'.

The format of *Notes* consists of lengthy quotations from Hegel's *The Encyclopedia Logic* and *The Science of Logic*, followed by James's interpretive

commentary of these passages and his application of Hegel's categories to the labour movement. The structure of the text is informal, and the commentary itself, though serious, is punctuated by playful banter and even ironic interjections addressed to James's readers. Indeed, as Rick Roderick writes, 'James makes passive reading [of *Notes*] impossible. He continually taunts the reader by suggesting that her or his reading, at that point in the text, is premature and not dialectical' (Roderick 1995: 207). In a characteristic example of this approach, early in the text, James writes: 'Don't think you know that categories move. You don't. You just don't until you know how and why. You must be patient and *bumble*. Hegel says it a thousand times. *All error, in thought and action, comes from this. All error. All.*' (James 1980: 16, emphasis in original). And again, a few pages later, having just cited a passage from the preface to the second edition of the *Science of Logic* in which the distinction between an instinctive and free act is introduced,<sup>8</sup> James writes: 'I reread this passage. I know where I am going. The question is: do *you* know?' (1980: 30). On yet another occasion, commenting on the relationship between analytical, synthetic and philosophical cognition as expressed in a passage he quotes from Hegel's *Encyclopedia Logic*, James again turns to his readers and urges them to observe the Hegelian method at work in this excerpt: 'You know that? You are ready to go on? You will never learn to be a dialectician. Stop and look at it. I am positive that you do not *see*' (1980: 40, emphasis in original).

Throughout *Notes*, James continually reminds his readers of the informal nature of these discussions. Violating typical academic conventions, he readily expresses a full range of subjective attitudes towards Hegel and his philosophy, alternating between excitement and admiration for his work on the one hand and frustration and downright dismissal on the other. If early on James comments that 'Hegel is very wise' (1980: 13), as readers make their way further into the text, they reach passages where James laconically declares: 'Hegel is very irritating' (1980: 100). Throughout the text, James refers to Hegel as 'the maestro' and, from the very outset, summarily dismisses the notion of *Geist*, one of the most fundamental concepts in Hegel's philosophy, with the following quip: 'Hegel talks about world-spirit, etc. For our purposes, it does not matter a damn. . . . To hell with it!' (1980: 26, 31). A few pages later, he again urges his readers to 'not be embarrassed by the World-Spirit business' (1980: 57). As James comments, 'the old boy [Hegel] spent years on it, all his life, but I cannot help thinking of it as one of the funniest things in philosophy. See if you do not find it funny' (1980: 56). Near the end, when he engages with parts of the doctrine of the Notion, James will go so far as to say, 'let him have his World-Spirit', thereby suggesting that this is an aspect of Hegel's system that one can simply ignore. By dismissing the import of the world spirit in Hegel's philosophy, James thinks he is now free to provide a materialist, non-metaphysical reading of Hegel (1980: 56–57).

Such commentary on the part of James, together with his constant ironic exhortations to the reader, make apparent his distinctive approach to the reading of Hegel's most difficult work and highlight some of the challenges involved in interpreting his *Notes*. James was not trained as an academic philosopher, and, as Alrick Cambridge observes (Cambridge 1992: 163–64), he does not follow the standard analytical conventions associated with doing philosophy in a formal manner. If Cambridge's assessment is correct, this means that any interpretation of *Notes on Dialectics* that seeks to evaluate James's reading of Hegel based on his familiarity with the scholarly debates and the application of analytic philosophical standards would be doomed to miss, if not altogether distort, the significance of this work and how it relates to James's broader corpus. James was not concerned with whether his interpretation of Hegel's philosophy was correct. In *Notes*, he is quite forthright when he says that he is going to interpret Hegel 'freely' and that he is not afraid of making interpretive mistakes (James 1980: 79, 83, 95). Rather, James was concerned with making Hegel accessible to two sets of audiences: his small circle of close comrades and ordinary workers whom he also hoped to reach. Keeping in mind James's own assessment of his interpretive approach, in what follows, I offer a close reading of his *Notes on Dialectics* with the aim of bringing into view the unique way in which James restages and appropriates Hegel's dialectic.

## II. C. L. R. James's reading of Hegel's *Science of Logic*

James opens *Notes on Dialectics* with a long quotation from Lenin's 1915 essay 'On the Question of Dialectics', followed by Lenin's aphorism from the *Conspectus*, where he famously declared that 'it is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood *the whole* of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later, none of the Marxists understood Marx[!]' (James 1980: 8). As Kevin Anderson remarks, 'this is the most dramatically explicit statement by Lenin anywhere on the centrality of Hegel to Marxism' (Anderson 1995: 65). For James and his associates, the implications of this aphorism were quite clear: this was nothing less than a call for Marxists everywhere to follow Lenin in a study of '*the whole* of Hegel's *Logic*'. After the outbreak of the First World War, Lenin returned to Hegel's work in an attempt to analyze and understand the political behavior of the Second International and their betrayal of a core principle of Marxism—proletarian internationalism (Bogues 1997: 111).

