

## COMMUNALISM AND SOCIALISM IN AFRICA: THE MISDIRECTION OF C.L.R. JAMES<sup>1</sup>

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Kwame Nkrumah - 'African Socialist'

...when the time comes and the history of international socialism and the revolution to overthrow capitalism is written at the head of course will be names like Marx, there will be names like Engels, there will be the name of Lenin. But a place will have to be found for Kwame Nkrumah...

C.L.R. James, Accra, 1960.

This declaration by C.L.R. James, one-time associate of Leon Trotsky, was remarkable. Not since the panegyrics to Stalin had individuals been greeted with such extravagant language. Even more amazing was the elevation of a man whose 'contribution' to socialism was nationalist, traditional and communalist, and whose message to other African leaders was:

Aim for the attainment of the Political Kingdom that is to say, the complete independence and self-determination of your territories. When you have achieved the Political Kingdom all else will follow...But this power which you will achieve is not in itself the end...Coupled with this will to independence is an equal desire for some form of African union...within the milieu of a social system suited to the traditions, history, environment, and communalistic pattern of African society. (*Hands off Africa!*, Accra, 1961)

James soon tired of Nkrumah and his eccentricities, and sought new African leaders to place on the pedestal alongside Marx and Engels. Yet it was the career of Nkrumah, who caught the imagination of socialists throughout Europe, that needs discussion if there is to be an understanding of this crucial phase in the life of C.L.R.

On 6 March 1957, Kwame Nkrumah, founder and leader of the Convention Peoples Party (CPP), became Prime Minister in the newly named state of Ghana. On the same day the book, *Ghana: the Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah*, was published and, whether intended or not, for the next ten years the names of Ghana and Nkrumah were always coupled together. Then, in 1966, Nkrumah was toppled in a bloodless coup and went into exile. Whether his name will be added to that of Marx, Engels, Lenin,...must be doubted. James was reflecting the adulation shown the man in 1960, when African news figured prominently in the left-wing press and the career of Kwame Nkrumah was followed avidly, not only because of events in that small corner of west Africa, but because commentators believed that something new always

comes of Africa, and this was the newest of all the new things to shake the world.

Nkrumah's political aims could be found in his many publications, all carrying the same message. Ghana was to be a socialist state based on social justice and democracy. Not the socialism of Marx, he said, but a socialism with a strong moral base to bring real justice to the people of Africa. All this would be achieved through the assertion of the 'African Personality' 'which will allow us in the future to play a *positive role* and speak with a concerted voice in the cause of peace and for the liberation of dependent Africa and in defense of our national independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity' (quoted in Woddis, 1963, p.119).

Socialists in Europe and America who applauded the way in which he had campaigned since 1951, when the CPP won its first electoral success, were fulsome in their praise of the first socialist state in Africa. There were some reservations, but most commentators were prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt. There was further optimism in socialist quarters 18 months later when Sékou Touré, an 'African Socialist' and former trade union leader persuaded the people of Guinea to vote against entry to the proposed French Community. Touré who had once had connections with the French communist Confédération Générale des Travailleurs, rejected the class struggle — which only divided the people in the struggle against colonialism. In line with Franz Fanon, he declared that the most exploited sectors of society were the peasants and women, and not the workers. As for the latter, Touré announced in 1958 that he would institute forced labour... 'for the benefit of those who are going to work themselves' (quoted in Andrain, p.172).

There was nothing in what Touré said that fitted with Marx's thoughts, but here too the voice of critics was stilled. In fact, so great was the sympathy for Guinea, where the departing French administrators had destroyed every available amenity, from telephones to toilets, that Touré's stance came to symbolize the forces of anti-colonialism. Then, when he turned to Moscow for aid and secured the co-operation of Nkrumah, his standing among western socialists rose. The signing of an agreement on 1 May 1959 to unite Ghana and Guinea brought paeans of praise from socialist writers.

There might have been some doubts when the terms of the agreement between these states became known. There was no statement on social policy, and no sign of socialism in the new union. That was not all. Six weeks later, President Tubman of Liberia — known more for the tyranny of his regime and his rejection of socialism — joined Presidents Nkrumah and Touré in setting up a loose federation of West African states under the terms of the Sanniquellie Declaration.

