

**FORUM**

Strange Encounter of the Third Kind

W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James and
Western Civilisation

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INTRODUCTION

With the allegory of the Black Atlantic, the British sociologist Paul Gilroy tried to describe the long history of black people living in the Diaspora.¹ Additionally, Gilroy used the allegory as an argument against an increasingly popular Afrocentrism (Gilroy 1993: xi). A Diaspora history of at least 400 years spanning many generations in Latin America – particularly in Brazil – as well as in the Caribbean, the United States and the United Kingdom needs to be evaluated in its own right, argues the author. This implies that an exchange with the dominating culture remains a not-to-be-neglected feature of life in the Diaspora. At the same time, the memory of Africa has and will continue to play an important role (ibid: 15ff).

Gilroy refers in his study to an intercultural learning process that contains two dimensions. First, Western countries are forced to reflect critically upon their own colonial history of domination. Second, black minorities in these countries come under pressure not to take refuge in myths like that of the return to Africa; instead they are asked to spell out what it means to be a citizen of the country in which they reside, with all the rights this entails. In the end Gilroy is hoping for a learning process where both sides can profit.

The anticipated outcome of such a successful learning process would be a new, self-critical form of perception that could help to reduce and perhaps even eliminate prejudice. In the long run this learning process could also be supportive of a more radical understanding of democracy, an understanding that would transcend the narrow frame of the Western nation state. Attempts to develop this idea have been made by anticolonial liberation theorists such as Frantz Fanon, the American writer Richard Wright, the founder of the American civil rights movement W. E. B. Du Bois, and the cultural critic C. L. R. James.²

¹ A version of this text first appeared in German in *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* (2/1997: 205-214). The text reproduced here is the original paper, first written in English and presented at a staff research seminar at the University of Sussex in the autumn of 1995.

² Gilroy refers repeatedly to these names not just in *The Black Atlantic* but also in his essay collection *Small Acts* (1993).

As progressive as it might seem at first sight, on mature reflection it is surprising how uncritically the learning process is described in *The Black Atlantic*. To be more precise: of course intercultural exchange is of great value, and nobody would argue that experiences in this respect are not enriching. After all, every cultural exchange which triggers a learning process is of significance – for both the individuals involved and the whole society. However, such an exchange does not take place in a context-free or ahistorical environment; the price to be paid for being naive in this regard can be quite high.

W. E. B. Du Bois's complex process of radicalisation might serve as an example. Was it just by chance that Du Bois, having received a classical European education and after a long stay in Berlin, suggested a charismatic "black Bismarck" for the American civil rights movement? Did Du Bois learn from sociologist Max Weber and the nationalist historian von Treitschke that it was necessary to have charismatic leaders and national heroes in order to write progressive history? And was it just by chance that the late Du Bois became a fellow traveller of the American Communist Party who would celebrate Stalin as the great leader who managed to unite the different nations of the Soviet Union? The road from Bismarck to Stalin might not be as long and winding as it at first appears. Rather, I suspect – and this is the main hypothesis presented in this paper – that the non-reflexive intercultural exchange has its price. In this article I aim to demonstrate that the dialogue with Western civilisation had results that were far more complex for black intellectuals than Gilroy claims. The two different approaches of W. E. B. Du Bois and C. L. R. James to Marxism are particularly striking examples of the chances and risks involved in such a dialogue.

The following sections do not claim to provide new biographical evidence or to present new facts. The objective is rather to highlight some fine but nevertheless important distinctions. Furthermore, I do not aim at a comprehensive rejection of Paul Gilroy's arguments concerning the black Diaspora; my point is rather to argue against an uncritical tendency to create heroes in a context where iconography is not really an advantage and can, if uncritically supported, have detrimental effect.

FROM DEMOCRATIC CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST TO DOGMATIC FELLOW TRAVELLER OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY: W. E. B. DU BOIS

The life of W. E. B. Du Bois can be described as a radicalisation process. Du Bois started out as a young student fascinated by and committed to humanist education. However, once he experienced the limitations of such an approach (and that of academia more generally), he turned into a radical liberal and civil rights activist who demanded the fulfilment of America's democratic promises. In his later years and due to a combination of factors – disappointment with the lack of progress being one – Du Bois became a dogmatic Stalinist.³

Du Bois grew up in New England, but it was in the South at Fisk University (Tennessee) where he first received a classical European education. At Fisk University, Greek, Latin, German, theology, natural sciences, philosophy, and history were all part of the syllabus. It seems that this combination of black southern life and classical European education influenced Du Bois considerably. In 1888, he was offered a place at Harvard University. Later in life Du Bois would comment about the twelve

³ Details about Du Bois's life can be found in his three autobiographies: *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*, (1920); "Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept" (1940/reprinted in Du Bois 1986); and *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois* (1968). Additional information can be obtained through David Levering Lewis's excellent biography *W. E. B. Du Bois – Biography of a Race* (1993).

years he spent at the famous institution: “He was in Harvard but not of it” (as quoted in Lewis 1993: 80). Du Bois referred here mainly to the tension between his admiration of that particular institution and the fact that his world had changed after having experienced the South.

