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C.L.R. James and the Johnson-Forest Tendency

Counseling Communism Discussion Guide #2

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May 2022

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On Lenin and “Leninism”:

- Lenin and the vanguard party (1963)
- Lenin and the problem (1964. From *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution*)
- Lenin and the Trade Union Debate in Russia. From *You Don't Play with Revolution: The Montreal Lectures*. 1966. 56 pages.
- Matthew Quest - Silences on the Suppression of Workers Self-Emancipation: Historical Problems with CLR James's Interpretation of V.I. Lenin
- Matthew Quest - The “Not so Bright” Protégés and the Comrades that “Never Quarreled”: CLR. James’s Disputes on Labor’s Self-Emancipation and the Political Economy of Colonial Freedom

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- British Barbarism in Jamaica: Support the Negro Workers' Struggle. 1938.
- Black Sansculottes (1964. Transcribed.)
- The Old World and the New (1971. Transcribed. From *Rendezvous*).
- Towards the Seventh: The Pan-African Congress – Past, Present and Future. From *At the Rendezvous of Victory*. 1976.

Selected readings on Black comrades:

- W. E. B. Du Bois (1965. Transcribed)
- Paul Robeson: Black Star (1970. Transcribed)
- George Jackson (1971. Transcribed)
- Fanon and the Caribbean (1978)
- Walter Rodney and the Question of Power (1981)

On Marx:

- On Marx's Essays from the Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts (1947. Transcribed from *Rendezvous*.)

You Don't Play with Revolution: The Montreal Lectures. 1966:

- Marx's *Capital*, the Working-Day, and Capitalist Production. 20 pages.
- Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and the 20 pages.
- Existentialism and Marxism. 14 pages.

Module 12: Supplemental Materials

- Dan Georgakas - Finally Got the News: The Making of a Radical Film. 1973.
- Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin - *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution*. 1998. 235 pages.

Some further reading by C.L.R. James:

“None of us ever thought that the work on Mariners, on American Civilization, on cricket, was anything other than an integral part of our politics.” - Martin Glaberman

Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In. 1952 (updated in 1978 with an additional chapter)

- Chapter 4: Fiction and reality included in *The Future in the Present*. 19 pages.

Vintage edition of Beyond a Boundary
Beyond a Boundary. 1963.

- “What is art?” Chapter included in *C.L.R. James Reader*.

Selected readings on Black struggle:

Introduction

The Counseling Communism Study Circle met from May 2021-May 2022 to discuss the works of the Johnson Forest Tendency (JFT). We have collected their most important works here, and encourage you to find a few folks to discuss them with.

Why read the works of the JFT?

It can be overwhelming to figure out where to start with C.L.R. James. Most people just read *The Black Jacobins*, which was written very early in James' political life. Many other JFT figures discussed below should be much more widely read and discussed. That's why this guide exists!

The Johnson-Forest Tendency was founded by C.L.R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee Boggs, all radical libertarian Marxists centered in Detroit.

C.L.R. James' party name was J. R. Johnson, while Dunayevskaya was Freddie Forest. Hence the “Johnson-Forest Tendency” formed in the early 1940s within the Trotskyist movement, but would break with Trotskyism in the 1950s and remain active until the early 1970s, though their influence can still be seen today. Dunayevskaya, Boggs, and Martin Glaberman, a life-long comrade and member of the JFT, all remained in Detroit for life despite various splits.

As Selma James wrote: The JFT was “based on a root-and-branch critique of the Left vanguard parties and offered a reorientation towards working-class self-activity... the leader was a Black man, an immigrant from the West Indies and a historian; his two closest colleagues were women, one a Russian immigrant, the other first generation Chinese-American... We were multiracial. We were confident. We felt we were ‘going somewhere,’ individually and collectively; with history rather than against it; building not a vanguard party so we could one day be the State, but a movement; antiracist and also antisexist; respectful of the people we worked and lived with, rather than

imagining ourselves an elite amongst the backward... We saw ourselves as uncovering and helping to articulate the infinite variety of ways grassroots people expressed its rebellion."

As Grace Lee Boggs wrote: "No wonder that in those days people used to say that in any gathering you could tell a Johnsonite by the enthusiasm, and energy we exuded. Our very eyes were stars because CLR had helped us rediscover America and the world, and because in the Johnson-Forest Tendency we had created a unique political community, a fellowship of revolutionary intellectuals and grassroots people united by a common goal, the unleashing of the creative energies of those at the bottom of our society."

Selma's account also reclaims C.L.R. James as an imaginative anticapitalist organizer who wanted to build the 'self-mobilization of the proletariat'—a different person from the intellectual popular among academics." Indeed, James was famous for his cultural analysis, while his politics were often viewed as a distraction. Since we are a political group, we may have overcorrected in the other direction and failed to engage with his more culturally focused writing. He would be frustrated with us! James viewed culture as political – no distinction between the two. His writings on the sport cricket are just one example that should be engaged with. We encourage you to at least check out *Beyond a Boundary* - an autobiographical book on cricket.

It is impossible to give a complete picture of everyone involved in the JFT in this short guide. Our goal is to gather sporadic (and often out-of-print) writings into one place and encourage you to engage with this work that is still very relevant.

Most of the main readings cited are available for free online except *Sex, Race, and Class: The Perspective of Winning - A Selection of Writings 1952-2011* (see module 11). We also suggest using the updated version of *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (see module 6). Both are available from PM Press.

