

## C. L. R. JAMES "FROM TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE TO FIDEL CASTRO" (1962)

By Isha Frederick, Sherese George, and Resa Noel

The title, "From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro," is likely to cause a reader to conjure up certain speculations about its meaning. James, therefore, puts it into perspective by first discounting the two most pervasive implications that the reader would likely assume. He points out that the title is not meant to suggest that the focus will rest in the fact that the two individuals cited led revolutions in the West Indies. He notes too that the title is not meant to provide a "convenient or journalistic" (296) labeling of a historical period under consideration. He suggests instead that the title is meant to signify a historical commonality, meaning both individuals cited are representative of situations emerging from "... The pass and fell incensed points/Of mighty opposites" (296). James explains that, despite the time lapse of over a century and half between these two individuals, the revolutions they led in Haiti and Cuba respectively underlie a history arising from the imposition of Negro slavery and sugar plantation. James posits that although the majority of Cuba's population was not enslaved, the very existence of Negro slavery and the sugar plantation bequeaths it an identity that is West Indian, as is the case with Haiti. Both situations, are therefore, "the product of a peculiar origin and a peculiar history," one that is uniquely West Indian. Furthermore, he posits that though such undertakings throughout the Caribbean islands differed, they all indicate a movement towards a national identity.

James then claims that in the Haitian Revolution, "West Indians first became aware of themselves as a people" (296). The Cuban Revolution, on the other hand, signalled "the quest for national identity" (296). To this end, he suggests that the West Indies between L'Ouverture and Castro naturally falls into three periods, namely, The Nineteenth Century, Between the Wars and After World War II.

### The Nineteenth Century

For James this period signifies the abolition of slavery. He points out especially that the patterns of Caribbean development began in Haiti. Tracking the progression of Haiti's development, James notes that Haiti, under the leadership of L'Ouverture, first sought to maintain the sugar plantation. This eventually failed due to the ill associations it presented to the Haitians. Under the leadership of Pétion the sugar plantation was replaced by subsistence production. This resulted in "an economic decay and every variety of political disorder" (297). It, however, "preserved the national independence" (297). To James, this proved to be a positive factor in the Africa-awareness drive.

On the downside, these attempts by Haiti were portrayed internationally as "hollow pretensions of Haitian civilization" (298). The suggestion was that Haiti was merely replicating French civilization in Haiti. To counteract this onslaught, Haiti resorted to what has since then been termed "Négritude" as its "national rallying-point" (298). In other words, it sought for something unique and unifying and found its peculiar history, a concept that transcends to Africa and all Africans, West Indians included. Specifically, it looked to the African customs carried out by its peasants in Haiti. As James explains, "...all this was Africa in the West Indies. But it was Haitian" (298). Moreover, this way of life became the catapult for "Haitian literary creation" (298). It was the Haitian Fernando Ortiz, who, a year after the Platt Amendment of 1904, "ushered the Caribbean into the thought of the twentieth century and kept it there" (299). Ortiz was "the first and greatest" of "the non-political writer(s) devoted to the analysis and expression of West Indian society" (299). This, according to James, is a "particular feature

of West Indian life" (299). Prior to this, James argues that plantation labourers did not advance the cause and "the Caribbean territories drifted along" (298) until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Cuba reignited the war for independence.

### Between the Wars

Before the First World War, Haiti is said to have "(begun) to write another chapter in the record of the West Indian struggle for national independence" (299). In this regard, the whole nation forcefully and successfully resisted the Marines who invaded Haiti in 1913 under the guise of recovering debts and restoring order. This resistance led to Haiti's substitution of Africa for France. James claims that this consciousness of Africa in the West Indian people proved to be a stage in the development of their quest for national identity.

James discusses the impact of this consciousness. He points out that the way was paved for Africa to gain emancipation by the great influence of two West Indians, "not Africans," (299). Firstly, the Jamaican immigrant Marcus Garvey advanced the cause by mobilizing a mass movement among African Negroes, passionately declaring that "Africa was the home of a civilization which was once great and would be great again" (300). Although his methods were rash and "incompetent" (299) at times, he caused persons, Negroes and others alike, to recognize the worth of Africa. James notes that Garvey had found that the "cause of Africans and of people of African descent (was) not so much neglected as unworthy of consideration" (300). The other influential West Indian was Trinidadian George Padmore. His most significant contribution, according to James, was the "African Bureau" (301) which he organized, the only African organization of its kind, to promote African emancipation. It was through this association that Dr Nkrumah was able to work along with Padmore to outline "doctrines and premises of Pan-Africanism" (301) which culminated in Nkrumah leading the Gold Coast in Ghana to emancipation. Padmore has been indisputably called the "Father of African Emancipation" (301).

James makes a point of stating that during that process many misjudged and underestimated these West Indians, and the same is being done to the West Indies. Perhaps the implication is that the skeptics will once more be disproved.

Noting then the sparse documentation of Africa's contribution to the development of the West Indies, James highlights a few. First, he examines the work of Aimé Césaire, a black West Indian from the French colony of Martinique who published the most famous poem ever written about Africa, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Statement of the Return to the Country Where I was Born). In it, Césaire expresses that the salvation for the West Indian lies in Africa, the original home and ancestry of the West Indian people' (302). In other words, West Indians need to develop an understanding of and appreciation for their African heritage before they can delve into defining their own national identity. Furthermore, C.L.R James states that the journey to Africa "clear(s) from minds the stigma that anything African was inherently inferior and degraded' (304), then West Indians can move along the path of acquiring a national identity.