If there were reservations about some of Nkrumah's activities there was consolation for the defenders of African Socialism, as the new ideology was named. In April 1958 Nkrumah convened a conference of the eight independent African states at which there was a declaration of loyalty to the UN, to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to the Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung. Resolutions were affirmed condemning

colonialism, calling for a just end to the war in Algeria, for the granting of independence to all trusteeship territories, for an end to racism in South Africa, Kenya, the Central African Federation and so on. This was followed by the All-Africa Peoples Conference in December, attended by governments and non-governmental bodies from across the continent. There were calls for the liberation of the Continent, the building of a Commonwealth of Free African States and the use of all means short of violence to secure these aims. The slogan 'Africa for the Africans' became the battlecry of the gathering. Most of the known African personalities were present and many made their first public appearance. One delegate who achieved prominence in the months to come was Patrice Lumumba who returned home to Leopoldville (Belgian Congo) to address an ecstatic crowd. The enthusiasm with which socialists greeted these leaders makes strange reading today. However, it would be wrong to ignore the mood of the time. History was being made, they all declared: Africa was on the march, new centres of socialist struggle were opening up which would take up the failing spark in Europe and light up the world.

Nkrumah was never out of the news for long. Modiba Keita of Mali joined with Ghana and Guinea in a new union of supposedly socialist states which formed the nucleus of the Casablanca group. This 'vanguard' for progress in Africa, which gave full support to Lumumba, included Morocco, Egypt, Libya (under King Idris) and the National Liberation Front of Algeria. Lumumba, whose martyrdom excludes any possibility of knowing what he might have achieved, was the adoptive darling of the left and an additional name for the champions of socialism in Africa to revere.

In a period just short of five years the enthusiasm for African Socialism spread among radical groups. Those that raised critical voices were sectarian, dogmatic, scholastic, or just foolish. How could anyone dare to question the credentials of Nkrumah, Touré, Keita, Ben Bella, Lumumba or Felix Moumié of the Cameroons? Had they not gone into the countryside and won mass support, organised their fellow countrymen into mass movements (or a revolutionary army in Algeria), had they not embarked on campaigns that humbled the imperialist powers? Were they not champions of world peace and opponents of the atom bomb? Did they not condemn apartheid, revile the Belgians, support the Algerians in their battles? Even Nasser joined the ranks of the near-socialists. He had rid Egypt of a corrupt monarchy, nationalized the Suez Canal, withstood the assault of Britain, France and Israel, and joined the Casablanca group. Why, he even turned to Moscow for aid and assistance in building the Aswan dam, and that alone qualified him for the appellation: socialist.

What if these erstwhile socialists imprisoned opponents, shackled trade unions, banned strikes, outlawed communist parties? These had to be accepted as part of the price of liberation, as the necessary consequence of the struggle against imperialism. Had the masters not said that 'freedom was the understanding of necessity.' Idris Cox of the British communist Party could not find praise enough for Nkrumah. He described his book *Consciencism*

as a 'creative contribution in the field of philosophy, in the application of Marxism to the specific conditions of Africa.' His considered opinion was that:

Because Nkrumah sought to translate Marxism into African terms it gave the African peoples something which *belonged to them*, a *scientific outlook* which can guide them on the march towards socialism. Not only was it an enrichment of Marxism. It also served to demonstrate that Marxism is not a rigid dogma, but a guide to action, and a beacon light which illuminates the path to socialism (Cox, p.88).

Publications from Moscow were only slightly less enthusiastic. Academician I.Ia. Potekhin, as quoted by D. Morrison, declared that the CPP programme included not only the demand for the elimination of imperialism and oppression, but also the liquidation of capitalist exploitation and the building of a socialist society (p.89). In a final accolade, when Potekhin met Nkrumah in December 1962 he said of him, and of Keita, that they were 'scientific socialists'.

There were several features copied from the USSR that appealed to Stalinists. The new 'socialist' societies were all one-party states presided over by dominant leaders, all claimed to exercise democratic centralism, all co-opted trade unions into the state structure and outlawed strikes, and several introduced five- or seven-year plans and state farms in imitation of the USSR. Furthermore, they condemned colonialism and imperialism, welcomed aid from and tended to side with the USSR on cold-war issues, and supported the causes approved by Moscow: for the FLN, for Lumumba, for Nasser, against apartheid and against the regimes in East Africa and the Rhodesias.

