

# C.L.R. JAMES IN AMERICA

---

*Bill Schwarz*

C.L.R. James, *American Civilization*, Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart (eds). Blackwell, 1993, pp385, £37.50 cloth, £12.99 paperback.

In April 1965, temporarily freed from house arrest, C.L.R. James delivered a lecture on Wilson Harris at the University of the West Indies at St. Augustine, Trinidad. He began: 'I would be very much surprised if, except in a private home, there was a copy of Heidegger's *Being and Time* in the West Indies', and then went on to develop a 'philosophical' interpretation of Wilson Harris, linking the novels to Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* which James, in his inimitably colloquial fashion, elaborated in terms of 'being there', 'everydayness' and 'authenticity'. Having demonstrated the connections he closed by saying:

European civilization for many centuries had a fixed assumption and classification of material achievement and corresponding philosophical conceptions. Harris says that America is not like that. He insists that America is not like that, the West Indies are not like that. They have a different attitude to the world; because their whole historical and material experience has been different. But Heidegger, in my opinion, and Jaspers and Sartre, are aware that the European preoccupation or acceptance of the material basis of life, a fixed assumption – that has broken down. That is the significance of Heidegger, Jaspers and Sartre. It began to break down with Nietzsche who said that God was dead and, as Dostoevsky added, if God is dead then everything is permitted: people, especially people with authority, do anything. The whole European conception of a fixed material assumption of things and a fixed political and philosophical assumption of things – that has broken down. Harris is saying that in the Americas, in Central America and in the West Indies, that has never been. There has never been that fixed assumption of things, that belief in something that is many centuries old and solid. That is why he is saying what I interpret as the *Dasein*, the 'being there'. I find it profoundly important and viable especially for people who live in these territories.<sup>1</sup>

1. C.L.R. James, *Wilson Harris: A philosophical approach*, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad 1965, pp4 and 15.

This carries James's characteristic self-assurance. We can hear the old political militant talking, the self-taught philosopher explaining the higher abstractions to the masses. Yet for all the corners cut it presents a compelling argument, suggesting that the lived historical realities of the Americas – in some unspecified manner – have superseded the philosophical abstractions of old

Europe, and have forced into being a new epistemology, more grounded both in popular life and in the practices of everyday existence. As he had argued some seven years earlier: 'Philosophy as such has come to an end'.<sup>2</sup>

Such reasoning has a recognizable theoretical pedigree; it also has, in formal epistemological terms, little going for it. But James was anything but a formal philosopher. Rather it was in his sense of the historical movements of cultures and their formations that he was most astute: and consistently he is striking in charting the deepening popular dynamic at the heart of twentieth-century culture. There is a weak way of putting such arguments, itemizing the enlarged sphere of popular participation – in the mass media, in leisure – in modern societies. Or there is the more difficult, more complex task of attempting to grasp how the underlying symbolic structures of our times are in the process of re-forming, which requires us permanently to shift the key conceptual terms of the debate. To take this approach is to incline towards one reading of the postmodern – where Cornel West meets Homi Bhabha – in which a range of hitherto repressed Others articulate new voices, which in turn serves to break up the terrain of the old formations. Or to follow Stuart Hall:

Even if postmodernism is not a new cultural epoch, but only modernism in the streets, that, in itself, represents an important shifting of the terrain of culture toward the popular – toward popular practices, toward everyday practices, toward local narratives, toward the decentering of old hierarchies and the grand narratives.<sup>3</sup>

Put like this, there seems a clear lineage between James and the cutting edge of contemporary cultural theory: even more so when we consider the frequency with which he is recruited into the ranks of postcolonial theory. There's an obvious truth here: after all, it's difficult to think of anyone of his generation more self-consciously 'postcolonial'. But as with Fanon, there's something too easy about this fit. Slipping him into the emergent canon and chanting the mantra does little to settle the case of James.

But there is another matter raised in the lecture on Wilson Harris. James identified a specific location where the 'fixed political and philosophical' assumptions of Europe had in reality already 'broken down': America. Or more accurately the spatial location is given various specifications: America, the West Indies, the Americas, Central America.

This too echoes arguments in contemporary discussion, particularly the idea that the cultures of modernity formed on the peripheries of the global system – in the backlands – embody within them a deconstructive momentum which anticipates and mirrors the more knowing, formal postmodern procedures of the metropolis. Such beliefs rest on a notion that the peripheries never quite underwent a proper schooling in the disciplines of a modernizing, instrumental reason. From the vantage of the State Department this can be given a normative rendering, as in Henry Kissinger's conviction that the developing world has yet to experience the benefits of a Newtonian revolution,

2. C.L.R. James, Grace C. Lee and Pierre Chaulieu, *Facing Reality*, Bewick, Detroit 1974, p65. Pierre Chaulieu is better known as Cornelius Castoriadis.

3. Stuart Hall, 'What is this "black" in black popular culture?' in Michelle Wallace and Gina Dent (eds), *Black Popular Culture*, Bay Press, Seattle 1992, pp22-3.

and thereby bears the additional burdens of epistemological underdevelopment: Or from an alternative perspective, it can be valorized as a positive escape from the unwelcome incubus of western precedents. In the 1930s a number of otherwise differing intellectuals from the metropolitan nations looked out to the undeveloped world, especially to the cultural zone where the Caribbean met and connected with Latin America, and identified an entire range of cultural forms – their links to the legacies of primitive communism still intact – which in the metropolitan purview were deemed more magical, more indigenous and more authentic than the reified, broken cultures of the imperial centres.