James speculates that part of our cultural identity lies in the amalgamation of the various cultures which exist in varying proportions from island to island. This amalgamation is evident in the political sphere where the masses have embraced and supported leaders from different ethnicities. For instance, Arthur Andrew Cipriani, a French Creole politician in the island of Trinidad, championed the notion of Independence and federation of the British West Indian territories. His advocacy rippled through the islands as oil field workers as oil field workers in Trinidad, the largest proletarian grouping in the West Indies, began a strike;

while social upheaval occurred in Jamaica, "thousands of miles away (from Trinidad)" (305). Moreover, these protests signaled to the colonial governments that the masses were becoming aware of the importance of issues such as labour movements and independence.

### After World War II

Despite the efforts of West Indians such as Cipriani, remnants of colonialism still existed within the Caribbean societies. In particular "financial power and its mechanism are today entirely in the hands of metropolitan organizations and their agents" (306). For instance, industries such as oil and bauxite are in the hands of foreign firms and local politicians offer concessions to encourage similar firms to establish new industries. Still West Indian society remains dependent on external countries for economic development.

In the political realm, James comments that "within a West Indian island the old colonial system and democracy are incompatible" (307). In other words the concept of Independence was defeated if the West Indian societies still depended heavily on European colonizers for political and economic assistance. Therefore, democracy along with a sense of national identity can break the old colonial system which left us socially and culturally divided.

James suggests that the consciousness of the black masses and the reality of their lives are influenced by the colonial social structure which is grounded on the notion of social mobility and wealth based on colour and class. Moreover, the wealth of the societies belong to the white majority and the emerging and growing coloured middle class. Due to this social and economic trend, persons tend to crowd into the capital city, as they became attracted to the notion of economic development. This movement was what 'Castro placed a match (on)' (308); that is, he tries to bring some balance / equality to the disproportionate distribution of wealth. Therefore, in at least one island some progress was being made in destabilising the social and economic remnants of slavery and colonialism.

In addition, colonial education, one of the key constructs of colonial system, continues to be used to control the masses. These ideologies are used to support or give credence to "brutality" or "savagery" while also igniting social change as the form of the Cuban Revolution. James provides two examples of the way in which two colonial systems control their respective colonies; French and British. French colonialists administer "a crushing weight on any attempt to change the old colonial system" (308). Furthermore, the resistance of the colonialists to grant countries like Guadeloupe and Martinique Independence, cause the mass population to relentlessly demand it. Conversely, the British system is more subtle in its control of the masses. For example, up to the time the article was written two countries had received Independence but "the Queen of England is their queen" (308); and they still receive grants, royal visits among other donations.

In James's view, America also assumes the role of colonizer, and in the case of Puerto Rico they do it under the guise of generosity; for instance free entry into the United States for their unemployed and their ambitious" (308). Also, America assisted in the deportation of Trujillo to Paris, leaving "Duvalier of Haiti...the uncrowned king of Latin American barbarism" (309). To be precise, although America is not a traditional colonizer (like the British and French), they manage to hinder democratic progress in some islands by making Puerto Rico economically dependent on them and obstructed the political development in Haiti. Ultimately, the guise or falsehood of generosity of the colonizers should be replaced by the colonies self-reliance. James posits that West Indian islands have raw materials which can

be successfully transformed into viable industries.

In this final section, James seems to be pointing to the West Indian writers as the medium through which this spirit of nationalism, a national identity should be expressed, maintained and encouraged. The people of the West Indies he says have already become 'nationalistic' in thought "...For if the ideologists have moved closer towards the people, the people have caught up with the ideologist and the national identity is a national fact" (310). This spirit of nationalism began with the Haitian revolution under the leadership of Toussaint L'Overture and was one of the most striking features of the upheaval in Trinidad during 1937-38. In Trinidad, all 'foreign' influences were excluded, almost abandoned and focus was instead placed on 'national issues'. There was no talk or thought, no finger pointing towards the British or Americans; instead every effort was concentrated on the people of Trinidad and how they can move forward together as a 'people' for the betterment of the local community (311). To the people of Trinidad, their quest for the return of the base was their first step at asserting and establishing a national identity, and this spirit was such that they were willing to suffer and die for their beliefs if need be (311). This spirit of nationalism spread to the other islands and soon it became a West Indian matter, perhaps because of the historic legacy that is identical to all the West Indian islands.

James argues further that "the West Indian national identity is more easily glimpsed in the published writings of West Indian authors" (311). He contends that just as the people of Trinidad focused selfishly on building or re-building and asserting a national identity, so too must the West Indian writer foreground West Indian issues and concerns. James' argument is that it is the duty of the West Indian writer to express the spirit of the West Indian people. In order to do this effectively, James is advocating that the author not be detached from his writing, but rather become engaged in, and also engage the reader in a continuous dialogue about the West Indian past. James is of the view that the West Indian writer "...makes a fool of himself by imitating American journalism, Shakespeare, T.S Eliot, Lorca" (313). Truth in the West Indian writing he says, is achieved only when the West Indian writer, writes about what is familiar to him, "his own West Indian childhood, his West Indian mother and the West Indian landscape" (313). In essence, James believes that the West Indian writer should concern himself with all things 'West Indian,' a rediscovery of themselves, independent of the colonial past. At the same time, this rediscovery should entail and express a national identity derived from its unique West Indian past.

James provides a comprehensive account of the progress that West Indian society is making towards nationalism; a break away from colonial hegemony on all levels towards the awareness of an authentic West Indian identity. This movement was initiated by the slave rebellion in Haiti which was skillfully organized by Toussaint L'Overture and continued in Cuba, the "state which Fidel started" (314).