Finally Got the News, is a short film documenting the League that was inspiring to self-activity of the working class worldwide, particularly in Italy. Georgakas provides a background of making the film for *Cineaste Magazine* (of note, Georgakas served on the editorial board of the magazine until his death in 2021).

- Kimathi Mohammed - Beyond Measure: C.L.R. James's Influence on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. From *Organization & Spontaneity*. 1974. 36 pages.
- Dan Georgakas. Young Detroit Radicals, 1955-1965. From Sojourner Truth Organization - *Urgent Tasks No. 12: C.L.R. James: His Life and Work*. 1981.
- Finally Got the News. 57 minutes. Documentary about the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

There were different tendencies involved, and tension between focusing on in-plant and out-of-plant organizing to support the League was never clarified. In April 1971, various members favoring direct democracy and decentralization, including Kimathi Mohammed and Modibo Kadalie, a radical social ecologist, were removed. After the “Easter Purge” Marxist-Leninist tendencies took over and the League would dissolve later that month.

Kimathi Mohammed, a Michigan-based activist and close follower of C.L.R. James, worked with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. In contrast to many political thinkers of the Civil Rights and Black Power era, Mohammed’s work emphasized the self-organization of ordinary African Americans and their liberating, self-directed activism. He was critical of would-be Black vanguards at a time when most prominent Black Power activists—even the socialist advocates among them—were beginning to embrace electoral politics and systems of patronage which would ultimately suppress any independent Black political power. Mohamed helped write a new introduction to *Facing Reality* and reprint relevant C.L.R. James materials for the League (see modules 3, 4, and 8). Here he gives a firsthand account of James’ influence on the League.

Dan Georgakas grew up in Detroit and co-authored the essential book on the League, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution*. Here he gives context to the various movements in Detroit prior to the League. He highlights his brief experience with News and Letters as “little more than a publishing committee for the thoughts of Chairwoman Raya Dunayevskaya” while his experience with Facing Reality was that James had a much more indirect influence on the group and more meaningful ways for members to grow. This piece was published as part of an entire issue of *Urgent Tasks* from the Sojourner Truth Organization that focused on James. The entire issue is highly recommended.

We try to use sources directly involved in the movements whenever possible.

Frank Rosengarte’s *Urbane Revolutionary: C. L. R. James and the Struggle for a New Society* relies extensively on JFT sources and is highly recommended.

Module 1: C.L.R. James

Module 1: Overview

Cyril Lionel Robert James was born in Trinidad in 1901. His mother loved to read, his father was a school teacher who helped him get into Queen’s Royal College, giving James a British colonial education most residents of Trinidad didn’t have. He grew up playing cricket. In *Beyond a Boundary*, he wrote about conflicts between the class and race make-up of two cricket teams he could have joined: Maple, “the brown-skinned middle class”, and Shannon, “the black lower-middle class.” By joining Maple he had “gone to the right and, by cutting myself off from the popular side, delayed my political development for years.” This early example shows how culture was never separate from politics for James.

There are way too many biographies of C.L.R. James despite his actual writings being shamefully underread. Here we focus on writings by Selma James, who was a fellow member of the JFT and future partner of C.L.R.; and Martin Glaberman.

Selma James’ piece is essential and expands on the issue of 3 different layers of members in organizations mentioned by Glaberman: “The first is the political and theoretical leadership; the second consists of activists in the arenas in which they work (unions, Black organizations, women’s groups, neighborhood organizations, etc.); the third consists of rank-and-file workers, youth, housewives, etc. The relation of this third layer to the organization depended on the ability to listen to the rank and file. Formal democracy was not enough; that simply re-

sulted in the members voting on proposals coming from the first or second layer... The group went.. out of its way to assure that the voice of working people appeared in the paper. In the days before the cassette recorder, Dunayevskaya coined the phrase 'full fountain pen.' Workers were interviewed, their words typed up and brought back to them for verification, and published."

The JFT tried new ways to center the third layer, while decentralizing intellectuals. There was no set method, and it barely exists in writing but was fundamental to the JFT. It didn't always work, and there were issues with subjectivity (such as one radical worker claiming they speak for the entire workplace, or one woman speaking for all women, as we shall see) but this idea is essential for understanding the JFT and the ideas and methods that would come out of it, like workers' inquiry.

Another piece by Noel Ignatiev is included. Ignatiev was born nearly 40 years after CLR James and was not directly involved but highly influenced by James in the work of the Sojourner Truth Organization (they published an entire issue devoted to James in 1981, see module 12) and Hard Crackers (which continues to this day).

Here we read *Every Cook Can Govern*, which outlines James' belief in Athenian-style assemblies. It was published shortly after a split with Raya Dunayevskaya (see module 7), which may have partially been on the role of organization and intellectuals in the larger movement.

In 2023, what would the formation of new organizations that understand the limitations of formal democracy given the reality of the appearance of these "layers" under capitalism, and believe that tactics like "full fountain pen" that center everyday people can be used towards overcoming contradictions and ultimately capitalist domination and oppression, while recognizing its potential limitations? How could it tear down divi-

lished in James' name, but according to Glaberman it was written mostly by Gorman. The issues around group writing and authorship continued throughout the JFT into 1970.

Listening to Revolt: Selected Writings. 2010.

- The Historical Roots of Black Liberation. 12 pages. 1968.
- Working Class Self-Activity. 12 pages. 1969.