Significantly, none of the Stalinist writers mentioned the influence on Nkrumah of George Padmore (see *Searchlight South Africa* No.2) or of C.L.R. James, who had become a close associate of Padmore and was a champion of pan-Africanism. They were not only present in Accra, speaking, advising, exhorting: their activities and opinions played an important part in establishing Nkrumah's place in Africa.

### **James and the African 'Revolution'**

C.L.R. James, born on 4 January 1901 in Trinidad, was an early protagonist of West Indian self-government. In 1932 he moved to Britain and was profoundly affected by his reading of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*. He joined a Trotskyist group in the British Independent Labour Party in 1933/4 and proposed at this stage that the black people could only be achieved freedom by revolutionary means. Angered by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 he joined with Padmore and others in forming a propagandist group, the International African Friends of Ethiopia. The Ethiopian army was faced with might of a technologically superior army and

was forced to surrender; but black opinion had been aroused. The led to the formation of the International African Bureau [IAB] to supply information on affairs in Africa and agitate for self-determination. George Padmore was President of the IAB and James, who was editor of the IAB journal, remained in Trotskyist groups and states that he 'worked on the application of Marxist and Leninist ideas to the coming African revolution' (James, 1977, p.64.) Remarkably, the 'Marxism' that James offered Africa was devoid of the Internationalism that he demanded for the European revolution.

Within a decade ideas propounded by Padmore, and the black intellectual, W.E.B. Du Bois inside the Pan-African movement, led to changed orientations on Africa. James now said that the leading role of the proletariat in effecting change was scrapped as was the need for armed struggle to effect change (ibid, pp.74-5). Precisely when James 'saw the light' is not certain. In his writings before the war he concentrated on the history of the slave revolt in San Domingo, and what he wrote about Africa consisted of gobbets, some true, many erroneous, on local uprisings in African colonies. At no point did he stop to place these events in their social setting, and although he said it was not his aim to show that Africans were capable of revolt, this was precisely what he seemed to be doing (James, 1939).

James straddled two political philosophies: that of nationalism in his African writings, and that of Marxism in his writings on Europe. His statements in discussion with Trotsky in 1940 indicates that he did not manage to reconcile them. He wanted Trotskyist support for the IBA journal, but without mention of socialism; he sought a black organization in the USA which included all classes and agitated for the advancement of all blacks (James, 1980). Trotsky disagreed with James on these points, but he did stress again, as he had done in earlier discussions with members of the American left opposition, that American blacks should be given full support if they expressed a desire for their own independent state. Eventually James accepted this and it could only have reinforced his own nationalist inclinations.

James eventually left the Trotskyist movement in 1950, by which time he had extended the views developed in the Pan-African movement. There was no need for revolution anywhere in the world. The masses had demonstrated their ability for self-organization and this would come to permeate all society. All that was needed by organizers was to spread the word. The new proponent of this philosophy, in James's view, was Kwame Nkrumah. Thus it was, that in July 1960 James could deliver his tribute, an extract from which heads this article. But it was also a speech of self-glorification. If Nkrumah was to be raised to the Gods, there was to be no uncertainty about who had placed him there. I quote:

My friends, I want to tell you: I have written, and there are people here who know it, a history of the Communist International. It begins with the study of Marx. It went on to the study of the Second International which originated and was inspired by Engels, and it went on to make a close study of the Third International which was established by Lenin.