James's indebtedness to Lenin's reading of the *Logic* is evident throughout *Notes*. James follows Lenin's approach and similarly copies long passages from Hegel's Greater and Lesser Logic, which he then comments on at length. Like Lenin before him, James similarly believed that the return to Hegel's dialectic

could serve as a means for grasping how dialectical theory could be used to forge critical solutions to immediate political issues. As John McClendon points out, in both Lenin and James, the return to Hegel, ‘while philosophical in nature, has, in each case a political motivation’ (McClendon 2005: 239). Each thinker thus turns from ‘the immediacy of political developments to inquiry into how dialectical analysis and method can help theoretically solve looming political questions and problems’ (McClendon 2005: 240). But even if they share a common motivation in their return to Hegelian dialectical philosophy, their respective readings of Hegel differ. James’s Hegel is a colloquial and ahistorical Hegel, divorced from the context of the tradition of German idealism. In dislodging Hegel from his historical context, McClendon argues (2005: 245) James effectively adopts Hegel’s dialectic on pragmatic grounds for political purposes.<sup>9</sup>

The structure of *Notes* is somewhat uneven, and James does not accord an equal amount of space to his treatment of the tripartite division that comprises Hegel’s *Logic*. He devotes no less than 65 pages of Part I of *Notes* to an extensive commentary on Hegel’s prefaces to the *Science of Logic*. This is followed by roughly seven pages on the doctrine of Being, forty-five pages on the doctrine of Essence, and approximately thirty pages on the doctrine of the Notion. Throughout, James is clear that his purpose in studying Hegel’s *Logic* is not to provide a summary or faithful exegesis of the text. Rather, his aim is to teach his followers how to *use* the *Logic*, and how to apply the dialectic to concrete political contexts (James 1980: 67). For James, Hegel’s dialectic was not a new way of thinking but represented ‘a new way of *organizing* thought [...] of knowing what you do when you *think*’ (1980: 13). As he informs his readers, ‘I was able to find a way into [Hegel’s *Logic*] and even to *speculate*, i.e., draw temporary conclusions from it, because I recognized early on that the *Logic* constituted an algebra, made to be used in any analysis of constitution and development in nature or in society’ (1980: 8). In engaging with Hegel’s philosophy, James sets out to ‘test’ the movement of the *Logic* ‘against the history of the labor movement’, and conversely, to use the movement of the *Logic* ‘to understand and develop for contemporary and future needs the history of the labor movement’ (1980: 8). From the outset, it becomes clear that the main concern of *Notes* is to grasp the relation between logic and history, organization and spontaneity, the finite and the infinite.

## II. i. *The Movement of Categories*

James begins his *Notes* by identifying the three modes of cognition discussed by Hegel in the preface of the *Logic*: vulgar empiricism or ordinary common sense, understanding, and Reason or dialectical thought (1980: 18). Focusing on the evolution of dialectical thought from the Kantian notion of understanding to the Hegelian concept of Reason, James first observes that whereas empiricism simply

sees a collection of facts or data and leaves them as they are, understanding is what organizes our sense perceptions into fixed categories or determination (1980: 20). It is only dialectical thought, however, that is able to recognize that the finite categories established by the understanding are not static but continually undergo transformation. Leaving aside the issue of whether James interprets Hegel's critique of Kant correctly,<sup>10</sup> James's main objective in the opening pages of *Notes* is to establish an opposition between Understanding (Kant) and Reason (Hegel). At stake in this antithesis is the ability to recognize whether categories move and change or congeal into fixed determinations.<sup>11</sup> James accepts what he takes to be Hegel's critique of Kant—namely, that the Kantian categories are immobile and that, therefore, Kant lacks a conception of dialectical transition for his categories. In this regard, James writes:

Now Kant, *says* Hegel, did not look to see *where* his categories came from; he just took them over from the old logic. He did not see that the categories developed out of one another, in a consistent movement, of opposition and resolution of opposition, and were all connected. He did not see that at critical moments, a new category appeared because the old categories could no longer contain the new content (James 1980: 17).