Despite the tensions in terms of different learning experiences, Harvard contributed considerably to widening Du Bois’s intellectual horizon. Whereas he had received his basic European *Bildung* at Fisk University, it was at Harvard where Du Bois honed his knowledge in philosophy and history. William James and George Santayana, who were Du Bois’s instructors at Harvard, need to be mentioned here. Marxism or radical forms of sociology were not taught at the time. Education at an Ivy League university meant that people of colour, who were few and far between in these institutions anyway, saw the future advancement of African Americans as achievable through philosophy and higher education rather than through radical action or politics. Du Bois’s subsequent notion of the “educated tenth” certainly stems from the way he was taught at Harvard.

The elitist emphasis on education led to Du Bois’s decision to go to Europe. Once he had received a classical education in Europe and particularly from a German university – the institutional incarnation of what *Bildung* meant – the educated part of the American public would listen to what he had to say, or at least so he thought. For almost two years Du Bois was a student at the Friedrich Wilhelm University (later Humboldt University). He sat in seminars of the historian Heinrich von Treitschke, listened to lectures of the political economist Adolf Wagner, and attended the lectures of Gustav von Schmoller, the then leading German economist. Du Bois also met the sociologist Max Weber.

When looking back at his experiences, it is surprising how enthusiastically Du Bois commented on his experiences in Germany and Europe. It seems that Du Bois as a student was welcomed everywhere he went, whether it was the German family with whom he stayed or when joining a meeting of the chapter of the local Social Democratic Party. Du Bois himself explained this warm welcome rather naively with having been a visitor in the land of classical humanism. A more realistic explanation is that Du Bois was in contact with people who were academically trained, had travelled, were internationalist in outlook, and belonged to the small urban intellectual elite. In short, Du Bois experienced a highly selective rather than a representative Germany.

After his return to the U. S. nothing suggested a renunciation of the idea of the enlightened “educated tenth” and improvement through *Bildung*. His doctoral dissertation *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* contains critical elements, but social and political conflicts were still explained by reference to character rather than society (Du Bois 1896/reprinted in Du Bois 1986). On the subject of ethnic conflict, Du Bois held on to questionable European traditions as it becomes clear in one of his early essays with the revealing title “The Conservation of Races.” (Du Bois in Lewis, ed., 1995: 20–27) Change came about later, when Du Bois stayed at the University of Philadelphia. The purpose of his stay was to study the largest black community in the East. Working on this project made it possible for Du Bois to combine his intellectual interest with his subjective experience. *The Philadelphia Negro* was a distinguished study in that it constitutes the first empirical sociological study of a large black community (Du Bois 1899).

At present it is considered to be a milestone in the development of American Sociology. The study established that extreme social inequality and poverty were rather dubious achievements of capitalist development. African Americans were freed from slavery only to enter another form of social stratification and degradation (Du Bois in Lewis 1995: 162ff). In his study Du Bois shows that black struggle for acceptance was far from over; it had only changed its form. Du Bois analyses the system of social stratification, but in doing so he does not study the problems of capitalist relationships in

the sphere of production; rather he looks at uncivilised attitudes in modern American society, hence his insistence and warning to remember the standards of civilisation. Du Bois still appeals to what he sees as the power of enlightenment, as if capitalism were just a misunderstanding, something that modern society could get rid of simply by appealing to common sense. Even later at the University of Atlanta, where Du Bois was promoted to professor, he still appealed to reason and to the power of *Bildung*.

The later controversy with Du Bois's counterpart Booker T. Washington revealed a more developed concern for political and social rights. But even then Du Bois's main argument remained hidden underneath the debate about the significance of professional training and education for young black people. Only with the Niagara Movement, the founding of the magazine *Crisis*, his participation in the NAACP, and his organisation of Pan African Congresses did Du Bois change. While he was still not inclined to give up the idea and ideals of the Enlightenment and education, his opinions shifted considerably in that he now paid more attention to the unfulfilled promises of American democracy and issues such as social and political recognition. The period between 1910 and 1934, the time in which Du Bois's work had a major impact on the NAACP, seems retrospectively to have been his most productive. It was during this period that Du Bois became a radical democrat who fought against all circumstances which denied political and social recognition of black people in the United States and elsewhere.