I want to say here and I want to say it most emphatically that when the time comes and the history of international socialism and the revolution to overthrow capitalism is written at the head of course will be names like Marx, there will be names like Engels, there will be the name of Lenin. But a place will have to be found for Kwame Nkrumah...[drowned by applause and shouts]. I state, as one who has studied the history of the revolutionary movement, that at the present time those policies that I have enunciated for you, those policies that you know spring from here are fundamental policies for the emancipation of all classes and all oppressed people in the world. And that today—I don't say yesterday, I don't say tomorrow, but I say today, the centre of the world revolutionary struggle is here in Accra, Ghana...[Loud applause]

Although James was to change his mind about Nkrumah — for whom a place would apparently not have to be found alongside Marx, Engels and Lenin; he nonetheless had the essay reprinted in the collection of essays in 1962, which went through four printings by 1977. The tone of the passage, and much more in the essay, is distasteful; but if the boasting is put aside, it is not easy to reconcile James's elevation of personalities with his claims to Marxist analysis. This 'cult of the individual' (if that phrase has any meaning) is more befitting to the Stalin cult that James had once condemned. Nor did James expand on the ideas that Nkrumah was supposed to have contributed (alongside Marx, Engels and Lenin), and he did not indicate how the new state of Ghana had become the 'centre of world revolutionary struggle,' whatever revolutionary struggle meant for him.

James began to have his doubts about Nkrumah's policies in the early 1960s: views he communicated in letters to the President, but Nkrumah did not deign to reply. The book on Ghana, says James, was concluded at a time when he 'feared for the future of Africa under African auspices, a fear which was immediately justified by the fall of Nkrumah' (James, 1977, p.24). Another God had failed and in James's favour it must be said that he distanced himself from the coming downfall where others continued in their praise of this failed leader. But for some unstated reason James does not discuss the roles played by Toure or Keita, or any of the other 'socialist' leaders in Africa. The dream had been shattered and James only wanted to distance himself from what had happened. But aid was at hand. James continued:

My bewilderment, however, was almost immediately soothed by the appearance of the Arusha declaration of Dr Nyerere. Before very long, on my way to lecture at Makerere, I was able to pass into Tanzania and read, hear and see for myself what was going on. I remain now, as I was then, more than ever convinced that something new has come out of Africa.

Step up Comrade Nyerere and take your place alongside Marx, Engels, Lenin...and Nkrumah?

### The Roots of Ideology

These writings of James on Africa, muddled and wrong, are all the more objectionable for their concentration on individuals who come to personify the state. Nkrumah had claimed that the CPP was Ghana and Ghana was the CPP. James equated Nkrumah with the CPP and when the leader failed to build the new society, James found a new leader for Africa in east Africa. The same personification was found elsewhere. Discussions of Guinea were converted into appraisals of Touré; Mali into a sketch of Keita; Algeria into a backdrop of Ben Bella. It was the ideas of these men that were quoted *ad nauseam*: plans for their countries, the meaning of socialism, their conception of democracy, the role of the trade unions, the attitude to peace, to neutralism, to African unity. This substitution of the party for the people and the leader for the party was a phenomenon that had taken root under Stalinism. It had taken hold in ever wider circles of writers who chose to ignore the social setting in which events occurred and ascribed success to charisma. As if a God-like favour was all that was needed to explain the emergence of particular leaders.<sup>2</sup>

The one factor common to colonial Africa was the predominance of the rural population. There were regions of these territories in which the colonial administration had been largely absent and where control was maintained through indirect rule. There were other districts in which the heavy hand of Commissioners was always apparent. But few regions were insulated from the needs and demands of the cash market, and there was widespread discontent in almost every colony. It is not always clear whether the aspiring leaders set out to capture the rural constituencies, or whether the process was reversed. In at least one well researched area, in the Kwilu district of what was the Belgian Congo, it is obvious that it was the radicalized rural population that forced the urban based leaders to advance ever more radical slogans (Weiss, *passim*).

To attract this vast constituency national leaders adopted tribal dress, used ceremonial libations, shook fly whisks, sang tribal songs, adopted tribal titles. They preached the virtues of the rural communalism: Nyerere extolled the mutual security of the rich and the poor, in which the community ensured the welfare of its members. This was supposed to have pre-existed colonialism and he called it the communitary society. Touré spoke of the communautocratic society with a 'unique humanism...in collective living and social solidarity.' In regions 'contaminated by colonialism' personal egoism abounded, but otherwise 'an individual in Africa cannot conceive of the organization of his life outside that of the family, village or clan. The voice of the African is faceless and nameless' (quoted in Cowan, p.193). Nkrumah harked on the same theme. Communalism, he wrote, involved the African:

as primarily a spiritual being, a being endowed originally with a certain inward dignity, integrity and value...[Socialism] includes the restitution of the egalitarian and humanist principles of traditional African life

within the context of a modern technological society serving the welfare needs of its people (Mohan, p.232).