For James, Kant's inability to recognize that categories move has momentous implications for political practice. Continuing his analysis of the Kantian notion of Understanding, James proceeds to argue that 'What Kant did in philosophy, others do in the sphere of intellectual life' (1980: 17). Here, we can observe James making one of the first of many direct transfers from Hegel's logic to concrete historical reality. Even as James acknowledges that 'these transfers are rough', he also insists that 'Hegel intended them to be made', i.e., that he meant for his *Logic*, which James describes as an 'algebra in constant movement', to be applied to concrete historical experience (1980: 17). Making the transfer from the *Logic* to the history of the international labour movement, James proceeds to examine how Understanding, or thinking in finite categories, manifests itself in actuality and what happens if one persists in engaging in this type of thinking: 'Hegel says that we can see it, know it and know in advance the errors it will make, *wherever it appears*' (1980: 17, emphasis in original). As James goes on to suggest, Hegel's *Logic* had anticipated the mistakes Trotsky made in assessing the character of the Soviet Union under Stalin's regime.

To explain how Trotsky's error relates to the three forms of cognition identified by Hegel, James turns to the example of the labour movement. He notes that 'a genuine empiricist sees the CIO as something that happened. It came, that's all' (1980: 20). While James acknowledges that no one 'can think at all without this simple [...] data of the senses', to remain at this stage is to become lost (1980: 20). 'You

must break out of these fixed, limited categories of sense', writes James, and the way to break out of them is through the Understanding. If the empiricist merely takes the world as it is, Understanding shows us that thinking 'in terms of First International, Second International, Third International, in embryo' is necessary if one wants to fit the fact of the CIO into a coherent whole (1980: 20).

In James's reading of Hegel, the understanding, while engaged in the necessary process of making determinations, on closer inspection, turns out to be dialectical to the extent that it involves a moment of instability, i.e., a moment that negates the 'immediate common sense aspect' of the objects of sense perception (1980: 20). However, 'precisely because it does not at once begin negating the determinations it has made [understanding] leads its user into trouble' (1980: 20). What makes the moment of Understanding so dangerous, according to James, is that it is a *necessary* stage. One *must* think in finite categories; one *must* create determinations. But it is precisely because Understanding makes its determinations permanent that it leads us into difficulties: 'It creates universals, a great stage in thought, but the universals it creates assume permanence. They therefore remain abstract' (1980: 21). As James reads Hegel, abstract universals are an important and necessary component of dialectical thought, but they must be overcome in order to arrive at the point of actualization, the point at which one can know the concrete dialectically (1980: 25). It is only by the light of reason and not of understanding that this can be achieved. As James writes, 'when you recognize that the categories of thought are not finite but move, and when you know how and why they move, then your method is the method of Reason', i.e., it is the dialectical method (1980: 16).

Just as Understanding contains within itself moments of negativity and creativity, in so far as understanding must *create* determinations and maintain them, Reason is similarly negative and positive. However, there is an important difference. On the one hand, 'reason is negative and dialectical because it dissolves into nothing the determinations of Understanding' (1980: 23). However, reason is also positive 'because it is the source of the Universal in which the Particular is comprehended' (James 1980: 25). The task of Reason, in other words, is to break up the abstract universals created by the Understanding in order to establish more concrete universals. But the process does not end here. As James elaborates, the results of Reason and the 'labor of the negative' in one generation go on to become Understanding in the next. These new determinations must, at some point, be dissolved if one is not to remain trapped in the old categories.

What are the implications of remaining trapped in the realm of abstract universals? James turns to Trotsky's defense of the Soviet bureaucratic state in order to show the real consequences of thinking in terms of finite categories and remaining 'stuck', as it were, at the stage of Understanding. Briefly, James's main charge

against Trotsky is that because he held on to the old categories inherited from past revolutionary practice, which included 'Lenin's monopoly capitalism, private property, revolutionary international against private property, revolutionary international *for* private property' (1980: 37), he failed to recognize that these categories no longer adequately described what it meant for socialism to exist in his own time and place. Arguing that political categories had changed while Trotsky's analysis stood still, James writes: '*Trotskyism, as far as thought is concerned, is the use of the categories, etc., of Lenin's practice, 1903–23, preserved in their essential purity and transferred to a period for which they became day by day more unsuited. Between 1933 and 1936 they became absolutely unsuited*' (1980: 34, emphasis in original). The categories that Trotsky 'lived in', as James clarifies, were the 'formed and finished categories which Lenin had left' (1980: 34). This prevented him from keeping pace with the times, and the result was that he was unable to grasp that state property was *not* equivalent to socialism (as supporters of the emerging Soviet bureaucracy maintained).

As James explains, Trotsky 'did not see that the revolutionary Third International had succumbed to state capitalism aided by Russian imperialism. He never wrote about the economic changes, what he thought about it, if he did, he never thought of sufficient importance to set down [...]. He just couldn't see it. His mind ran on other wheels' (1980: 37). Imprisoned by inflexible categories of thought and unable to keep pace with 'the economic changes, the changes in labour organization, and in the character of mass movements' (1980: 37), Trotsky could not comprehend the emergence of Stalinism and mistook the USSR for a workers' bureaucracy.

