

previously unpublished letters, is only part of the story. Of particular value is that of the letters of Marx and Engels are here printed together with the letters addressed to them, and also with links to volumes in other sections of MEGA. The introduction, however, is much too long (ca. 90 pages). This is truly a *big* misunderstanding. Since 1990 when work on MEGA began to be carried out under new circumstances, it has never been the intention to supply some sort of authoritative interpretation of the texts. Today, MEGA aims at being an open, scholarly edition, so it seems obvious that the author of the introduction has mistaken his role: providing a concise account of the place of the present 311 letters in the lifework of Marx and Engels. Here, excessive space is taken up quoting from and repeating letters which one can read directly in this volume, and the huge level of detail does not provide transparency. Indexes of names and literature have been carefully prepared, and references to existing scholarly literature are extensive, but not adequate; in particular, literature in English seems to have been selected somewhat haphazardly, which is unsatisfactory as important contributions on Marxism and its development have, in recent years, been published in English.

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### The Philosophic Ambiguities of C.L.R. James

John H. McClendon III, *C.L.R. James's Notes on Dialectics: Left Hegelianism or Marxism–Leninism?* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004).

A significant shortcoming of the many studies on C.L.R. James is the lack of attention, if not utter silence, concerning his *Notes on Dialectics*. This is unfortunate in light of the fact that James considered it to be his most important work (James 1986a). It is therefore significant that a full-length study of the book has finally appeared. Unfortunately, McClendon hardly does justice either to James's work or to the numerous philosophic issues surrounding it.

Though McClendon respects many aspects of James's legacy, he is highly critical of *Notes*. He argues that his locus as a "Marxist–Leninist" thinker and activist is contravened by the "idealist" approach of *Notes*. He writes, "James's root philosophical mistake lies in his misappropriation of the dialectical method on idealist rather than

materialist terms. James's idealist theory and method emanate from his conception that there is an immediate relationship between philosophical cognition and political practice" (McClendon 2004: xxi).

It is true that James's *Notes* is characterized by an effort to directly apply Hegelian concepts (primarily in the *Science of Logic*) to politics. In addition to its discussion of Hegel and Marx, much of *Notes* consists of reflections on Trotsky, Trotskyism, Stalinism, the state of the labor movement, theories of organization, etc. This partly explains why James's *Notes* have rarely captured the attention of Hegel scholars. James's proclivity to directly apply philosophy to politics, as seen (for example) in his contention that Hegel's critique of synthetic cognition exposes the errors of orthodox Trotskyism, is not exactly the sort of thing that characterizes academic discourses on Hegel. McClendon's critique of *Notes*, however, extends further than the problems associated with directly applying Hegel. He accuses James of taking a Left Hegelian and even "anti-Marxist" approach by appropriating Hegel without regard for the concrete, material concerns that govern social realities.

The problem is that McClendon develops this argument by abstracting James's *Notes* from the concrete, material concerns that propelled him to write the book in the first place. James composed his *Notes* in 1948, when he was co-leader (along with Raya Dunayevskaya) of the Johnson–Forest Tendency (JFT) in the US Trotskyist movement. The JFT held that the Soviet Union was a state-capitalist society. James and Dunayevskaya, however, were not content with simply providing an economic analysis of the Soviet economy; they were also interested in what new kinds of revolt were likely to emerge *against* state-capitalism. As they saw it, the concentration of political power in the hands of the single-party state was part of a worldwide tendency towards the further concentration and centralization of capital. While this leads to growing statist repression and authoritarian control over the workplace it also leads to a greater socialization of labor as workers become trained, united, and organized by the very mechanism of capitalist production. They therefore held state-capitalism would be met by a new series of revolts in which the proletariat would be able to *immediately* create socialism. On these grounds, by the late 1940s James began to question both the concept of a "vanguard party" and the need for a "transitional" stage between capitalism and socialism. The nature of the age of state-capitalism indicated to him that proletarian self-activity provided the sufficient ground for transcending capitalism without the need for any mediation by an outside force, like a vanguard party. This perspective is central to *Notes on Dialectics*. James turned to

Hegel as part of an effort to *philosophically* elucidate the significance of spontaneity, self-movement, and self-activity. His stated aim was to explore Hegel's "abstract" emphasis on the self-movement of the Concept, which appears most fully in the final section of the *Logic*, "The Doctrine of the Notion," as part of illuminating the new kinds of workers' revolts that were bound to emerge against state-capitalism. It was not only in 1948 that James held that position. He reaffirmed it in 1980, when he pointed to Poland's *Solidarnosc* movement as "proving" the validity of his standpoint in *Notes* (James 1986a: 164).

McClendon, however, refrains from evaluating or discussing the theory of state-capitalism or James's view of workers' revolts. He even suspends judgment on James's critique of Stalinism (McClendon 2004: 141). Attention to such issues, he says, "exceeds the scope of my investigation" (McClendon 2004: xxii.). But these issues did not "exceed the scope" of *Notes on Dialectics*. They are of crucial importance in comprehending its content, significance – and pitfalls.