From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community. 1972.

Part 2 - The Sociology of European and American Racism:

- From Sundown to Sunup Racism and Slavery. 25 pages.
- Racism and the Making of American Society. 12 pages.

William Gorman (Morris Goelman) - The Atlantic Slave-Trade. 1970. (Published under C.L.R. James)

Personal Notes. From Sojourner Truth Organization - *Urgent Tasks No. 12: C.L.R. James: His Life and Work*. 1981.

Module 12: League of Revolutionary Black Workers / Movie Night!

Module 12: Overview

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers formed in 1969 in Detroit around a series of wildcat strikes against worsening conditions and racist and bureaucratic unions. It united many Revolutionary Union Movements at Black industrial work sites around principles of Black liberation and Marxism. Martin Glaberman and C.L.R. James mentored many members of the League.

conflict between the two. His time with James is recounted briefly in 'Personal Notes' linked below.

C.L.R. James encouraged Rawick to think about what could be known about slavery from the slaves' point of view – former slaves getting access to the 'full fountain pen.' Rawick would go on to edit a 41-volume set of oral histories of former slaves, titled *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. His introduction on these slave narratives was published as *From Sundown to Sunup* and includes his thoughts on Africa, the slave family, and the place of slavery and racism in the history of capitalism. James remarked "this is the best thing I have read on slavery in general and in particular in the United States... It will make history." As a radical historian, his lasting influence would continue in writers like Peter Linebaugh among many others.

Listening to Revolt, a collection published 20 years after his death, includes an in-depth introduction by David Roediger. Early in life, Rawick's politics were closer to the Communist Party, his political trajectory would continue to radicalize him but like others in the late Facing Reality group, he never really found a political home. He encouraged people to join or at least pay dues to the IWW but never joined himself.

One figure of the JFT that hasn't been mentioned yet is Morris Goelman (known as William Gorman in the JFT). Gorman was a Civil War historian and Hebrew scholar, and part of the JFT prior to Rawick. He was known to have great ideas, but never finished writing projects, which frustrated members of the JFT (per Kent Worcester). James described Gorman's ideas in 1955: "the most amazing thesis that has ever been put forward about American history—that the *runaway slave*, not slavery, nor the 'rebellion of the Negroes,' nor the intelligence and *revolutionism* of the Negroes etc. etc., but the slave, *running away*, awoke and united all the forces for the Second American Revolution. *That* is something that is *ours*, and *ours* alone. Where else could it come from?" The piece below was pub-

sions between political economy and culture and work towards making connections towards self-emancipation?

- Selma James - Striving for Clarity and Influence: The Political Legacy of CLR James. *Sex, Race, and Class: The Perspective of Winning - A Selection of Writings 1952-2011 by Selma James*. 13 pages. 2012.
- Martin Glaberman - Remembering C.L.R. James. 7 pages. 1998.
- Noel Ignatiev - The Worldview of CLR James. *A New Notion: Two Essays by CLR James*. 15 pages. 2010.
- Every Cook Can Govern. *A New Notion: Two Essays by CLR James*. 26 pages. 1956.

Module 1: Supplemental Materials

Here Glaberman writes briefly on James' Marxism and methodology around race, class, and organization in the U.S.

We also highly recommend checking out the C.L.R. James timeline and the video documentary: *Every Cook Can Govern: Documenting the life, impact & works of CLR James*.

The C.L.R. James documentary project has recommended checking out the analogies of James' writings mentioned below, "Although out of print, these anthologies are worth seeking out as they encapsulate the breadth and depth of James' political intellect, from the stories he wrote in his 20s through to his later writings written in his 70s and 80s." Anna Grimshaw was James's assistant for the last six years of his life and editor of *The C.L.R. James Reader*, her introduction is included below. These analogies are expensive but we have scanned them for you and uploaded them to Libcom for you to check out!

Ask James himself: "I like to think of myself as a Marxist who has made serious contributions to Marxism in various fields. I want to be considered one of the important Marxists." Also, "I, a man of the Caribbean, have found that it is in the study of Western literature, Western philosophy and Western history that I have found out the things that I have found out, even about the underdeveloped countries."

As Scott McLemee wrote: "James' writing moved with grace and brilliance among the most diverse topics, finding links between the game of cricket and Aristotle's Poetics, and weaving together connections among Shakespeare's plays, Lenin's

ings on that campaign, as well as theoretical writings, are included here.

Despite divorcing C.L.R., Selma would continue to recognize the importance of the JFT, writing in 1989: "[It was] a new type of political organization.. It was this organizational creativity, which allowed him to break from the outdated and elitist Marxism for which Europe was the center of the world." Nina López's introduction remarks that Selma was "a third layer person, encouraged to speak and write—a formative experience for Selma, similar to James Boggs.

Sex, Race, and Class: The Perspective of Winning - A Selection of Writings 1952-2011 by Selma James. 2012.

- Nina López. Introduction. 9 pages.
- A Woman's Place. 1952. 18 pages.
- Women, the Unions, and Work, or What is Not to be Done? 1972. 16 pages
- The Family Allowance Campaign. 1973. 5 pages.
- Sex, Race, and Class. 1974. 10 pages.
- Marx and Feminism. 1983. 17 pages.