Trotsky's fundamental error, in James's view, was that he believed he knew that categories move. But as James demonstrates, this was far from the case: 'The error of errors is to *begin* by believing you *know* that categories change. To say that, to think that, implies that you know that categories change, and Trotsky didn't. He would have been able to lecture you on changing categories most profoundly. He talked about it all the time. But fixed and finite determinations held him by the throat to the end' (1980: 18). For James, 'one of the chief errors of thought is to continue to think in one set of forms, categories, ideas, etc., when the object, the content, has moved on, has created or laid the premises for an extension, a development of thought' (1980: 15). This is the grave error he believes Trotsky committed. James's erstwhile hero was unable to grasp the principle that 'thought is not an instrument you apply to content'. Rather, 'the content moves, develops, changes', and in doing so it 'creates new categories of thought, and gives them direction' (1980: 15). This works from the opposite direction as well. Following Hegel, James writes that just 'as the object moves, and it must move [...] philosophical knowing moves too' (1980: 26). On the basis of this reading, James concludes that if 'logic is

the analysis of this movement of philosophical cognition, then the movement of the different stages of philosophical, i.e., correct cognition, gives us the movement of the object' (1980: 26). James, in effect, charges Trotsky with an inadequate grasp of the dialectic and suggests that errors in philosophical cognition lead directly to errors in political practice.

Stuck at the stage of understanding, Trotsky could not grasp the true significance of Stalinism, namely, that Stalinism was a 'necessary, and inevitable, form of development of the labor movement' (1980: 30). Whereas Trotsky held that Stalinism was a form of deception perpetrated upon the workers, James's reading of Hegel allowed him to grasp Trotsky's position as an inadequate diagnosis, at once simplistic and condescending in tone in so far as it portrayed the workers as 'playthings of chance'. As James writes, 'Hegelianism is merciless on the talk of such deception' and goes on to argue that the concrete existence of Stalinism and the workers' support for it were an objective fact. As such, 'the phenomenon of Stalinism requires that you take it as an impulse from below and incorporate it into your categories and drive *them* forward' (1980: 29). In an important aside that does not receive further elaboration but can be related to James's life-long concern with writing histories from below, he notes that 'every serious movement has come from below', i.e., from the mass of ordinary people (1980: 29). This is something that Trotsky simply could not see trapped as he was in the old categories. Had Trotsky employed dialectical reason, James suggests, he would have been able to 'include Stalinism as a necessary, an inevitable, form of development of the labor movement'. He would have been able to recognize that 'the workers are *not* mistaken' and that 'they are not deceived'. Rather, 'they are making an experience that is necessary to their own development' (1980: 30). Continuing with his exposition of Hegel's philosophy, James takes Hegel's often misunderstood claim that the real is rational and applies it to his analysis of Stalinism. This leads him to conclude that 'Stalinism is a terrible reality and because it is real it is reasonable'. For James, 'without the reality of Stalinism', one cannot even begin to reason about it at all (1980: 30).

It should be clear that James's point is not to offer a defense or justification of Stalin's regime but to show how Stalinism was a product of complex historical and social movements and that his tyranny was a dialectical response within the revolutionary organizations themselves. What James gleans from Hegel in this part of *Notes* is an aspect of the dialectic that has been frequently criticized: namely, the incorporation of all aspects of reality into an integrated whole where every event, even the most destructive one, could be understood as part of a process aiming towards an immanent goal (1980: 65). What we see on full display here is James's Hegelian confidence in a historical process that would inevitably subvert the existing social order.

II. *ii. Contradiction and Spontaneity*

In the second part of *Notes*, James moves to an exposition of the doctrines of Being, Essence and Notion (Concept). He offers a quick discussion of the movement of being-nothing-becoming and the categories of quality, quantity (which he skips) and measure in order to make his way to the doctrine of Essence. Essence is the name Hegel gives to mediated Being. Following Hegel, James grasps (1980: 76) essence as a 'movement of negation' and immediately proceeds to apply this to the history of the labour movement. 'We know what the labor movement is. It was at one time the 1848 revolutions [...]. It took the form of the First International. It took the form of the Second International at its highest peak [...]. [It took the form of] the Commune' (1980: 76). But these movements, as James explains, came and went. While their particular 'forms' vanished, their 'essence', the proletarian movement continued. 'The Commune [...] the First International, the 1905 struggles were just Being, they were Nothing. They did not exist, they existed, they did not exist anymore. They were from nothing and went back to nothing. But their experience, what they represented *was stored up*. It was not lost. Essence is a movement but a movement of stored up Being' (1980: 77). As such, it does not deny but simply lays aside and preserves the past. James goes on to argue that 'The essence of a thing is the fact that it must move, reflect itself, negate the reflection, which was nothing, become being, and then become nothing again, while the thing itself must move on because it is its nature to do so' (1980: 78). Applying this to the historical evolution of the labour movement, James shows how, at various points in time, the international labour organizations not only absorbed in themselves the features of earlier forms of organization but also moved beyond and transcended them, thus producing a qualitatively different form to what had come before. His focus is on those epic moments of historical transformation when, as Stuart Hall writes, 'the husk of a whole era is challenged' (Hall 1998: 20), when the labour movements dissolved, broke up, and reconstituted themselves in new formations.