Du Bois pursued a strategy which tried to mediate between particularism and universalism, almost in a Hegelian sense: he made a particularistic argument when he suggested forming black organisations along the colour line; his arguments took on a universalist meaning because the result of such forms of organisation benefited all of humanity and civilisation in the end.

Increasingly, Du Bois also referred now to experiences and encounters he had during long journeys in Europe, the Soviet Union, Africa, and Asia. He was especially impressed by what he saw on his first journey to the Soviet Union in 1926. Yet these impressions did not prevent him from making critical remarks about Marxism as an analytical tool. This becomes clear in an article entitled "Marxism and the Negro Problem," which he wrote for the NAACP house journal *Crisis*. In this essay Du Bois hints at the peculiar dimensions of the experiences of black workers which differentiate them from the white proletariat. For the same reason Du Bois was highly sceptical about communist attempts to organise the black working class. At the end of the above mentioned article he wrote:

Marxian philosophy is a true diagnosis of the situation in Europe in the middle of the 19th Century despite some of its logical difficulties. But it must be modified in the United States of America and especially so far as the Negro group is concerned. The Negro is exploited to a degree that means poverty, crime, delinquency and indigence. And that exploitation comes not from a black capitalist class but from the white capitalists and equally from the white proletariat. His only defence is such internal organisation as will protect him from both parties. (Du Bois in Lewis, ed. 1995: 543).

As the quote reveals, Du Bois saw communism not as an end in itself and Marxism simply as an analytic tool to improve the conditions of African Americans. In other words, if Marxism could not explain the peculiarities of black people's experiences in the United States, and if socialist and communist organisations were reluctant to take those specific conditions into account, it was necessary to explore other alternatives. It is precisely this pragmatic attitude of Du Bois that also made him a firm critic of the Socialist Party and La Follette's Progressive Party. It might also explain the sympathy he held for Franklin D. Roosevelt. The New Deal, the emphasis on good race relations, and the circumstances of World War II – as Du Bois argued – contributed more to the abolition of discrimi-

nation than the policies of Roosevelt's predecessors or the proposals of radical opposition leaders (ibid: 48of and 482ff).

A change of circumstances might explain Du Bois's shift from being a supporter of the *Bildungsideal* and a radical democrat to becoming a fellow traveller of the American Communist Party. In particular, his disappointment from the insufficient advancement of black people in the United States played a decisive role. In Du Bois's view, there was nothing that African Americans had not tried in order to be recognised as citizens of equal status: Did black people not fight side by side with white people in the Second World War to save Europe from National Socialist barbarism? After all, despite all the appeals to reason, the norms of civilisation, the educated elites, and the institutions of higher learning, black people still had not received recognition. Contradictions between the norms and practices of American democracy continued to loom large.

A second contributing factor that might explain Du Bois's shift was the process of decolonisation especially in Africa after the Second World War. In Du Bois's view it was the socialist countries – first the Soviet Union and later China – that had been supportive of nation building processes in the developing world. This stood in sharp contrast to American foreign policy especially during the Cold War. Du Bois's interests shifted more and more towards international politics; while he previously had criticised the U.S. for its dealing with “internal” problems such as racial discrimination, he now criticised American foreign policy just as passionately. However, it was problematic that he did not realise how his preoccupation with the rights of black people in the USA had disappeared beneath his new rhetoric of world peace. He was also unable to see how his celebrity status was being used by communist countries to accuse “racist America.”

Not much remained of the radical democrat Du Bois. The following two examples demonstrate how uncritical he had become. In the report of his second journey when Du Bois met Chairman Mao, not only did he mention the “historically necessary invasion” of Tibet, but also the “happily smiling citizens” of China. He talked about a country in which people did not have to suffer social inequality, where women were treated as equal, prostitution had been abolished, and socialism had become real (Du Bois 1968: 44). The report is full of socialist prose. The following quote from the end of the China ‘fairy tale’ is typical: “I’ve seen the world. But never so vast and glorious a miracle as China... Oh beautiful, patient, self-sacrificing China, despised and unforgettable, victorious and forgiving.” (ibid: 53) Worse only is Du Bois's obituary of Stalin where he wrote the following eulogy:

Joseph Stalin was a great man: few other men of the 20th century approach his stature. He was simple, calm, courageous. He seldom lost his poise; he pondered his problems slowly, made his decisions clearly and firmly... he was the son of a serf, but stood calmly before the great without hesitation or nerves ... he was a great man who sought deeply, read understandingly and listened to wisdom, no matter whence it came. (Du Bois in Lewis, ed., 1995: 796).