Even though his first historical researches on the Caribbean date from this period James never succumbed to these easy polarized essentialisms. Nor was he ever mesmerized by the magic of backwardness: to read of him in the late 1950s – whilst launching the paper of the People's National Movement in Trinidad – grubbing through junk-heaps in order to find type-face, letter by letter, is telling enough, as indeed is his reflection on the absence of books in the underdeveloped world – no Heidegger in the Caribbean. More significantly he was never convinced that the Caribbean represented a pure cultural antidote to the west, of either indigenous or African hue. To the contrary, from the time of *The Black Jacobins* on, he insisted that the contemporary Caribbean had been born in the interstices of modern industry, and that its peculiar features rested above all in its combination of backwardness and modernity. This is a constant theme. The West Indies, he claimed, have no 'indigenous civilization and culture'; they are located inside the structures of western modernity; and yet the legacies of national backwardness, 'the very limitations of the past' might still 'enable us to go further'.<sup>4</sup> The structure of thought here is not one which pitches a magical *indigenismo* against western reason. Its origins are more mundane: the historical thought of Lenin, and Trotsky's illuminating if halting discussion of combined and uneven development, in which he makes it possible to conceive in the mind of extraordinary historical leaps – the apparently most backward formations exhibiting the potential for creating a striking new modernity.

This is fine as far as it goes but there is an obvious problem. James identified not only the periphery as the embodiment of *Dasein* but the whole of the western hemisphere. For a marxist happy to spend the bulk of his political life as an outrider on the left extremities of the international communist movement his inclusion of the US represents a provocation. We need to see how this happens.

There is an English view of James which turns on the relationship between metropolis and colony. It begins with James's birth in the distant reaches of the empire, in Tunapuna in Trinidad in 1901. The colonial schooling, and cricket, prove decisive. The arrival in Lancashire in 1932, and immersion in the politics of Pan-Africanism, fit centrally within this scheme of things. There then appears a long caesura when, to English ears, James's voice goes quiet. It revives again with his return to England in 1953, his re-engagement with

4. C.L.R. James, *Party Politics in the West Indies*, Vedic, San Juan, Trinidad 1962, p40.

Caribbean politics in the late 1950s and 1960s, and his final triumphal incarnation as the wise old man of Brixton for another twenty years after that. It's a construction of James which privileges *The Black Jacobins* of 1938 and *Beyond a Boundary* of 1963, the lineages between the two direct and immediate.

This is a persuasive reading. It recognizes the tensions of England as an imagined community; and it centres the colonial, external dynamic. The intellectual traffic across the old empires clearly possesses a prodigious unwritten history, and James represents one moment in this larger story. In my own mind I've always thought of James in this context in parallel with Gramsci: close enough in birth to be of the same generation, moving by virtue of the structures of colonial education from periphery to centre – Gramsci an impoverished Sard nationalist, James a luminary in the largely unknown, tiny Trinidadian literary renaissance – and then, when abruptly confronted by the internal culture of the metropolis, each moving to marxism: Gramsci to the Socialist Party and thence the Third International, James to Trotskyism. In each case it is precisely the overdetermined complex set of confrontations between the new and the old, the mass and the folk, colonizer and colonized which proved so charged, unleashing for each of them within the frame of a newly acquired marxism a profound, unending interrogation of the 'home' culture and its modernity to which each had migrated.

But there is a puzzling aspect to this too. In 1937 James published *World Revolution*, a vast, epic, scorchingly critical history of the official Communist movement. If we think of James as historian, it stands alongside the two histories he published the following year: *Black Jacobins* and *The History of Negro Revolt*. Often it is ignored because of its allegiances to Trotskyism. But James wrote it; arguably it's his first serious history book; and from the mid-1930s, for some fifteen years, Trotskyism was large in James' imagination. The question then becomes this: how did he move from the conventional orthodoxies of his Trotskyism to the extraordinarily unorthodox cultural criticism of *Beyond a Boundary* twenty-five years later? This supposes, against many of his admirers, that there is no simple evolution from *Black Jacobins* to *Beyond a Boundary*, the one immanent in the other, or from James' Trotskyism to the enticing cultural thought which followed.

Of course, to put it like this takes too much for granted. Those who can divine such things spot tell-tale signs in the text of *World Revolution* which reveal that the author's credo was wobbling even at the height of his commitment to an orthodox reading of Trotskyism. Nor is it feasible to suggest that the theoretical structure of *Black Jacobins* and *Negro Revolt* exactly duplicates the more conventional structure of *World Revolution*. More to the point it is clear that there were other passions which pulled James in different directions. There was, after 1935 especially, the cause of Africa and his heterodox sympathy for Garveyism. There was cricket and his professional life as a sports-writer. And there was James the artist, a presence in the outer circles of Bloomsbury, the author of a well-received novel, of the play of the *Black Jacobins* which had starred Paul Robeson, an aesthete with radically distinctive

aesthetic tastes. In the 1920s, while still in Trinidad, he listened on his gramophone to Mozart, Debussy and calypso, an impossibly hybrid conjunction within the norms of the metropolitan culture. Nor was he immune to the aesthetic and other pleasures of the good life. Fredric Warburg, the publisher of *World Revolution*, remembered him like this: 'Immensely amiable, he loved the flesh-pots of capitalism, fine cooking, fine clothes, fine furniture and beautiful women, without a trace of the guilty remorse to be expected from a seasoned warrior of the class war'.<sup>5</sup> Even James at his most orthodox was a figure who cut a dash.

5. Paul Buhle, *C.L.R. James: The artist as revolutionary*, Verso, London 1993, p63.

Even so, the problem is I think a real one. Its solution can be summarized in a word: America. James' period in the USA actively reordered his intellectual cosmos and, in an oblique move, gave him the means to integrate insights drawn from his own West Indian culture into his larger politics. Those aspects of James' intellect which previously had found separate outlets and which functioned as if by separate logics – cricket and marxism; aesthetics and politics; calypso and Mozart; the personal and the political; popular culture and intellectual culture – were able to find a new synthesis. There are suggestions too – from other contemporary observers – that James came more intensely to experience himself as black, the persona of the gentlemanly English aesthete relaxing. The intellectual work which made this happen was arduous, and often beyond conceptual resolution. But in all, this work – largely unknown to English audiences – pretty much resembles a protracted political and epistemological *coupure*. Or to put this in less rigorous mode, in the USA he discovered one America which brought home to him another America which historically was his: the Caribbean.