For James, another crucial feature of Hegel's logic of essence is that it highlights the relational aspect of thought. He arrives at this insight by engaging with the categories of identity, difference, and contradiction. Once again, he applies these to an understanding of the labour movement and the various forms of cognition discussed above. In identity, James finds the empiricist's view of the world: 'I look at something and in my view I get a picture of it [...] book, stone, horse, house, labor movement, scientific theory, dish of ice-cream. I define it to myself: I establish its identity' (1980: 83). However, like all Hegelian categories, identity cannot simply be a reflection of the world. Identity also contains difference within itself. Using the example of a house, James explains this as follows: 'that house, which I think I have established so clearly, eludes me even as I establish it. The house is changing. (I am changing too...).' In two years, that house will be another house: paint gone, holes

in the roof, furniture water-logged, grass growing in the patio' (1980: 84). He notes that these changes occur over time and that existence is always caught up in a struggle with non-existence: 'this house is, but at the same time it is not, or to be more precise, it is and is not what it is, it is also something else' (1980: 84). With this example, James illustrates how identity contains difference within itself.

But just as identity implies difference, so too difference implies identity. Contrasting the concept of difference to the concept of unlikeness, James notes: 'I do not compare a camel to a French dictionary. Those are merely things that are unlike; there is no "difference" between them. Sure, they are "different", but that is a vulgar difference, as vulgar in its way as the identity that house is house' (1980: 84). This means that any real, meaningful difference requires some degree of identity. And conversely, identity can only exist on the basis of difference (1980: 84). It is at this juncture that real movement begins for James. He notes that for Hegel, the identity/difference principle becomes decisive when engaging in philosophical cognition about a single object. James argues that Hegel is concerned with what he calls 'the specific difference' that represents 'the Other of the object' (1980: 84). The other is the essential difference, the difference that belongs to the object and distinguishes it from all other objects. 'To find *that* out is to find out what makes the object move' (1980: 84). Just as much as identity defines an object, so does this essential difference. James notes that the term 'father' is really meaningless unless it is considered with its specific difference—son. 'Father has no meaning except in relation to son. Above has no meaning except in relation to below' (1980: 84). Knowing that thought must always be relational, that things cannot be left in their immediacy but must be shown to be mediated by something else, one can better understand all sorts of social phenomena. By placing priority on relations over things and individuals, Hegel's logic of essence shows how individuals are constituted in and through the relations that obtain between them. Most importantly, for James, using the principle of relationality can help one to understand the history of the labour movement and the transitions that it has undergone. James goes on to argue that Leninism must be understood as the Other of Menshevism (moderate socialism), just as Stalinism represents the Other of Leninism. He writes:

The history of the Third International is the history of the suppression of Leninism by Stalinism [...]. If you do not see it as Difference in Identity, cruel, murderous, but (given the objective forces) necessary *transition*, then you rush off into fantastic explanations such as 'tools of the Kremlin' or the incapacity of the workers to understand politics and such like...That which ultimately becomes the obstacle over which you must climb is an Other which was inside it, identical with it and yet

essential difference. If the 4th International is to supersede Stalinism then it must 'contain' Stalinism in its concept of itself (1980: 87).

For James, understanding the relationship of the concept to its Other is essential for understanding the concept itself. One cannot possibly conceive of a solution to a problem unless the problem is seen as something contained within the solution that must be overcome. To understand concepts, whether this means 'father' or Trotsky's 'Fourth International', as isolated, harmonious identities is to not understand them at all. Not only does James follow Hegel in observing that 'simple, abstract identity is a fiction', he also concludes that it is 'a deadly trap for *thinkers*' (1980: 85). It is here that *contradiction* becomes so important for both Hegel and James. If vulgar empiricism sees only simple, static identities in the world and Understanding is that stage of thought that regards opposites as mutually exclusive and completely cut off from one another, Reason (dialectical thought) is what 'catches hold of the variety and seeks out the Opposition, the Contradiction, and *drives them together*, ties them together, makes one the Other of the other' (1980: 91). It is at this point that things begin to move. 'When you concentrate all attention on the contradiction between Stalinist bureaucratism and the necessity of the proletariat for free creative activity', writes James, 'then all the phenomena begin to move. They do this only when the contradiction is at its sharpest' (1980: 91).