Especially alarming in this obituary is the uncritical attitude concerning Stalin's policy towards ethnic minorities and smaller nations: “As one of the despised minorities of man, he first set Russia on the road to conquer race prejudice and made one nation out of its 140 groups without destroying their individuality” (ibid: 796). Du Bois did not hesitate to legitimate the destruction of the Russian peasants and the kulaks; he also did not hold back in his sympathy for the ice pick murder of Leon Trotsky. All this stands in clear contrast to the earlier positions held by Du Bois. How did it become possible to legitimate Stalinism while at the same time holding on to the utopian idea of civilised progress? The answer to this question sounds almost absurd: During his lifetime Du Bois always had a problem with Marxist theory but never had a problem with Marxist praxis – at least not after he

left the NAACP. For Du Bois, communist praxis symbolised the practice of enlightenment. The price that Du Bois paid was high. Leaning towards communism as it actually existed in practice meant a “reduction of complexity” (Luhmann): the ideal of higher education through the “educated tenth” became real in educational dictatorship. Here an interesting parallel with German intellectuals during National Socialism and communism in the former GDR emerges. *Bildung* did not prevent people from supporting dictatorships; that was and still is possible only by following democratic paths. In this respect Du Bois was perhaps not enough of an Atlantic thinker. For him, only the *Bildungsideal* stemmed from the West; Du Bois followed the maxim *ex oriente lux* regarding political and social liberation.

FROM DOGMATIC TROTSKYIST TO RADICAL CULTURAL CRITIC: C. L. R. JAMES

While in Du Bois’s case we can observe a development of radicalisation from a liberal education, then to radical democrat, and finally to uncritical supporter of the communist party, the case of C. L. R. James is very different. James’s learning process can be described as a development from dogmatic Trotskyism to a pluralistic, democratic, and open, if not to say “liberal”, Marxism. Compared to Du Bois, James’s intellectual and political development seems to have been a more mediated process. Two phases can be distinguished: one that has a more political dimension with remarkable parallels to fellow Trotskyite Isaac Deutscher; and one that is more oriented to cultural criticism with parallels to Walter Benjamin.

Looking at James’s life, it becomes clear that he was more of an Atlantic thinker than Du Bois, who – with the exception of his last two years – always had his home in the U.S.⁴ Born in Trinidad, James had an early interest in literature and writing; additionally he discovered a passion for cricket. James first made his name as a sports commentator. In 1932, James came to England and managed to get a job as a sports correspondent for the Manchester Guardian. James also had an early interest in politics – quite unlike Du Bois. The young emigrant found his first political home in Trotskyist circles; in 1934 he joined the Independent Labour Party. In his politically active time in England, James wrote two books: *World Revolution 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (1937) and *Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938). The first study was a critique of Stalinist policies of the Comintern. What is remarkable about James’s critique is the historical acquittal of Lenin whom James treats as a charismatic leader and whose early death in the author’s view accelerated the power struggles between different factions. It does not have to be stressed here that such a viewpoint wants to offer another charismatic leader, Trotsky, as the alternative to Stalin. Instead of being a serious and critical historical study, James’s analysis became a pamphlet of justification for a particular political tendency.

It is a different case with *The Black Jacobins*. Although the author does again play with the idea of the unfinished revolution, the political message is put on the back burner. This is to the advantage of a serious discussion of the historical material at hand, resulting in a study that becomes more than just a historical footnote to the event that was the French Revolution. However, today we read *Black Jacobins* mainly as a pioneering work in its own right because of its paying tribute to long neglected aspects of the black Diaspora’s liberation history.

⁴ Details about James’s life can be found in Paul Buhle’s monograph (1988) *C.L.R. James. The Artist as Revolutionary*, and in Anna Grimshaw’s introduction to *The C.L.R. James Reader* (ed. Anna Grimshaw, 1992: 1-22).

James moved to the U.S. during the same year when *The Black Jacobins* was published. As one would expect, his first contact on arrival was with Trotskyist comrades. He flirted first with the American Socialist Party, before becoming a member of the Workers Party (WP). Later he found a political home in the Johnson-Forest Tendency of the WP (where James worked together with Raya Dunayewskaya).

This short overview makes it clear that James was sucked into sectarian politics – a common and still current feature among Trotskyist circles in the U.S. However, James soon opened up – and changed. His change had obviously something to do with his attempt to come to terms with the peculiarities of American life. The change would also have a major impact on his future writings. Why? The American experience was very important, because it encouraged James to say farewell to an elitist concept of “high” culture. Additionally, it led James to favour political analyses and views that were no longer sectarian, but instead were open to new experiences and to a dialogue with a much broader public.