Module 11: George Rawick and William Gorman

Module 11: Overview

George Rawick was born in Brooklyn in 1929. He was radicalized by the treatment of fellow Jews during WWII. He was the last major figure to join the Facing Reality group. He would serve as James' personal assistant in London in the 1960s, and was highly influenced by Selma James, often caught in personal

Module 10: Selma James

Module 10: Overview

Selma James joined the JFT when she was about 15 years old in 1945. She was 29 years younger than C.L.R. In 1956 she would become C.L.R. James' third wife until their divorce nearly 25 years later. Her energy and devotion to C.L.R. in times of trouble and illness was an education in women's liberation in both the workplace and in domestic life. Selma James often felt pushed to the side despite raising children and keeping everything in order for James to do his work. A complaint from another member directed at James and the JFT was very similar: "rank-and- file women who lacked the credentials of a Grace Boggs or a Raya Dunayevskaya were shunted off to the margins, and were not taken seriously by the leadership" (from Frank Rosengarten's book).

'A Woman's Place' was written while she was working in a factory at the age of 22. In 'full fountain pen' style, C.L.R. suggested she write the piece by writing her ideas onto scraps of paper and keeping them in a shoebox to compile later.

C.L.R. also suggested the piece should be co-authored with JFT member Filomena Daddario, though Selma wrote the piece alone, so both women could speak publicly about it (another example of the JFT's issues around group writing and subjectivity, often claiming to speak for "women"). Although the pamphlet did not advocate socialism or a political revolution, it did focus on the complete need for change in domestic social relations, and would be a founding document for autonomist feminists like Mariarosa Dalla Costa (who would also have her own group writing dispute with Selma James).

Selma would later focus on the Wages for Housework campaigns in the 1970s which created tension with C.L.R. James. They would divorce a few years later in 1980. Some of her writ-

politics and the problems facing developing countries. To read James is an exercise in rediscovering the world — and an invitation not only to reinterpret it, but also to change it."

- Martin Glaberman - Reflections on the Marxism and The Politics of C.L.R. James. *Punching Out and Other Writings*. Pages 191-197.
- *Every Cook Can Govern: Documenting the life, impact & works of CLR James*. 2016. 121 minutes.
- The C.L.R. James documentary project. CLR James Timeline. 2016.

Analogies of C.L.R. James Writings:

- *The Future in the Present (Selected Writings)*. 1977.
- *Spheres of Existence (Selected Writings)*. 1980.
- *At the Rendezvous of Victory (Selected Writings)*. 1984.
- *The C.L.R. James Reader*. 1992. Published posthumously. Summary of all 3 anthologies, with additional material.

Anna Grimshaw - C.L.R. James: A Revolutionary Vision for the Twentieth Century. 22 pages.

Module 2: C.L.R. James in 1930s England: The Black Jacobins / A History of Pan-African Revolt

(4 sessions OR 2 sessions)

Module 2: Overview

James was about 31 years old when he moved to England to pursue a career as a fiction writer and literary critic, and journalist covering the sport Cricket. Shortly after arriving, he campaigned for West Indies independence, joined the Trotskyist movement, and wrote a play starring Paul Robeson about the Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint L’Ouverture.

A few years later, in 1938, *The Black Jacobins*, James most well-known work, was released. Earlier that year, James also released *A History of Negro Revolt* (revised in 1969 as *A History of Pan-African Revolt*). This is a classic account of global black resistance and a shorter read.

Later that year, James would then leave England for a U.S. speaking tour as part of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) at the request of Leon Trotsky. James would end up staying in the U.S. as the director of the SWP’s ‘National Negro Department’. He would be involved in Pan-African throughout his life but never disconnected from class struggles.

- *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. 1938, updated 1962. 376 pages.

Module 2: Supplementary Materials

One year prior, In 1937, James had published *World Revolution 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* which Trotsky recognized as a critique of Stalinism. See William Clare Roberts on this and some critiques of *The Black Jacobins* below. *The Black Jacobins Reader* also contains relevant essays. Christian Høgsbjerg’s book chronicles James’ time in England, “revealing the radicalizing effect of this critical period on James’s intellectual and political trajectory. During this time, James turned from liberal humanism to revolutionary socialism.”

of political differences. He also kept James’ work in print through Bewick Editions, which was run out of his home.

His only book, *Wartime Strikes* was submitted as his doctoral thesis after it was published. Lynd remarks on the book: “For Marty, the path to revolution was not first to change workers’ ideas, and then to proceed to revolutionary action. Quoting Marx, Marty insisted that the activity would come first, and in the course of the activity consciousness would change. This is the significance of Marty Glaberman’s best-known published work, *Wartime Strikes*, a study of the struggle within the UAW during World War II over the no-strike pledge. Marty found that at the same time that UAW members, voting alone in their homes, recorded a majority for continuing the no-strike pledge, a majority of the workers in Detroit automotive plants took part in unauthorized wildcat strikes. He concluded that what workers say they are willing to do is not necessarily true. The workers’ ‘real’ consciousness was better revealed by how they acted than by how they voted.”

This view of the working class is consistent back to James’ writings in ‘Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity’. *Punching Out and Other Writings*. 2002.

- Staughton Lynd. Introduction. 12 pages.
- Towards an American Revolutionary Perspective. 19 pages.
- Marxism, The Working Class and The Trade Unions. 6 pages.

Wartime Strikes: The Struggle Against the No-Strike Pledge in the UAW During World War II. 135 pages. 1980.