When the 1938 cricket season closed James embarked to the USA believing that he'd be back in England the following spring in time for the new season. In the event, he stayed until 1953 and even then left only under duress, at the insistence of the immigration authorities. He went originally at the behest of James Cannon and the US Socialist Workers Party – although some suspect this was a manoeuvre to 'straighten him out'.<sup>6</sup> In the US his existence as a Trotskyist tyro continued. Audiences loved him: they found him charismatic, charming, erotic. He travelled, spoke and wrote: with one exception all his published writings appeared under the imprint of far-left organizations, dictated by the immediate concerns of political debate. In April 1939, instead of preparing for the opening of the new cricket season, he found himself in Coyoacan in discussion with Trotsky, disagreeing in equal measure about both sport and the role of blacks in the revolutionary struggle. He was active at various moments in the cultural and political life of Harlem. He debated Hegel with Adorno in cafes around the New School on Fifth Avenue. He fell in love (more than once), married and had a son: in order for the marriage to take place he needed to divorce his first wife, which took him to Reno – a break which gave him the opportunity to draft his *Notes on Dialectics*, a nice irony of history this. Often money was short; he was ill; towards the end the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the FBI were closing in. And he went to the movies:

6. C.L.R. James, *World Revolution, 1917-36: The rise and fall of the Communist International*, Humanities Press, New Jersey 1993, pxxv.

During the last years, illness and other difficulties have caused me to spend a certain amount of time at the pictures. I rather despised them – Hollywood, I mean. I don't any more. The rubbish I look at would astonish you. I can sit through almost anything. When it is very bad I see why it is bad. I have seen *Now Voyager* six times and will see it, if necessary, six times more. The reason? I work at home. At times I must stop. The only thing that keeps me quiet is the movies. So at all hours of the day or night I go where there is a picture, often the nearest. That is why I see some over and over again. I am learning plenty, I can assure you.<sup>7</sup>

7. C.L.R. James, *The C.L.R. James Reader*, Anna Grimshaw (ed), Blackwell, Oxford 1992, pp128-9.

*Now Voyager*, for those who may not recall, dealt with psychoanalysis and doomed love affairs; it starred Bette Davis [in mink] and Claude Rains. The characteristics of a high-cultural Englishness, James' ticket from Trinidad to England, were slowly breaking up. Or in different register, *Vanity Fair* was giving way to *Moby Dick*. When eventually he returned to England he wrote to friends in New York: 'It is most remarkable, but at the present moment the feeling that I have and the memory of life in the United States are expressed most concretely in gramophone records, jazz records in particular, and movies'.<sup>8</sup>

8. C.L.R. James, *American Civilization*, Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart (eds), Blackwell, Oxford 1993, p17.

It would be possible to trace the mutations in James' thought through a reconstruction of his political activities: speaking in the same idiom and ostensibly remaining faithful to the same principles, he and his group – the fiery, cocksure, theoretical conquistadors of the Johnson-Forest Tendency – moved from the mainstream of Trotskyism in 1940 to an anti-Trotskyist, anti-vanguardism a decade later, ditching on the way much of Leninism, and preparing themselves to make common cause with the utopian libertarianism of Castoriadis and the group around Socialism or Barbarism. It's an important story, still largely untold, which bears directly on James' reconceptualization of the popular in the cultural formations of the mid twentieth century.

Yet it's also clear that his inherited framework of marxism, even with an increasingly diluted quotient of Leninism, was unable to offer the conceptual space he needed to explore the issues he found most perplexing. Where we can see him working through these issues, inventing what he needs as he goes from whatever was to hand, is in the text which is now published as *American Civilization*. It is a dramatic work, James' mind visibly racing ahead of his writing. It was drafted, at the end of 1949 and the beginning of 1950, at his usual ferocious pace. He wrote it for private circulation, for a small number of trusted friends and comrades. He saw it neither as outline nor abridgement: it is, more aptly, James' *Grundrisse*. The next step – which predictably perhaps never occurred – was clear. In James' words: 'The whole will be put together in one closely interconnected logical and historical exposition for the average reader, in 75,000 words, not a word more, and written so that it can be read on a Sunday or on two evenings'.

James, grised old Bolshevik and black militant, didn't need lessons on the reactionary nature of the USA and the intensity of its systems of exploitation.

He had seen enough with his own eyes, and knew enough of Adorno and Horkheimer, to have a realistic grasp of the totalitarian potential of Americanized mass society in the opening moment of the Cold War. But in an acrobatic move, in which a renewed interest in Hegel allowed him to think his way out of Trotskyism, he arrived at the opinion that the most reactionary sector of the imperial heartlands – the USA – carried with it the possibilities for a leap into a future organized on the deepest democratization of social life. Clearly, elements of Marx and Trotsky continued in the newer theorizations: the debt to the notion of combined and uneven historical times is evident. But in arguing that the structures of the future society existed in the intersections of everyday life and the institutions of mass culture, James was at the very least calling for a necessary expansion of conventional marxist models, and maximally for a different mode of theorization altogether.