James was not the first Marxist to read Hegel in light of contemporary social concerns. One need only recall Engels's statement that Hegel's "Doctrine of Essence" illuminates the capitalist labor process. What motivated James's *Notes*, and the basis for judging it, is his effort to elaborate a non-vanguardist concept of organization by exploring the part of Hegel that most Marxists had neglected – the "Doctrine of the Notion." Yet as McClendon notes in passing (116), James poses his "new universal" about organization when he comments on Hegel's "Doctrine of Essence." James declares: "To conclude [our discussion of the Doctrine of] Essence ... Organization as we have known it is at an end. The task is to abolish organization. The task today is to teach, to illustrate, to develop spontaneity" (James 1980: 115, 117). James continues to elaborate on this for the rest of the book. Though McClendon cites this passage, he fails to discuss the significance of the fact that James reaches his conclusion about the role of organization *before even reaching* the "Doctrine of the Notion." McClendon reduces James's problem to one of translating "idealist" Hegelianism into concrete politics, while neglecting the ramifications of the fact that James rushed to a *political* conclusion on organization without first grappling with the *whole* of Hegel's *Logic*.

Two problems result from James's rush to provide an answer to the problem of organization. One, by reaching a conclusion regarding the role of organization before exploring "The Doctrine of the Notion," James contradicts the stated aim of his *Notes*. James stated, "We have to get hold of the Notion, of the Absolute Idea, *before* we can see this relation between organization and spontaneity in its concrete truth"

(James 1980: 119). Since James already reached his conclusion about the role of organization *before* encountering the “Doctrine of the Notion,” it is no accident that *Notes* ends up saying relatively little about that section of the *Logic* (the section of *Notes* devoted to the Notion is mainly a political discussion of Lenin and Trotskyism). Two, James’s rush to provide an answer to the problem of organization led him to focus exclusively on the *form* of organization. For Lenin the right form of organization is the centralized party; for James the right form is the decentralized, spontaneous organization. Though Lenin’s and James’s positions are opposed, they share a common assumption: namely, that the *form* of organization by itself exhausts the *concept* of organization. It is therefore not surprising (as McClendon acknowledges) that James’s *Notes* critiques Lenin in “a somewhat ambiguous manner” (McClendon 2004: 4). Whereas Lenin held that it is impossible for workers to reach socialist consciousness without the party, *Notes* states: “The party is the knowing of the proletariat as being. Without the party the proletariat knows nothing” (James 1980: 172).

McClendon neglects to explore these ambiguities, since he reduces the problem of James’s *Notes* to simply substituting Marx’s “materialist” approach for Hegel’s “idealism.” McClendon’s repeated counterpoising of materialism and idealism defines his entire perspective. In James’s defense, one can say that he was at least trying to escape from the hostility towards Hegel which characterized much of the Marxist movement (especially in the US) at the time by “reading Hegel materialistically.” He was not alone in this. In 1914 Lenin wrote in his “Abstract of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*”: “In this most idealistic of Hegel’s works there is the least idealism and the most materialism. ‘Contradictory’ but a fact!” (Lenin 1961: 234). Lenin wrote this without knowing of Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, where Marx stated: “Here we see how consistent naturalism or humanism is distinct from both idealism and materialism, and constitutes at the same time the truth unifying both” (Marx 1975: 336). McClendon cannot claim not to know the 1844 Manuscripts. Yet he never cites this passage. He instead states: “In 1844 [Marx’s] critique of idealism is shaped considerably by Feuerbachian materialism” (McClendon 2004: 66) – even though numerous scholars long ago destroyed the myth that Marx was a Feuerbachian in 1844.<sup>1</sup> McClendon holds so stubbornly to a crude version of “dialectical materialism”<sup>2</sup> that

1. For two of many refutations of the notion that Marx was a Feuerbachian in 1844, see Lobkowitz 1967 and Dunayevskaya 2003.

he fails to entertain the possibility that there is any difference between Lenin's 1908 *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (written before he studied Hegel) and his Hegel Notebooks of 1914–15. He never mentions the issue that was central to both works: the relation of thought to reality. In 1908 Lenin adhered to a photocopy theory of knowledge in which cognition was seen as a simple reflection of social reality. In 1914 Lenin significantly altered his view, writing: "Man's consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it" (Lenin 1961: 212). Though he cites numerous passages from Lenin's "Abstract of Hegel's *Science of Logic*," McClendon never mentions the existence of this passage. Such omissions give the book a rather subjective and tendentious character.<sup>3</sup>

This is not to say that the book doesn't contain some insights. McClendon takes issue with James (in Chapter 3) for saying that the problem with Kant is that his deduction of the categories of cognition forecloses self-movement. McClendon correctly writes, "what is wrong with Kant is not the lack of an active principle but his dualism" (McClendon 2004: 84). He also has an interesting discussion (in Chapter 5) of the similarities between James's effort to link workers' self-activity to Hegelian categories and Lukács's problematic notion of the proletariat as representing the Hegelian identity of subject and object.