The worker was viewed differently. Fanon, Senghor, Mboya, Touré and others inveighed against a 'privileged minority', a 'selfish privileged group', who played little part in overthrowing colonialism. Nyerere said of them that after independence they 'displayed a capitalist attitude of mind' demanding a greater share in the general income because of the contribution they made. (Mohan, p.245) Attitudes differed, but African leaders were agreed that socialism did not involve working class control of production: some because they said the working class was minute (and in this they were often factually correct) or because they claimed that the workers were selfish. Behind much of this rhetoric came the claim that there were no class divisions in Africa, and no class struggle. Touré claimed that his party had 'adapted from Marxism everything that is true for Africa' and had 'excised' the class struggle 'to permit all Africans regardless of class to engage in the anti-colonial struggle' (Cowan, p.189). Elsewhere he said that the party had 'formally rejected the principle of the class struggle...' as a European inspired doctrine that was not relevant to Africa (*ibid*).

These arguments were repeated by leaders in east and in central Africa. I have not been concerned with the truth or falsity of the claims for 'traditional society', but with the fact that African leaders rested their cases on such statements and that James did not refute them. This is remarkable: James knew full well that Engels had said of the utopian socialists that their theories were constructed during the 'immature phase of capitalist production' when class positions were correspondingly inchoate. Their answers were utopian and 'the more their details are elaborated, the more they necessarily recede into pure fantasy' (Engels, pp.23, 285).

Such fantasy led Nkrumah to the conclusion that capitalism was 'too complicated a system for a newly independent nation. Hence the need for a socialist society.' Others were more cavalier in their discussion of economic problems: 'You cannot be a capitalist when you have no capital' said Sedou Kouyate, Mali's Minister of Planning and Rural Development – without explaining how planning or rural development was possible without capital. Other Ministers used the arguments once advanced by the Narodniki in Czarist Russia: Capitalism led to fratricidal struggle, to degradation and social injustice, to personal enrichment. It was in this tradition that Nkrumah was to write in *Consciencism* that 'the presuppositions and purposes of capitalism are contrary to those of African society. Capitalism would be a betrayal of the personality and conscience of Africa' (see also Mohan, pp.221–2).

This word spinning circumvented the need to confront real problems. These phrases provided no means to secure development in industry or in agriculture, and no way to find food for the population. The 'personality and conscience of Africa' was a myth that brought neither capital nor socialism to Ghana, did not solve its inter-regional rivalries, did not appease the



Ashanti cocoa growers, did not provide the aluminium plant that Nkrumah tried to secure, and did not save him from the popular wrath.

A more extensive essay would show that similar fates were waiting for other states that claimed they could build socialism in their little states, without resources, without capital, and without a working class. Their failure could have been anticipated by Marxist thinkers — and if local leaders did not have the understanding of what was required, they were unfortunate in not finding the advisers they needed. Of James it must be said that he, more than any others, should have been better prepared to explain the problems critically. His great disservice was to give political mysticism the sanction of an apparent Marxist radicalism.

The problems of the 1960s, when James played a central role in Pan African politics, are of more than historic interest. The theoretical confusion of the left when confronted with class struggles in backward societies goes back to the polemics in Russia before the revolution of 1917: an issue resolved in practice, but leaving a legacy of theoretical confusion.<sup>3</sup> The struggles for colonial independence were denied the insights that Marxism should have offered. Instead, mysticism prevailed and populist theories replaced scientific analysis.

## Notes

1. C.L.R. James (4 January 1901–31 May 1989). I was influenced, as were scores of others, by his writings on the revolution in San Domingo and his exposure of Stalinism as a world-wide phenomenon. But in the course of his career he erred on many issues — none more grievously than in his appraisal of events in Africa. It is of this aspect of his activities that I write below.

2. The dictionary meaning of 'charisma' is often overlooked. It refers to a favour or a talent bestowed by God. The concept explains little and is used here only because of its wide usage.

3. In Russia only Trotsky drew on the events of 1917 in calling for a reappraisal of the nature of the revolution. See his *Lessons of October*, first written in 1923.

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