The manuscript ranges over many issues in an accelerated rhythm – until the end when it looks very much as if exhaustion set in. Individualism, intellectuals [Whitman, Melville, the abolitionists], Fordism, popular arts, happiness, with a final section on the contemporary predicaments of ‘Negroes, Women and Intellectuals’ – these compose the formal subject-matter, with the chapter on popular arts serving as the thematic climax of the argument. In part I must admit the excitement of the book is historical rather than conceptual: given the contemporary overload of cultural studies James’ discussion of soap operas and stars, domesticity and department stores, *True Confessions* and sexual relations doesn’t immediately strike one today as daring. But that he was thinking through these issues some fifty years ago is extraordinary; it’s also intriguing that a marxist of his generation was writing seriously about Bette Davis and Garbo, Cary Grant and Frank Sinatra – an impossibility in the milieu of English marxism at the time. But the manuscript is significant not only as a historical find. James never assembled the argument as planned. There were many reasons for this but one of them must be internal to the project itself: it simply wasn’t possible for him to order and close his whole thesis in the manner he imagined. In my own view this is because what he uncovered could not easily be contained within the theoretical system of a totalizing marxism and Hegelianism. It was precisely the fact of a modernity in minor key that he was discovering, a modernity of the street and the home rather than of the public manifesto and the magazine, a modernity rooted in the unassuming local narratives of the everyday. Everything he discovered threatened to undermine the unity of his own theoretical suppositions. At the risk of seriously conflating what he says we need to see the bare bones of his argument, sticking only to what he has to say about mass culture.

James’ premise lies in his recognition that the structure of American civilization is composed on the one hand by the imperatives of 1776 and the cult of individualism; and on the other, by Fordism and the system of mass production. The crux of his argument is the suggestion that these have now become indistinguishable: happiness has become entirely dependent on mass consumption and thus on mass production. He treats very seriously the

traditions of individualism, refusing to see in them an empty rhetoric appropriate only for ventriloquist politicians. Like many Europeans before him [on arrival in the States James liked to call himself a 'black European'] he was impressed by 'the exceptional capacity for free association' characteristic of social life in America, a characteristic he found particularly pronounced in black cultures. These social instincts, grounded in the organization of a highly developed civil society, gave a true vitality to the traditions of individualism. The implication throughout is that in an age of deepening bureaucratic collectivism the revitalization of lived individualist tradition held the promise of augmenting the mainsprings of a popular radicalism.

Working against this was the mechanization of everyday life, a familiar enough theme in a wide range of literature. James offers many pages on the intensification of the labour process, extending his analysis to new forms of domesticity and housing, family life and sexual relations. 'Simply sitting in the park and watching the harried faces and manners of young married women' was enough to convince him of the depths of this social transformation. This critique of all the apparent freedoms proffered by American society – of apartments which turned out to be prisons; of modern, hygienic and Taylorized housewifery which induced silent howls of pain – was intransigent. James was not alone in formulating such a view of the realities of the postwar American dream, although he was amongst the earliest. Where he differed from many such critiques was in his refusal to espouse a commensurate impossibilist denunciation of America *tout court*, in which the only viable politics turned out to be driven by self-destructive fantasies of annihilation.

On the marxisant left the conventional step in the argument at this point would be to extend the indictment to mass culture as another manifestation, and prime cause, of the reification of social life. Quite simply, James turns this on its head: it is within mass culture, he believes, that the modest utopianism of a lost individualism is evident and where most is to be gained. 'The passionate individualistic American temperament that Melville knew so well and saw only as a danger to the organizers of society, is now stirring in tens of millions of individuals, the masses of the people, thwarted in their daily lives, hemmed in on all sides.' Mass culture, he claimed, represented not the suppression of these forces – it was neither false, reified nor escapist – but their expression; in the popular forms of commercial culture could be found a profound response to these inchoate instincts, 'dealing with the most elementary symbols and relating them to very complicated social structures'. Thus on soaps he wrote: 'these serials, ridiculous as they are, mean more than mere idle passing-the-time to the women who listen, overburdened with domestic work, the care of children, illnesses. They should be listened to and examined in the light of the fact that art has now assumed a very intimate relation to the daily lives of the great masses of the people'. It could be said that his objective in *American Civilization* was to uncover and make sense of 'the elementary symbols' of modern America; to see how they worked; and to explore how they could be transformed.



In more empirical mode, his discussion of the cultural formations of modernity parallels Benjamin on mechanical reproduction. Mass culture, James suggests, collapses the distinctions between art and culture, artists and people, and provides the possibility for imagining and bringing about a new universality. No longer are the inheritors of Whitman and Melville to be found in the modern intellectuals, philosophers and artists – for whom he has not one good word, the existentialists in particular incurring his wrath – but in the myriad forms of anonymous popular culture: ‘in modern popular art, film, radio, television, comic strip, we are headed for some such artistic comprehensive integration of modern life, that the spiritual, intellectual, ideological life of modern peoples will express itself in the closest and most rapid, most complex, absolutely free relation to the actual life of the citizens tomorrow’. At which point, in a knight’s move of characteristic ingenuity, James’ historical imagination moves into overdrive: ‘During the last thirty years *mass production* has created a vast populace, literate, technically trained, conscious of itself and of its inherent right to enjoy all the possibilities of the society to the extent of its means. No such social force has existed in any society with such ideas and aspirations since the citizens of Athens and the farmers around trooped into the city to see the plays of Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus and decide on the prize-winners by their votes’. Such a futurist recovery of the past, for James, existed in the present realities of capitalist modernity.

Or not quite. His is no blithe, reflex utopianism. In all this he did not ignore the crazed, pathological dimensions of American mass culture. Time and again he refers to ‘the bitterness, hate, fear and sadism which simmer just below the surface’, ‘the representation of murder, violence, atrocity, evil’. Here a more conventional, empirical suggestion appears. For James 1929 marked a decisive break. The great promise of American modernity, glimpsed in the early decades of the century, faltered after the Depression, turning in on itself, its utopian elements giving way ever more frequently to its opposite – to anxiety, fear and sadism. (He notes two exceptions: the Marx brothers, and – in the creation of Donald Duck – Walt Disney.) This way of thinking reflects one of his central propositions. What made American civilization unique for James was its simultaneous capacity for the expansion of subjective life – the struggle for happiness, in his terms – and, in the same moment, for its exploitation, manifest in ever more disturbed and psychotic forms. The rest, to determine which would predominate, was politics.