However, one or two shiny beads do not make up for a broken necklace. The book is replete with errors and inconsistencies. He writes, "James did not describe himself as a 'Marxist humanist'" (McClendon 2004: 184). A page later he refers to "James's exhortation 'Marxist Humanism.'" So was he a humanist or wasn't he? McClendon could have easily found the answer by referring to James's *State-Capitalism and World Revolution* (first published in 1950); it explicitly rejected humanism (James 1986b). The fact that James recoiled from humanism led, by the mid-1950s, to the breakup of the JFT, as Dunayevskaya went in a different direction by developing the philosophy of Marxist-Humanism.

In critiquing the "idealism" of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, McClendon writes: "Lukács, contrary to James, later acknowledges his departure from Marxism and his embrace of Hegelianism"

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2. Marx himself never used the phrase "dialectical materialism." The phrase was invented by Plekhanov. For a critique of the phrase, see Smith 1996.
  3. For a discussion of the difference between Lenin's 1908 *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and his 1914–15 Hegel Notebooks, see Anderson 1996. Anderson also discusses James's failure to see any problems with *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* in *Notes*.

(McClendon 2004: 209). Though Lukács sharply criticized his own book, he never said that it “departed” from Marxism. On the contrary, his self-critical 1967 Preface to *History and Class Consciousness* states that it “represents what was perhaps the most radical attempt to restore the revolutionary nature of Marx’s theories...” (Lukács 1971: xxi).

Numerous inaccuracies characterize the discussion of James’s relation with his co-leaders in the JFT – Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs. McClendon states that both “intimately collaborated” with James in his “initial writing” of *Notes*. This is an exaggeration. Dunayevskaya, who did not begin her studies of Hegel until after 1948, influenced the writing of *Notes* only indirectly, by informing James of Lenin’s Hegel Notebooks of 1914–15, which she was the first to translate into English. Boggs, who raised several criticisms of James’s *Notes* within a year of its composition, did not contribute directly to it either. McClendon also takes issue with a 1972 letter by Dunayevskaya that said James did not have access to Lenin’s 1914–15 Hegel Notebooks when he wrote *Notes*. McClendon challenges this on the grounds that the 1980 edition of *Notes*, unlike an earlier 1971 edition, does refer to Lenin’s Hegel Notebooks.<sup>4</sup> Oddly, McClendon fails to notice, first, there are but *two* references to Lenin’s Hegel Notebooks in the 1980 edition of *Notes* and *both* refer to passages that appear in the 1948 and 1971 editions. The only difference between the 1980 edition and the earlier ones is that the editors added a footnote to where the passages can be found in Vol. 38 of Lenin’s *Collected Works*, which was first published in the early 1960s. Second, James acknowledged (in the 1948 and 1971 editions) that he learned of those two references by hearing an on-sight translation in 1941 by Dunayevskaya of parts of Lenin’s Hegel Notebooks. James first saw an English-language *text* of Lenin’s Hegel Notebooks in 1949, a year *after* he finished *Notes*, when Dunayevskaya translated them. James never denied that he didn’t have access to the text of Lenin’s “Abstract of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*” in 1948, so it is odd that McClendon would spend so many pages trying to suggest otherwise. In 1972 Dunayevskaya critiqued James for republishing his *Notes* without rewriting or revising it even though the full text of Lenin’s Hegel Notebooks was now readily available. McClendon presents no evidence that Dunayevskaya was mistaken in her appraisal, even though he spends many pages critiquing her view. Moreover, McClendon’s effort to reduce the differences that emerged between Dunayevskaya

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4. See Dunayevskaya 1997.

and James between 1949 and 1955 to “personal” matters is undermined by his failure to consult the widely available philosophic correspondence between the two from that period.<sup>5</sup> The correspondence clearly shows that James and Dunayevskaya began developing serious differences on both dialectics and organization; in 1953 Dunayevskaya already moved beyond James’s exclusive focus on *form* of organization by suggesting the need for a new *relation* between *philosophy* and organization.<sup>6</sup> That James later reverted to a more traditional Marxist–Leninist position, whereas Dunayevskaya went on to develop a Marxist–Humanist perspective, indicates that far more substantive issues were involved in the breakup of the JFT than McClendon suggests.

Despite its importance in James’s development, it is questionable whether *Notes on Dialectics* will ever become a major focal point of discussion. One hardly needs to grapple with the complexities of Hegel’s dialectic simply to affirm the importance of spontaneous forms of mass organization. And those looking for Marxist studies of Hegel have far more comprehensive works at their disposal today than the overly politicized reading of Hegel found in *Notes*. This is not to say there isn’t much to be gained from a critical reading of *Notes on Dialectics*. However, criticisms of *Notes* that regress to an older, crude materialism that James at least tried to free himself from are hardly likely to animate those reaching for a philosophy of liberation in the 21st century. James certainly deserves better treatment than McClendon’s, even if James’s philosophic ambiguities may in part be responsible for it.

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5. See Dunayevskaya 1986. This microfilm collection is widely available at libraries around the country. Several of the most important letters from 1949 to 1953 are also available in Dunayevskaya 2002.

6. For a discussion of this correspondence and the light it sheds on their subsequent political and philosophic differences, see Hudis 2004.

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