James argues that once contradiction is understood as internal to any object or concept, one can gain a clearer view of the shortcomings of the socialist movement up to that point. In a 1947 article written as a preparation for *Notes*, James quotes a passage from Hegel's *Logic* that highlights the importance of the principle of contradiction to dialectical motion: 'Contradiction is the root of all movement and life, and it is only in so far as it contains a contradiction that anything moves and has impulse and activity' (James 1992: 154).<sup>12</sup> Failure to recognize contradiction as characteristic of all concepts leads to the creation of stagnant abstract universals. As we have already seen, for James, nobody was more guilty of this crime than Trotsky himself.

James argues that Trotskyism, remaining as it did in the realm of Understanding, moved on from Leninism but failed to adapt to the objective reality of contemporary society. Instead, Trotsky took hold of categories developed under Lenin and raised them to the level of abstract, empty universals. James notes that Trotsky had done this with the category of nationalized property. Having misread Lenin, Trotsky thought that nationalized property was the only basis for the development of socialism, i.e., of free humanity (James 1980: 155). In sticking to this false Universal, James argues that Trotsky had not merely made a logical mistake. Rather, he had 'transformed the revolutionary concepts of Lenin into their exact

opposite' (1980: 152). As James contends, the true, concrete universal of socialism was not nationalized property and plan. Neither Marx nor Lenin had ever said this. Rather, 'the universal of socialism is the free proletariat' (1980: 152). Unlike Trotsky, who could only think in the categories that were already familiar to him and not in terms of the movement generated by their own internal contradictions, James believes that Lenin had recognized the workers in Hegel's discussion of the doctrines of Being and Essence. Here, he had discerned the self-movement and self-activity of the proletariat.

In his treatment of Lenin, James focuses on his discussion of Hegel's concept of leaps or breaks in gradual, evolutionary change. To James, the notions not only of leaps but also of 'spontaneous activity and self-movement' (1980: 101) are key concepts to be drawn from Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* and specifically from his analysis of the doctrine of Essence. Based on his reading of Lenin (and Hegel), James sought to demonstrate how the freedom of the proletariat rests in their own hands and not in any political party. James is attracted to the idea of spontaneous self-development as opposed to rigid stages, either in concepts or in history. He insists that the Soviets and the Paris Commune had shown the way forward for what the next 'leap' in the historical process would be (1980: 170–71). This consisted in the dissolution of economics and politics into each other at the moment of revolutionary transformation. Lenin's struggle after 1920 had been to bring the Russian people, the whole labouring population, into the governing of the state. 'If every cook learned to govern', James writes following Lenin, 'if every worker to a man administered the economy of the state', then the state and the party as we have known it must also disappear (James 1980: 176). While this idea remained only latent in Lenin, for James and his comrades at the JFT, the abolition of the party became the new revolutionary universal for the period (1980: 176).<sup>13</sup>

## Concluding remarks

In a later work, James summed up what he took to be the key aspects of Hegel's dialectical thought as follows:

- a) Contradiction, *not* harmonious increase and decrease, is the creative and moving principle of history. Society cannot develop unless it has to overcome contradiction.
- b) All development takes place as a result of *self-movement*, *not* organization or direction by external forces.
- c) Self-movement springs from and is the overcoming of antagonisms *within* an organism, not the struggle against external forces.

- d) It is *not* the world of nature that confronts man as an alien power to be overcome. It is the alien power that he himself has created.
- e) The end toward which mankind is inexorably developing by the constant overcoming of internal antagonisms is *not* the enjoyment, ownership or use of goods, but self-realization, creativity based upon the incorporation into the individual personality of the whole previous development of humanity. Freedom is creative universality, *not* utility (James et al. 1986: 117).<sup>14</sup>

James developed these points in two of his subsequent works, where he argued that these dialectical principles were the heart of Hegel's system and were 'absolutely revolutionary' (James et al. 1986: 118). Viewing human society as a living organism, James insisted that 'the creative movement of historical development' (James 2013: 105) comes from the existence of obstacles, contradictions, or antagonisms within society that need to be overcome. Movement and development, for James, comes from the overcoming of such contradictions. Without this, 'there is only stagnation and decay' (James 2013: 105). Next, James argues that development must come from within, through the self-movement and self-activity of ordinary human beings, and not by means of guidance or direction from external forces. The proletariat, like every other organism, must develop from itself and from the specific conditions it faces 'its own antagonisms and its own means of overcoming them' (James et al. 1986: 132). He offers an example from the West Indian struggle for self-determination against the British Crown, arguing that it is only when the British leave the West Indies that real development, free from external interference and imposition, can begin.