To summarize in this way represents a terrible reduction of James’ reasoning – more often than not the insights appear in passing, and as I’ve suggested there are great difficulties in elaborating a finished theoretical argument from investigation of this kind. But the qualitative shift in his outlook should be clear. And so too James’ insistence that Americanized mass culture carried the promise of transcending the fixed cognitive categories inherited from the abstractions of European thought. As James said of Ahab: ‘He lives entirely in abstractions’.<sup>9</sup> He was trying to imagine the potential for a

9. C.L.R. James, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: the story of Herman Melville and the world we live in*, Bewick, Detroit 1978, p17.

new universalism which *began* with the popular and the everyday, in which a new integration of human life might come about. That he anticipated the current preoccupations of much postmodern theory by an insistent return to Hegel is only one of the ironies.

James' public, political writings articulate one voice. The voice in *American Civilization* is connected but very different: it's just as subversive, just as intransigent, but a deal more experimental and in my view undoubtedly of more permanent value. But from the same period there is another voice, more personal and intimate, where many of these ideas first appear, and which carries its own spirited subversion. This can be heard in those few of James' love-letters to Constance Webb which have been published. We have glimpses of a more lyrical, sensual James, brim-full of the pleasures of aesthetic life. We see him, in 1944 and 1945, in elegiac mood, ruminating on the destruction of the Europe which – all the denunciations notwithstanding – he still loves. Two years before he started on *American Civilization* he wrote: 'I feel all sorts of new powers, freedoms etc surging in me ... We will live. This is our new world – where there is no distinction between political and personal any more'.<sup>10</sup> Or finally we could reflect on what James might have taken for his own conception of *Dasein*:

10. *American Civilization*, p14.

One day we'll have a jam session – you and me. It will begin with philosophy – the method of thought, i.e., logic, the inevitable development of ideas, and we'll reach poetry by that road. Then we'll see clear as day what the concept class means and what the absence of it has meant to poetry. Always remembering however that the poet reacts to life *emotionally* – and without that, though he were the wisest man in the world, he could not write a line of verse. But the more humanity develops the more emotional response depends upon a conception of the world which does not so much guide the poetry, but releases and expands the personality, integrates it, opens horizons, and thus gives the emotional responses a range and depth and power impossible otherwise. This, sweetheart, is to live.<sup>11</sup>

11. *C.L.R. James Reader*, p140.

# REWRITING THE EVENT

---

*David Roden*

Geoffrey Bennington, *Legislations: The Politics of Deconstruction*, Verso, 1994, 302pp, £39.95 cloth, £13.95 paperback.

The fifteen essays in *Legislations* move, with no lack of rhetorical flourish, across a range of disciplinary, thematic and allegorical frontiers. The penultimate essay, 'The Frontier: Between Kant and Hegel' is occupied with the concept of the frontier and the concept *as* frontier. To understand the concept, after Frege, as a boundary is, at least implicitly, to affiliate the question 'What is a concept?' with issues of legitimacy and conduct, to operate with a certain scepticism on the border between theoretical and practical rationality.<sup>1</sup> Following the epiphanic title, the deceptively informative subtitle contests the boundary between something called 'deconstruction' and something called 'politics': there might, *after all*, be a deconstructive politics, despite the imprecations heaped upon the work of Derrida and his compatriots by customs officials on left and right.

The introduction introduces the frontier as theme and motif. Bennington identifies the political with those 'border incidents' in which an interlocutor puts the rules of 'my' language game in question. In such circumstances I cannot appeal to the rules in deciding whether the other is formulating a law without prejudging the other as a 'charlatan' (as opposed to a 'legislator'): 'This moment at which the legislator always might be a charlatan (and to that extent always in a sense is, can never be shown not to be), just is the moment of the political, and it is irreducible because it is undecidable.'<sup>2</sup>

One of the most common criticisms of Derrida and his coevals is that deconstructive readings simply foreclose any relationship to the historical particularities of a text's production and dissemination. To the extent that deconstruction is understood as ahistorical, it is possible to present it as politically and ethically irresponsible. Bennington's revisionary conception of the political allows him both to sketch the outline of a politics in which deconstruction will have a privileged role as a means of access to alterity and – as he makes clear in the introduction – to criticize those conceptions of the political whose appeals to historical or ethical particularities efface the complexity of the event of communication.

As may already be apparent, the conceptual machinery of Bennington's explicit formulation of the politics of alterity owes much to a Lyotardian account of incommensurable language games pivoting around the event-singularities which form the referents of proper names, dates, demonstratives and other indicative signs. In *The Differend* Lyotard embraces a quite radical

1. *Translations From The Philosophical Writings of Gottlieb Frege*, Black and Geach (eds), third edition, Blackwell, Oxford 1980, p139.

2. *Legislations*, p33.

contingency in the way events may be described, narrated or otherwise 'linked' to other events: the 'arrive-t-il?' is a surd, angelic and quite other to the discursive system for which it functions as referent, addressor or addressee.<sup>3</sup> The 'cardinal sin' for Lyotard – as it is for Bennington – is to pretend otherwise; for any one language game to claim to occupy the position of a metalanguage within which apparent incommensurabilities may be unequivocally determined or arbitrated. It is precisely for this assumption of transcendence that Bennington, in a section of the book entitled 'Refutations', takes to task some philosophical and political responses to deconstruction. Bennington cheerfully concedes that the 'refutations' will be indignant, bad-tempered and amused, inspired as they are 'by the extraordinary ignorance and complacency which [seems] to dominate critical accounts of deconstruction'.<sup>4</sup> The first and longest essay, 'Deconstruction and the Philosophers (The Very Idea)', is perhaps more amused than bad-tempered, finding in the attempts at systematic exposition on the part of writers such as Rodolphe Gasché, Irene Harvey, John Llewelyn and Christopher Norris a cause of some hilarity.