- Grace Lee Boggs - C.L.R. James: Organizing in the U.S.A., 1938-1953. In *C. L. R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, edited by Selwyn R. Cudjoe and William E. Cain. 1995. 9 pages.
- Kimathi Mohammed - New Introduction to *Facing Reality*. 1970. 4 pages.
- C.L.R. James with introduction by Martin Glaberman. Marxism and the Intellectuals. 1962.
- James Boggs. *The American Revolution: Pages From a Negro Worker's Notebook*. 1963.
- The Gathering Forces. 1967. (Unpublished)

Module 9: Martin Glaberman (2 sessions)

Module 9: Overview

Martin Glaberman was a full-time autoworker and UAW organizer in Detroit. He grew up in Brooklyn and was a socialist since he was 13 years old. He joined the JFT early on and would remain in contact with James for life. After retiring from the factory, he would continue to write, attend *Capital* reading groups and never lost faith in the self-activity of the working class.

Glaberman would transition to academia after the factory. Staughton Lynd, a grassroots labor lawyer, considers him to be the most important writer on labor matters in the U.S. in the 20th century. "He developed distinctive concepts concerning the nature of trade unionism; the unfolding of working-class consciousness; and the forms of revolutionary organization appropriate to modern industrial society."

Glaberman's home was also a central gathering point for many activists and community members in Detroit, regardless

'Haiti & New Orleans: Is the Feeling Mutual?' is a podcast exploring the after-effects of the Haitian Revolution by tracing the San Domingo emigres' experience in Louisiana and providing some more current context.

James' memoir of George Padmore, tells how they grew up together and later worked together in the International African Service Bureau.

- *A History of Pan-African Revolt*. 102 pages. 1938, updated 1969.
- Robin D.G. Kelley - Introduction. 34 pages. 1994.
- William Clare Roberts - Centralism is a Dangerous Tool: Leadership in C.L.R. James's History of Principles. 21 pages. 2021.
- Charles Forsdick, Christian Høgsbjerg (editors) - *The Black Jacobins Reader*. 464 pages. 2017.
- Christian Høgsbjerg. *C. L. R. James in Imperial Britain*. 312 pages. 2014.
- TriPod: New Orleans at 300. *Haiti & New Orleans: Is The Feeling Mutual?*. 2017. Podcast, 59 minutes.
- C.L.R. James - George Padmore: Black Marxist Revolutionary – A Memoir. 1976.

Module 3: Revolutionary answer to the Negro Problem in the USA / Basic Documents on the Black Struggle.

Module 3: Overview

In April 1939, James visited Trotsky in Mexico for about a month. They discussed the "Negro Question". Parts of their conversation were transcribed as 'Three Discussions on the Negro

Question in 1939'. Trotsky saw the Trotskyist Party as providing leadership to the black community, James suggested that the self-organized struggle of African Americans would lead to a much broader radical social movement. James was way ahead of his time!

Nearly a decade later, James spoke at the SWP's U.S. convention. The speech came to be known as 'The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the USA.' The speech outlined the JFT's view of the 'Negro struggle' having 'a vitality and validity of its own'.

- Basic Documents on the Black Struggle. 1939-1950: 24 pages.

1. Three Discussions on the Negro Question in 1939 2. Revolutionary answer to the Negro Problem in the USA (1948) 3. Negro Revolution Through Revolutionary Socialism (1950).

C.L.R. James was never completely consistent on the role of the working class himself, and this would lead to disagreements with Marty Glaberman when writing 'The Gathering Forces' in 1967. This, combined with low membership, would lead Glaberman to dissolve the Facing Reality group in 1970.

James was involved with the League for Revolutionary Black Workers in 1970 and encouraged them to reprint *Facing Reality* with a new introduction. Here are some key points from that introduction by Kimathi Mohammad: "As far as I am concerned, *Facing Reality* is a classic, and one of the hallmarks of social thought. When C. L. R. James wrote this book in 1958, he did what few, if any, political analysts had done; he gave us a glimpse of the emerging new society..."

The reality James forces us to recognize is that our societal system is fluctuating between a state of crisis and paralysis. Certain elements of the social order are in motion and their self-activity makes the revolution. After reading 'Facing Reality' you will be better able to identify these revolutionary elements and determine how we have to respond to them...

'Facing Reality' is a direct break with the outdated conceptions and theories of Marxism. James destroys the myth that the revolution is impossible unless it is led by a vanguard party. His focal point is the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the development of Workers' Councils. However, James does not just deal with the political developments in Hungary; he also traces what he considers obvious patterns of movement in the United States, Poland, France, England, China and Ghana. Throughout 'Facing Reality' James contends that the new society already exists, and we have to recognize and record the facts of its existence. He also takes the position that: 'It is quite untrue to say that contemporary society faces the possibility of collapse. As a way of life, as a civilization, as a culture, modern society has collapsed already.'"

- Cornelius Castoriadis - C. L. R. James and the Fate of Marxism. In *C. L. R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, edited by Selwyn R. Cudjoe and William E. Cain. 1995. 21 pages.

Module 8: Supplemental Materials

Grace Lee Boggs reflects on her formidable time as a founder of the JFT in ‘C.L.R. James: Organizing in the U.S.A.’ It is essential reading – particularly her discussion on how Correspondence was founded and organized as a special school in 1952, in which “blacks, rank-and-file workers, women, and young people were the teachers while the intellectuals listened or played the role of full fountain pens. This was a very important school for all of us politically. It also meant a lot to me personally because it was at this school that I met James Boggs whom I later married.” Boggs was invited as a “third layer” Black worker, and would later become the chair of Correspondence.