James elaborates on the fourth point by highlighting what he sees as the fundamental problem facing humankind today. If, in earlier centuries, human beings had struggled to gain mastery over nature, the fundamental problem of the modern period is that today we do not have control over capital. Instead, it is capital accumulation that controls us. This is the alien power that we ourselves have created. The solution to this, James argues, can only be a Marxist one: 'to put all this wealth under the control of the men who work on it. Then, and only then, will the mass of accumulated wealth and scientific knowledge be used for the benefit of mankind' (James 2013: 107).

In the fifth and final bullet point, James suggests that the dialectic encapsulates the idea of freedom itself. He believed that the ultimate values towards which humanity was striving were freedom and happiness. He maintained that these values would eventually be realized through socialism: through the integration of the individual into the social community. As James writes, 'an individual life cannot be comfortable and easy or creative unless it is in harmony to some degree with the society in which it lives'. For James, this means that 'the individual must have a

sense of community with the state' (2013: 109). Although he does not fully elaborate on this idea, he seems to build on Hegel's conception of a well-functioning free society where the three moments of individuality, particularity, and universality that comprise the structure of the Concept (Notion) are in harmony with each other.

However, in *State Capitalism and World Revolution*, James goes on to argue that Hegel was ultimately unable to 'carry the dialectical logic to its conclusions in the socialist revolution' (James et al. 1986: 119). This is because Hegel was frightened of the social forces that had undertaken the concrete realization of the movement towards freedom and happiness (i.e., socialism)—the modern proletariat—and could not anchor his analysis in their struggle. Because Hegel did not know the proletariat, 'he could not envisage universal freedom for the mass of men' (James et al. 1986: 119). The result was that he had reinstated the division of labour between the intellectual elite and the workers—the trap from which, according to James, Hegel had sought to extricate European thought—thus restricting universality or freedom to the state bureaucracy whose specific world-view would then embody and represent the community (James et al. 1986: 120). Despite what he takes to be the failure of Hegel's project in the *Philosophy of Right*, James's elaboration of the central principles of dialectical logic suggests that for James, the *Science of Logic* provides the resources for the anticipation of a future socialist society.

By concentrating on the form the dialectic takes in Hegel's two principal works on logic, the *JL* and *EL*, James was keen to highlight the inner dynamism and processual nature of the dialectical movement. He was drawn to and remained alert to the tragic aspect of the dialectic, to the fact that every historically developed form is transient and must eventually perish. In addition to its tragic dimension, in James's work the dialectic is also revealed in its constructive force. James was always interested in and looking for connections and patterns—the internal relations between things—and a way to integrate them. His appropriation of the Hegelian dialectic permitted him to develop and refine an approach to the socio-political world that he had already begun to develop in his earliest work. In this regard, Paul Le Blanc is correct to observe that a fundamental aspect of James's method 'is to make links between seemingly diverse realities' and phenomena, to 'take something that is commonly perceived as being marginal' (Le Blanc 2018: 1) or peripheral and 'show that it is, in fact, central to an adequate understanding of politics and society' (2018: 26). This is done in a manner that profoundly alters (rather than displaces) the traditionally 'central' categories. James's analysis of the Haitian revolution is a case in point, for here we see on full display James's attempt 'to bring Marxism and African independence together, to make them part of the same constellation of thought' (Brennan 1997: 229). Related to this is another crucial aspect of James's method: his capacity 'to see things that aren't quite "there" yet, but that are in the process of coming into being'

(Le Blanc 2018: 26). Such was the case with his ability to anticipate the coming independence of Africa, for which, as we have seen, he retrospectively credits Hegel's speculative thought.

It is the practice of linking together opposites, or what might at first appear as completely disconnected realities, that constitutes a key feature of James's method. It is what enabled him, in *The Black Jacobins*, to link Haiti to France and to connect Marx and Hegel to Africa. Looking back to James's history of the Haitian revolution, we can already see in that text the same themes and tensions expressed in *Notes on Dialectics*: the dialectic between organization and spontaneity, between leadership and the instinctive actions of the masses. In the preface to the first edition of *The Black Jacobins*, James announces the central motif of the book—a motif that resurfaces in different forms in nearly all his writings:

The transformation of slaves, trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organize themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement. Why and how this happened is the theme of this book (James 1989: ix).

In celebrating the spontaneity of ordinary human beings (in this case, the San Domingo slaves), James sought to accent their capacity for self-determination. For James, spontaneous rebellions and periodic revolutionary upsurges are the 'leaps' that become the basis for historical development and change. This is clearly discernible in the historical narrative he develops in *The Black Jacobins*, in his book on Herman Melville written just before he was deported from the United States in 1953, titled *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, as well as in his *A History of Pan-African Revolt* published the same year as *Jacobins*. It was in thinking *with* Hegel, rather than against him, that James conceived a method and a theory of history (never explicitly elaborated or fully achieved) that breaks with the idea of linear progress and development. It was through the writing of the *Black Jacobins*, composed in the midst of 'the booming of Franco's heavy artillery, the rattle of Stalin's firing squads and the fierce shrill turmoil of the revolutionary movement striving for clarity and influence' (James 1989: xi) that James and his comrades glimpsed the future: a future in which all would meet 'at the rendezvous of victory' (1989: 401).