Bennington is, it should be stressed, far from being a philosophical Luddite (some of the best moments in *Legislations* are, as he would say, 'intensely philosophical'). However, he discerns an inevitable crudity and violence – that is to say, a 'political' moment – in any philosophical *rapprochement* with deconstruction:

Deconstruction is not a philosophy even though it involves intensely philosophical moments. I try to show how the philosophical attempts to save deconstruction from the naiveties of 'political' or other positive approaches, though no doubt to be preferred ... always runs the risk of reinstating a philosophy of deconstruction which again closes off the opening to the other (and therefore to reading) which I have outlined.<sup>5</sup>

The assurance with which Bennington disposes of philosophy in this passage invites the suspicion that the name, 'philosophy', refers here to an island language game which has never entirely abandoned its imperialistic designs on the rest of the archipelago. This model replicates a Lyotardian paranoia concerning the hegemonic tendencies of theoretical discourse that is quite foreign to Derrida's writing. True, Derrida does seek to demonstrate certain *aporia* (roughly, irresolvable contradictions) attendant upon theoretical undertakings (in philosophy, psychology, linguistics, historiography etc.) but this should surely cause us to question whether violence is the inevitable concomitant of theory. Much hinges upon the vexed question of 'the event' for, in Lyotard's philosophy it is its supposed singularity (unrepeatability, one-offness) which precedes identification and hence allows the superposition of heterogeneous language games. Without this common (yet heterogeneous) element there would be little sense in talking about language games in agonistic terms. While *Legislations* contains a highly illuminating discussion of the

3. J.-F. Lyotard, *The Differend*, tr. George Van Den Abbeele, Manchester University Press, 1988.

4. *Legislations*, p3.

5. *Ibid.*, p4.

differences between Lyotard and Derrida's treatment of the event in the final essay, 'Index', these are more often elided. Bennington seems to recognize that Derrida's stress on the iterability of events (their impure repeatability) involves the abandonment of phenomenologically 'pure' singularity but seems intent on reconciling them in the teeth of this manifest incompatibility. In the final sentence of 'Index' (significantly, the final sentence of *Legislations*) Lyotard and Derrida stand reunited in 'a sort of radical passivity before the event'.<sup>6</sup>

6. *Ibid.*, p294.

This roseate vision diffracts through the passages in 'Refutations' where Bennington is suffused with the Mosaic glow of the legislator. Philosophy is, we recall, always liable to do violence to the Derridean text. The reason for this, as it emerges in 'Deconstruction and the Philosophers', is that 'Derrida's work is less a system than a series of impure "events"'.<sup>7</sup> Although 'pure events' might be more appropriate given the context, this metaphysics of singularities does account for Bennington's hostility to Rodolphe Gasché's positioning of Derrida within the traditions of the philosophies of reflection and phenomenology in what is possibly the most systematic account of Derrida's work to date, *The Tain Of The Mirror*. In a passage quoted at length by Bennington, Gasché writes of deconstruction as both a continuation of certain motifs in Husserl's phenomenology and as decisive breaks, not only with phenomenology but with ideas of continuity and tradition as such.<sup>8</sup> Bennington detects a *reductio ad absurdum* of Gasché's entire strategy in this admission. One must acknowledge that Gasché is on singularly dangerous ground when he asserts that Derrida's relation to Husserl 'is, in a certain way, radically contingent'. However, despite Bennington's occasionally rather histrionic dismissal of the Gaschéan recourse to history, it is far from clear that Gasché is simply exposing the gap between his methodology and 'Derridean orthodoxy' here. If in Derrida's work we encounter a relation to tradition that also has the nature of 'a decisive break' this could equally suggest that a significant revision of our notions of tradition, continuity and historicity might be in order (though Bennington could no doubt respond that any 'revision' which took due account of 'the temporal complexities of the event' would be more *catastrophic* than significant).

7. *Ibid.*, p44.

8. Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, Harvard University Press, 1986, p246.

Questions of historical continuity and periodization reappear in the three subsequent 'refutations', all of which are concerned with left or marxist criticisms of deconstruction, and in 'The Rationality of Postmodern Relativity' which utilizes Lyotard's non-periodizing conception of the postmodern against Charles Jencks's periodizing (postmodern as mostmodern) account of 'the continuation of modernism and its transcendence'.<sup>9</sup> The latter essay contains a sophisticated discussion of the relation of deconstruction to architectural theory and practice; its anti-historicist case plausible given the philosophical problems afflicting many of the accounts of modernism currently on offer. The earlier essays include a piece on Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* and 'L'Arroseur Arrosé(e)', an enjoyably caustic discussion of Peter Dews's *Logics of Distintegration* and Gillian Rose's *The Dialectic of Nihilism*. Both essays are concerned with the now familiar charge of deconstruction's effacement of the historical and reiterate the counter-charge that, under the rhetorical guise

9. *Legislations*, p173.

of a concern with 'the concrete' or 'the real', an eminently metaphysical conception of history is being employed to occlude the ineluctable modalities of the text. The refutation is somewhat inconclusive, as we might expect given the entirely different presuppositions adopted by either side. There is, however, an accusation levelled at Derrida in Peter Dews's book which deserves more consideration than Bennington is inclined to allow: it is that Derrida's work, far from marking a 'decisive break' with the philosophical tradition, simply perpetuates the time-honoured German idealist language game of finding ever more inclusive 'conditions of possibility' for experience, knowledge, philosophical thought, identity and so on – a case, as Richard Rorty memorably observed, 'of Nietzschean wine in Kantian vessels'. While it can be objected that deconstructive 'conditions of possibility' (*difference*, iterability etc.) are radically finite, refractory, conditions of impossibility as well as possibility, there is no doubt that Derrida's more philosophical work can be read as articulating a quasi-Kantian categorical framework of undelimitable generality (Richard Rorty is probably correct in claiming that, for all his precautions and disclaimers, this is essentially the reading Gasché undertakes in the *Tain of the Mirror*).<sup>10</sup>