Later, in 1962, James Boggs, as chair, refused to publish James’ piece ‘Marxism and the Intellectuals’. C.L.R. would denounce Boggs for breaking with Marxism, instead focusing on the role of increasing automation and the revolutionary subject of Black people outside of the point-of-production. James Boggs was concerned about sharing his writing on these positions with the rest of the organization. Due to this perceived break with Marxism, C.L.R. demanded Grace cease communication with him and the organization split. Shortly after the split, James Boggs would release these writings as *The American Revolution: Pages From a Negro Worker’s Notebook*, which was very influential at the time. Grace also attributes part of the split to the challenges C.L.R. faced trying to lead an organization overseas. Grace and James Boggs, would remain activists and writers in Detroit for life.

Module 3: Supplementary Materials

‘Down with Starvation Wages’ is an early example of C.L.R. James that encouraged writing by the “third layer” themselves – the workers or the subject themselves in struggle. The workers wrote the entire thing, ‘full fountain pen,’ and he published it.

It may be interesting to compare how James’ ‘Black Power’ talk given in London in 1967 to his earlier works. McLemee’s collection provides further writings and context.

- Down With Starvation Wages in South-East Missouri. 1942.
- Black Power. 1967. 16 pages.
- Scott McLemee (editor) - *C. L. R. James On The “Negro Question.”* 184 pages.

Module 4: Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity

Module 4: Overview

Just prior to this, in 1947, the JFT published ‘Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity’ as a pamphlet. The following year, James would expand this work into a full book, ‘Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx and Lenin.’ It is one of the most complex and original Marxist documents ever to come out of the

U.S. It provides a thorough reexamination of the Hegelian foundations of Marxist theory and a new interpretation of the history of the labor movement through a close engagement with Hegel's Logic.

Here is an extended quote from the shorter piece, 'Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity' for example:

"The dialectic teaches that in all forms of society we have known, the increasing development of material wealth brings with it the increasing degradation of the large mass of humanity..."

The second law of dialectical materialism is the change of quantity into quality. At a certain stage a developing contradiction, so to speak, explodes, and both the elements of contradiction are thereby altered. In the history of society these explosions are known as revolution...

Thus, the inevitability of socialism is the inevitability of the negation of the negation, the third and most important law of the dialectic... He negates all that has previously impeded him, i.e. negated him, in the full realisation of his inherent nature. Socialism is the negation of all previous negations. It is obvious that these are large conceptions. But the death of a world civilisation is not a small thing."

- Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity. 33 pages. 1947.

Module 4: Supplemental Materials

James reprinted 'Basic Documents on the Black Struggle' (see module 3), 'Facing Reality' (see module 8) and the full book 'Notes on Dialectics' when working with the Garvey institute sorting out internal problems with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in 1970 (see module 12). These works remained essential to James for decades.

- *Outline of Marx's Capital Volume One.* 1940s, updated 1978.
- Peter Hudis - Raya Dunayevskaya's Marxist Humanism and the Alternative to Capitalism. 2021.

Frank Rosengarten - *Urbane Revolutionary: C. L. R. James and the Struggle for a New Society.* 2007. 296 pages.

- Chapter 4: The Internal Life of the Johnson-Forest Tendency

Module 8: Facing Reality (3 sessions)

Module 8: Overview

Just like C.L.R. James was ahead of his time with his early writings on the 'Revolutionary answer to the Negro Problem in the USA' in the 1940s, he was also ahead of his time when writing 'Facing Reality' with Grace Lee Boggs in 1958. As the cover says "A sixties classic before the sixties." It was originally published shortly after the Hungarian workers' revolution, which confirmed many of James' ideas of self-emancipation and working-class self-activity through the formation of workers' councils against the state capitalist Soviet Union.

John H. Bracey's short introduction included in the book gives more context. According to Bracey, Cornelius Castoriadis, of Socialisme ou Barbarie, did write chapter 6 on 'The Marxist Organization: 1903–1958', though he dissociated himself from *Facing Reality* because he felt the ideas were not fully fleshed out. Castoriadis wrote about his relationship with James, issues with *Facing Reality*, and his own break from Marxism in the essay below.

- C.L.R. James, Grace Lee Boggs, with Cornelius Castoriadis, *Facing Reality: The New Society: Where to look for it & How to bring it closer.* 1958. 175 pages.

He considers the analysis of abstract and concrete labor as his original contribution to political economy, ‘the pivot on which a clear comprehension of political economy turns.’”

- *Marx’s Capital and Today’s Global Crisis* (Chapters 5-8 of *Marxism & Freedom* & updated materials). 1958, updated 1978. 108 pages.

Module 7: Supplemental Materials

Dunayevskaya’s *Outline to Marx’s Capital* continued to be used for half a century by Martin Glaberman is provided below. Citations have been updated to match the Penguin edition. This outline continues to be influential, and was mentioned in a 2021 Red May panel by Paul North discussing a new English translation of *Capital*.

In the chapter ‘The Logic and Scope of Capital, Volumes II and III’ Dunayevskaya writes “Capitalism begins when the capacity to labor becomes a commodity. As we saw in Volume I, production becomes capitalist commodity production from the moment when the direct producer must ‘instead of a commodity, sell his own capacity to labor, as a commodity.’ Hence, it is more correct to call the Marxist theory of capital not a labor theory of value, but a value theory of labor.”