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used:

*EL* = Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

*LPH* = Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. R. Alvarado (Aalten: WordBridge, 2011 [1857]).

*SL* = Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

In a frequently cited passage from his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel writes, ‘At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movement in it, that is to say, in its northern part, belongs to the Asiatic or European world [...]. What we properly understand by Africa, is the unhistorical, undeveloped spirit, still caught in the conditions of mere nature, and which has to be apprehended here only as on the threshold of world history’ (*LPH*: 91–92). In pronouncing this judgment, Hegel not only deemed non-Europeans as irrelevant to the task of world history; he also condemned them to extinction, enslavement and potential colonization.

<sup>2</sup> James’s critique of Hegel’s philosophy of history and the developmentalist worldview it popularized (with its depreciation of non-European cultures) was indirect. Even though James had not yet studied Hegel at the time of the first publication of *The Black Jacobins*, the searing indictment of colonialism James offers in his most famous book—a study that highlights the central role people of African descent have played in the making of the modern world and the making of world history—could be read as a thoroughgoing rebuke of Hegel’s (or Hegel-inspired) racialized claims about Africa. Such views were not only shared by other thinkers of Hegel’s age but were also prevalent during James’s own time.

<sup>3</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Martin Luther King Jr., Angela Davis and Aimé Césaire are notable figures in this intellectual tradition.

<sup>4</sup> After Marx, notable thinkers that engaged with Hegel’s *Logic* included Engels, Plekhanov, Lenin, Lukács, Gramsci, Marcuse and Adorno, among others.

<sup>5</sup> See C. L. R. James (2005). The letters form a running commentary on the actual genesis of *Notes* and provide a chapter-by-chapter outline of the manuscript as it was originally conceived.

<sup>6</sup> The Johnson-Forrest Tendency drew its name from the pseudonyms of two of its founding theoreticians: C. L. R. James, who wrote under the name of J. R. Johnson, and Raya Dunayevskaya, the Russian-born economist and former secretary to Leon Trotsky, who wrote under the name of Freddie Forest. A third important member of the tendency was the Chinese-American activist and philosophy PhD, Grace Lee Boggs, who wrote under the pen name Ria Stone. Although the Tendency was originally organized around the Russian Question, the group became known for their involvement in the black struggle in the US, for

their advocacy of autonomous social movements, for their support of the women's movement, and for the philosophical bent of their publications. Founded in 1945, the JFT officially split due to internal differences in 1955. As Martin Glaberman argues, organizationally, the Tendency ended up being a failure, 'but a failure that is rich in meaning and lessons for anyone interested in a democratic, revolutionary Marxism' (Glaberman 1999: xxiv).

<sup>7</sup> The best and most thorough critical engagement with James's *Notes on Dialectics* is John McClendon's (2005) monograph. Other studies that attempt to analyse various aspects of James's *Notes* include Douglas (2008, 2013), Colás (1996), Ferguson (2003), Anderson (1995), Bogues (1997), Cambridge (1992), Lovato (2016), Marriott (2014), Renault (2015), Robinson (1983), Roderick (1995), Surin (1996), Turner (1995), Nielsen (1997), Rosengarten (2008) and Henry (2017).

<sup>8</sup> See *SL*: 17.

<sup>9</sup> Rick Roderick raises a similar point when he argues that James's reading of Hegel's *Logic* 'is a strategic, contingent movement, based not on a rigid, essentialist Hegelian norm but on his own particular production of those terms' (Roderick 1995: 210).

<sup>10</sup> For a critique of James's treatment of Kant, see McClendon (2005) and Ferguson (2003).

<sup>11</sup> McClendon (2005: 123) also points out that James's critique of Kantianism in philosophy is to be understood as a political struggle against revisionism and the assault on dialectics offered by figures like Bernstein.

<sup>12</sup> See *SL*: 382. The Di Giovanni translation reads as follows: 'contradiction is the root of all movement and life; it is only in so far as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, is possessed of instinct and activity'.

<sup>13</sup> James says little about how this emphasis on spontaneity is to be squared with Lenin's concept of the vanguard party. As James sees it, Lenin's embrace of the Soviets in 1917 and his book, *State and Revolution*, reveal a break in Lenin's thought on the issue of organization and spontaneity. James believes that this break resulted from Lenin's study of Hegel's *Logic*.

<sup>14</sup> James includes these points in his book *Facing Reality* (1974: 105), and again in *Modern Politics* (2013: 119), where they are given further elaboration.

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