Bennington's somewhat peremptory response to Dews is to endorse Gasché's claim that the Derridean 'quasi-transcendental' is also 'radically empirical': that it *just is* the exposure to a certain 'contingency and historicity'. This seems to me to be insufficient if 'historicity' is exclusively an opening to contingency, however the latter is 'radicalized'. An adequate account of historicity must also deal with the *emergence* of pervasive structures and it is precisely here that (as in Gasché's heroic attempts to 'think' the relationship of Derrida's work to phenomenology) one often has the sense of a dead end, an impassable frontier. It transpires that Derrida is more sensitive to this difficulty than some of the more zealous Derrideans. This emerges with particular clarity in his treatment of 'literature' as that 'institution' which, for Derrida, institutionalizes its own precariousness and provides 'un fil conducteur' for an account of textuality as such. Thus in his essay on Kafka's parable, 'Before the Law', he explores the juridical and institutional horizon which accounts for the text becoming a *work*. It is the singularity of the work (an ambivalent and, I would argue, essentially *conventional* singularity, as distinct from that of the Lyotardian event) which puts into question the historically emergent 'borders' of the work.<sup>11</sup> If deconstruction cannot *avoid* the issue of social (and by implication technological, biophysical) conditions of emergence then we can no longer take the existence of a 'Lacanian bar' between something called 'deconstruction' and something called 'history' (or something else called 'politics') as self evident.

10. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, chapter six.

11. In Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, Derek Attridge (ed), Routledge, London 1992.

# PARIS, TEXAS

---

*Josh Cohen*

Jean-Philippe Mathy, *Extreme Occident*, University of Chicago, 1993, 307pp. £10.99 paperback.

1. Jean Baudrillard, *America*, Verso, London 1988.

Recent years have witnessed the increasing hegemony of postmodern French theorizations of America. Curiously enacting his own notorious contention that theories float above, and oblivious to, the messy material practices of everyday experience, in some endlessly self-generating hyperspace, Baudrillard's rather tired aphoristic reflections on America seem to be echoed pervasively in the collective cultural consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Notions such as the 'fake' culture of a simulated mediascape, the 'classless' melting pot of a melancholy achieved utopia, the 'blank' locus of the death of the subject, and the 'unhistorical' space of a kind of primal modernity, sealed off from Europe's burden of tradition, often seem to be organically and unassailably embedded in the very conditions of public conversation about America. Jean-Philippe Mathy's *Extreme Occident*, a critical genealogy of France's ongoing intellectual engagement with the New World, is to be especially welcomed in this context, counteracting as it does the naturalized status of these diagnostic abstractions.

Mathy's central thesis, articulated through a series of chronologically and thematically organized chapters, is that the French 'intertext' of America is less a network of critical descriptions and analyses, than a ceaseless working-out of specifically French cultural anxieties. In particular, America is projected as, from its very inception, a repository of fears about the creeping erosion of the authority and autonomy of the intellectual. America, that is, emerges as the ultimate signifier of an emergent market, driven by the amoral imperatives of commercial profit and technological rationality, which threatens to supplant the aristocratic mandarin, guardian of hard-headed aesthetic judgment and philosophical reasoning, as the primary point of reference for value and action. The bitter conflation of America with the market itself has persisted, with varying intensities and inflections, through the course of the twentieth century, Mathy's central focus.

The book is at its best when it places specific representations of America in the more general context of a given writer's or movement's literary-philosophical project. Thus, George Duhamel's *America the Menace* (1931) and Celine's *Journey to the End of Night* (1934), are read as contributions to the reactionary modernism of inter-war Europe, counterparts to the German critique of Americanism as a technological assault on social and spiritual being, as posited by the likes of Junger and Heidegger. In the French tradition, this critique is distinguished, however, less by Teutonic 'blood and soil' revivalism,

than by an almost hysterical cultural patricianism, as in Duhamel's vision of the American cinema. Hollywood is conceived as the demonic apotheosis of the conspiratorial manipulation of public taste for profit, a phantasmic illusion of motion, reducing the viewer to a "seditary mollusc" submitted to a series of flashes, repetitions, explosions, and titillations, "this tickling, this burlesque, a kind of masturbation of the eye" (Mathy, p81). From a contemporary perspective, it is illuminating to find that the same projection of America as the apocalyptic site of the eclipse of critical engagement, by a visual culture that disables reflection, informs both Duhamel's paranoiac polemic, and Baudrillard's wry affirmations. This sense of a lineage of representation, lent continuity by a persistent preoccupation with the status of the intellectual within a technologically-generated lifeworld, is systematically brought out in Mathy's admirably comprehensive survey of French prose.