For non-orthodox readers of Marx, it is important to note that Dunayevskaya wrote this in the 1940s, before many works on Marx’s Value Theory would make similar points decades later.

Peter Hudis is affiliated with the International Marxist-Humanist Organization, which split from News and Letters Committees. Here Hudis provides a sympathetic biography.

Frank Rosengarten’s chapter gives a good overview of the JFT and the ambiguous split between James and Dunayevskaya.

According to Kimathi Mohammed, James deemed these two documents key for (1) countering radical forces inside and outside the League that attacked Black Nationalism on the grounds that from the standpoint of Marxism-Leninism it was reactionary and (2) steering the League forces towards a proper understanding of what dialectics as a method of thought was all about and how to correctly apply it as a tool of analysis.

‘Notes on Dialectics’ was privately circulated in mimeographed editions. This is its first publication in book form in 1980 with a new introduction by James.

- *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx and Lenin*. 231 pages. 1948.

Module 5: Grace Lee and The American Worker (2 sessions)

Module 5: Overview

The American Worker was the first modern writing to be considered Workers’ Inquiry. It was written in 1947 by two members of the JFT: Phil Singer (using the pen name, Paul Romano) and Grace Lee Boggs (using her party name, Ria Stone). In the first half, Singer, an auto worker, goes “full fountain pen” and vividly describes factory life. In the second half, Grace Lee outlines a Marxist analysis.

Grace Chun Lee was a Chinese American with a PhD in philosophy. She became an activist after the March on Washington led by A. Philip Randolph in 1941. Grace Lee was attracted to the day-to-day organizing in the black community and joined the Workers Party to do this. “However, the moment CLR discovered that I had studied Hegel and could read German, he had me translating *Capital* for him and comparing its structure with Hegel’s *Logic*.” She would be the first to translate Marx’s

1844 Manuscripts into English for discussion with Detroit autoworkers.

Asad Haider and Salar Mohandes on the method of *The American Worker*: “It first began as a diary. When Phil Singer, an auto worker employed in a New Jersey GM plant, began to discuss the frustrations of the rank and file at the factory, CLR James suggested that he write his thoughts down in a diary. Sections of it were later assembled into a coherent piece, and paired with a theoretical essay.. The first part of the pamphlet.. became a kind of self-reflexive ethnographic investigation into the conditions of proletarian life in postwar America. The second part.. consciously drew on the concrete experiences documented in the first part in order to theorize the content of socialism in a world changed by automation, the assembly line, and semi-skilled labor.”

Grace Lee cites Karl Marx’s questionnaire as an influence: “See, ‘A Workers’ Inquiry’ [Workers’ Questionnaire 1880] by Karl Marx in which one hundred and one questions are asked of the workers’ themselves, dealing with everything from lavatories, soap, wine, strikes and unions to ‘the general physical, intellectual, and moral conditions of life of the working men and women in your trade.’”

The text expanded on Marx’s questionnaire in a more narrative form and had a tremendous impact beyond the U.S. Socialisme ou Barbarie in France for example:

The American Worker, a booklet published in 1947 by the Johnson-Forest Tendency, an American group with which S. ou B. had, from its beginnings, maintained a close relationship. This text, published over the first five issues [in 1950], constituted for many years a model for the interpretation of struggles conducted in France.” -*A Socialisme ou Barbarie: An Anthology*, p. 96

- Phil Singer and Grace Lee, with introduction by Martin Glaberman. *The American Worker*. 113 pages. 1947.

section of the Trotskyist Left Opposition, and worked as Trotsky’s secretary from August 1937 to May 1938 in Mexico.

Dunayevskaya broke with Trotsky over the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939 and helped develop the theory of State Capitalism with James. An important early contribution by Dunayevskaya was a study using original Russian language sources to analyze industrialization in Russia from published in 1941. Dunayevskaya would later split from James and become the founder of “Marxist-Humanism.” Though often considered parts of the same tradition, James thought the addition of humanism to Marxism was redundant.

Important to Marxist-Humanism were Marx’s early ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844’. They were first translated into English by Grace Lee Boggs in 1947, and continued to be a significant influence on Marxist-Humanism. Despite the JFT’s importance of being the first to translate these early manuscripts, Dunayevskaya always considered *Capital* to be Marx’s most important work.

Dunayevskaya would split from James and Grace Lee Boggs in 1956 to form News and Letters Committees, still active to this day.

Marxism and Freedom is regarded as Dunayevskaya’s most important work, the first book in the “trilogy of revolution.” The book was released shortly after the split and was likely influenced by the JFT. Here we include her chapters on *Capital*, later reprinted in the 1970s as a pamphlet with additional material when a new English translation of *Capital* was released by Penguin. She continues to attack the Trotskyist Ernest Mandel who wrote the introduction for the new Penguin translations.

Unlike James, she clearly understood the importance of abstract labor. She writes in *The Humanism and Dialectic of Capital, Volume 1, 1867-1887*: “Marx begins CAPITAL as he began Critique, with an analysis of the dual character of the commodity. He moves straightforwardly from the duality of use-value and value of the commodity to the dual character of labor itself.

months in 1953, James wrote *.Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*. This analysis of Herman Melville's novels *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* was used unsuccessfully to make the case to the U.S. government to prevent deportation. James would return to England and the Caribbean before returning to the U.S. in 1970 as a professor. (See additional materials at the end of this study guide for more info).