Given his identification of the problem of agency as central to the French interrogation of America, it is unsurprising that one of the more fruitful contexts for the demonstration of Mathy's argument is that of existentialism, and in particular, the pivotal figure of Sartre. Mathy traces Sartre's miscellany of writings on America through the development of his existential system and its shifting political inflections. Thus, in the context of his post-war transatlantic journeys (commissioned by Camus for publication in *Combat*), Sartre's humanistic gaze focuses upon the American impulse to motion, to a valorization of the temporary, the unfinished, the mutable, as expressed by its adventurous, disordered, and irrepressibly modern cities. Here, America functions as a living enactment of authentic existential experience, the mobility of its people embodying 'a denial of contingency' (Mathy, p111), a refusal to yield to the metaphysics of collective destiny, in favour of the conscious assumption of individual responsibility. However, the raw material of America can be employed in the construction of a very different narrative; for American individualism is but one component in a fully systematized structure of conformity. Again, the familiar trope of social depersonalization surfaces, the repression of any articulation of individuality outside of the universalizing framework of the technological lifeworld. Thus Sartre speaks of the American's lifelong subjection 'to an intense drive to organize and Americanize him' (Mathy, p114), a drive to dissolve the tensions between individualism and conformism. It is this critique of the serializing tendencies of American life that carries forward, some twenty years later, when post-war Allied triumphalism has yielded to bitter anti-imperialism, into the damning prognosis of American genocide in his report to the Russell Tribunal.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is this very category of seriality that is at the heart of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre's magisterial attempt to theorize through Marxism the material degradation of existential freedom.<sup>3</sup> His observations on the universalizing impulse of Americanism and his condemnation of the 'total' character of the Vietnam War read like specific articulations of the abstract category of the 'practico-inert' formulated in the *Critique*, that is, the realm of external facticity that constrains existential freedom.

2. Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Vietnam - Imperialism and Genocide' in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, Verso, London 1974.

3. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Verso, London 1986.



Mathy's discussion of Sartre is illuminating foremost, then, for this hermeneutic operation, one that reveals a coherent intellectual project at work within apparently fragmentary and disparate writings on America. It reveals the conceptual malleability of America, its availability for different kinds of metaphorical appropriation (the utopia of existential mobility, the dystopia of serial repression), in the service of contingent philosophical and ideological requirements. Simultaneously, it demonstrates persuasively the centrality of representations of America to French philosophies of modernity, America's haunting conceptual presence in French intellectual history. In tracing the fluid trajectory of Sartre's engagement with America, then, Mathy usefully maps the fundamental dilemmas of modernity as framed by existentialism. If his later discussion of French postmodernism seems less insightful, it may be because this sense of conceptual fluidity is absent.

The reading of contemporary French theory as expressing a more positive relationship to America produces a narrative of reconciliation, one that tends to elide the ambivalence which continues to characterize postmodern representations of America. Thus, Baudrillard's 'fatal strategy' of abandoning codes of resistance in favour of an ecstatic yielding to the simulacrum, Lyotard's assault on totalizing master-narratives in the service of generating a limitless plurality of language-games, and Deleuze's injunction to deterritorialization as the condition for the dynamic possibilities of becoming, each find themselves enacted in America. As it stands, however, this reading is somewhat partial, effacing, insofar as they are incommensurable with this reconciliatory model, the surprisingly high-modernist sensibility expressed by Lyotard's lofty condemnation of cultural commodification<sup>4</sup> as anathema to the sublime unrepresentability of the real, as well as Deleuze's seminal critique of institutionalized psychoanalysis<sup>5</sup> (America, after all, is the birthplace of industrial psychology, amongst other forms of collective mental systematization). Furthermore the same model excludes postmodern theorists whose work flatly refuses the reconciliatory impulse; I am thinking here of the curiously neglected figure of Paul Virilio,<sup>6</sup> whose apocalyptic projections of the totalized absorption of human, and especially visual, agency, by the historical conjunction of military and cinematic technologies, seem thoroughly continuous with Duhamel's earlier demonization of America's visual culture.

However, these omissions are essentially local flaws in the book's content; a more structural problem is revealed by its avowed methodology. Mathy's attempt to graft Edward Said's Orientalist framework onto his own investigations, in order 'to show the consistencies and articulations, as well as the differences and inconsistencies, that make up the complex of descriptions that forms our intertext' (Mathy, p11), seems fundamentally wrong-headed. Whilst recognizing, in his conclusion, the crucial differences in power configurations at work between the West's construction of the Orient, and France's representations of America, he fails to register fully the logical consequences of those differences. Thus, where Said's work demonstrates the continuity of the West's textual construction of the Orient with the wider forces

4. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

5. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, Athlone Press, London 1990.

6. See, for example *War and Cinema*, Verso, London 1992, and *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Semiotext(e), New York 1991.

of cultural and political-economic imperialism, Mathy's book reveals the French intertext of America as an ongoing negotiation of anxieties over the latter's creeping cultural and geopolitical ascendancy. Consequently, whilst it is tenable to posit Orientalism as a legitimization of colonial power that works to appropriate and silence the voices of its subjects, it is difficult to speak in the same terms about Mathy's intertextual counterpart. Indeed, in the latter context, it can be argued persuasively that American intellectuals have functioned as participants within, as much as objects of, the creation of their own mythologies. American intellectual history, that is, is defined by a project of national self-fashioning that is as metaphorically abstracted from material reality as the French intertext documented by Mathy. In this respect, his tendency to read this intertext largely in terms of its authors' own preoccupations, whilst acute, nevertheless misses the degree to which French intellectuals have continuously, and often insightfully caught onto the inherently inorganic, self-fashioning nature of American cultural identity.

The absence of reflection on intercultural traffic between the nations only serves to underline the problematic nature of Mathy's theorization of his intertext as more revealing of France than America, as if the latter had not been instrumental in the global projection of its own identity. Despite scattered accounts of American receptions of French thought (most notably, the surprising appropriation of Continental anti-foundationalism by American pragmatism), there is little discussion of the ways in which America has both fed and fed on French culture, in forging its identity. An interesting case in point here would be Norman Mailer's appropriation of existentialism, as a way into a very specifically American auto-critique and project for a new national identity.<sup>7</sup> This kind of discussion would be a useful corrective to the almost exclusively French focus of Mathy's survey, in enabling America to be understood less as the objectified victim of French cultural misrecognition, than as an active agent in its own perpetual re-invention.

7. See, for example, *Advertisements for Myself*, Granada, London 1984, and *The Presidential Papers*, Panther, London 1976.