For James' original remarks on the 3 layers within organizations, see the relevant section of the 'Balance Sheet' mentioned below. Reading the full document may be too polemical.

Overall, for a text that is only 113 pages, the PM press edition has 39 pages of introductory materials. That's plenty.

- Production for the Sake of Production. 1943.
- Martin Glaberman - The Marxism of C.L.R. James. *Punching Out and Other Writings*. Pages 181-190.
- Introductions and prefaces by James, Glaberman, and Paul Buhle - *State Capitalism and World Revolution*. 1950. 39 pages. Updated edition available from PM Press.
- Balance Sheet of Trotskyism in the United States, 1940-1947.

V. The Organizational Question, section c) "All-Inclusive Party" and "Bureaucracy"

Module 7: Raya Dunayevskaya

Module 7: Overview

Raya Dunayevskaya was born in Ukraine and came to the United States with her parents in 1922 when she was 12 years old. She was active in Black struggles in Chicago throughout the 1920s. Later on, in the 1930s, she belonged to the U.S.-based

Module 5: Supplemental Materials

Haider and Mohandes's article should be read for an overview of Workers' Inquiry and the JFT.

Note: The Counseling Communism group also used this piece as a transition reading to the Socialisme ou Barbarie (SoB) Anthology and a series on value after finishing the JFT readings. There is also important info in this article on Selma James, SoB, and abstract labor.

See Counseling Communism Study Guide #2.5 on SoB and Social Reproduction Theory (coming soon).

Haider and Mohandes's article highlights the issue of expanding the subjectivity of a single worker to the entire working class. See comments on Selma James' 'A Woman's Place' for example (module 10).

American Revolutionary is a documentary about the life of Grace Lee Boggs.

- Asad Haider and Salar Mohandes. *Workers' Inquiry: A Genealogy*. 2013.
- Clark McAllister. *Karl Marx's Workers' Inquiry: International History, Reception, and Responses*. 2022. 170 pages.
- *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs*. 84 minutes.

Module 6: State Capitalism and World Revolution (2 sessions)

Module 6: Overview

State Capitalism and World Revolution was the document that led the JFT to a complete split from Trotskyism, forming the Correspondence Publishing Committee. It was written by

the 3 leading figures of the JFT: C.L.R. James, Grace Lee, and Raya Dunayevskaya (see module 7).

A document written largely in transition, Paul Buhle writes: “*State Capitalism* may be itself regarded as a step toward the philosophical conclusion spelled out in *Facing Reality*. [it] is also the last of James’ texts to be set in the classic Marxist-Leninist strategic framework... James knew what it was moving away from but not so clearly what it was going toward. *State Capitalism* told the Old Left what it did not want to hear, and spoke to the rising New Left in a voice that it could not clearly understand.”

If you aren’t sure you want to commit to reading the full document, James’ anthology only included the chapter ‘The Class Struggle’ and may be worth checking out.

You may consider skipping this module but definitely read ‘*Facing Reality*’.

Oftentimes it is very polemical and assumes the reader is familiar with Marx (keep in mind this was originally a Trotskyist party document). “*Germain*” was a party name of Ernest Mandel, a leading Trotskyist economic theorist, and often attacked. Mandel would go on to write introductions to new English translations of ‘*Capital*’ in the 1970s and would continue to be attacked by Raya Dunayevskaya long after splitting with James.

State Capitalism expanded on the earlier *Invading Socialist Society* written in 1947. This was the same year the JFT translated Marx’s early Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts. The division between intellectual and manual labor was fresh on James’ mind, and is often confused Marx’s later contribution in *Capital* of abstract vs. concrete labor. (Not sure what that means? Check out our current study circle on value!)

Furthermore, those looking for a less orthodox Marxism from James will be disappointed. James relies heavily on the falling rate of profit that Marx wrote in his unpublished manuscripts that would become *Capital* Vol. 3. James does not

address that the value-form existed in the USSR simply because of money and commodity production/exchange, instead he relies on muddled notions of alienation and the falling rate of profit. Other libertarian socialists like Paul Mattick also leaned into the falling rate of profit (see *Counseling Communism* #1). We think this is unfortunate, see the upcoming *Counseling Communism* #3 on value (coming soon) for more info.

James writes in a footnote from chapter 2: “The falling rate of profit is no longer theory. Like so much of Marx’s abstract analysis the proof now is before our eyes... The total mass of surplus value produced in relation to the total social capital is hopelessly inadequate. It may be useful (though we doubt this) to point out the fabulous profits of this or that company in the United States. This is no more than a variety of American exceptionalism. These profits will never be able to rebuild world economy. Europe, China, India under capitalism will perish for lack of capital to continue ever-greater expansion. This capitalist system is finished, finished for good and all.”

- C.L.R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, Grace Lee Boggs - *State Capitalism and World Revolution*. 1950. 113 pages. Updated edition available from PM Press.

Module 6: Supplemental Materials

If you are looking for Marxian theory from James, ‘Production for the Sake of Production’ was an earlier text that covers Marx’s categories of constant and variable capital and is worth reading. There are also some more Marx related texts at the end of this guide.

Martin Glaberman gives firsthand context and theory behind *State Capitalism* and its place within James’ trajectory.

From 1938-1953 James lived in the U.S. James was deported, technically because of a passport violation, but largely because of his political activities. While detained on Ellis Island for 4