To be sure, there were moments in James’s earlier life when he favoured popular culture. This is particularly obvious in his writings on cricket.⁵ But only in America did James succeed in combining his views on the civilising process and popular culture with critical Marxism. Like Walter Benjamin in his essay on *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin 1935/1961) James stresses that mechanically produced art for the masses could serve as a starting point for human emancipation. He saw modern art almost as an open window through which it is possible to look into the future of the civilising process. In his letters to Constance Webb, James made this remark on modern mass media:

The picture exceeded in results my greatest hopes. Not only Hollywood but everywhere the masses loved it... It is revolutionary. Why? Because the more the technical discoveries of capitalism bring culture to the masses, the more they resent the degradation and humiliation of their role in production – the grinding slavery of the machine... Today an intelligent worker sees the same films, reads the same best-sellers, hears the same radio speeches, same newspapers, etc., as the bourgeoisie. The gap between the classes is becoming increasingly narrow. (James in Grimshaw, 1992: 131).

Because he lived longer and because he experienced the U.S., James managed to see further than Benjamin. He saw that with the exception of the United Kingdom, the whole of Europe had been conquered by fascism and that it was up to the U.S., that “wonderful democracy,” to inherit Western civilisation and save it from barbarism. If there were ever to be a society that could fulfil the promises of democracy it would be the United States. Analysing and interpreting American literature, particularly the works of Walt Whitman and Herman Melville, James observed:

Because of the peculiarly free conditions of democracy in the United States, the American intellectuals as a social group were the first to face as a practical question the beginnings of a problem which has been fully recognised during the last twenty years – the relation of individuals to democracy as a whole. By contrast, in Europe, this question was narrowed and concretised by all sorts of special conditions. (ibid: 202).

The discussion of the relationship between individuals and society culminated in the question of what positions intellectuals should hold in a democracy – a question that was never raised by Du

⁵ How cricket can become an allegory for an entire life is beautifully demonstrated in C. L. R. James’ autobiographical *Beyond a Boundary* (1963).

Bois in a similarly sophisticated manner.⁶ James saw a particular new moment in that the twentieth century was the first century in which the “masses” entered the stage of history. From this observation James deduced that intellectuals and critics would find acknowledgement and only be successful if they reflected on this new condition. He referred to historical examples such as Shakespeare to stress that only thinkers who were able to interpret the signs of the times became influential intellectual figures. Their dialogue with a larger public was particularly crucial in this respect.

James hypothesised that in Europe the “old fashioned” intellectual still dominated public debate, whereas in the United States intellectuals were much closer to and in dialogue with contemporary popular culture:

This is the division between the culture of the intellectuals and educated people and the desire of the mass to interest itself and amuse itself and be stimulated. It was never so sharp as in the much vaunted nineteenth century. And it is this division which in my opinion the twentieth century has to break down. I see in the United States a very clear, immensely interesting current of activity and mass response which seems to me to be the road to the future. (James in Grimshaw, 1992: 228).

This quote shows that to have the finger on the pulse of the times was essential for James – and this was more likely to be experienced in America than in Europe.

One cannot imagine what it meant at the time for C. L. R James to have been expelled back to the United Kingdom (on grounds not related to politics). What happened after his return can be described as a true transatlantic odyssey. Back in England James first resumed his work as a cricket reporter for the Manchester Guardian. However, in 1958 he returned to Trinidad. He travelled again to England in 1962 only to go back to Trinidad again in 1965. In the following years James was invited to lecture in a number of East and West African countries. He was in contact with Nkrumah, the president of Ghana, of whom he would later become more critical. In contrast to the late W. E. B. Du Bois, James always insisted on democratic means in the new nation building process. Taking into consideration his political criticism of U.S. policy, it was nevertheless James’s faith in the democratic potential of the United States that made him insist on the “democratic question.” He remained convinced that there was a relationship between means and ends in democracy. In other words, if the new African nation states were not democratic, then this might have something to do with the path they had pursued and the means they had chosen. Not all the failures could be attributed to the former colonial powers.

James’s argument does not stop there. He was of the view that the new nations – and particularly the new African nations – had to fulfil a most important task, namely to function as interlocutors, reminders, correctives, and inheritors of Western civilisation. Distinct from the late Du Bois, who in this regard thought about an enlightened *Bildungselite*, James discussed the matter more in terms of mass participation and collective learning processes. It is precisely this radical concept and understanding which prevented James from becoming part of the new postcolonial elite, and it is not by accident that while the late Du Bois was officially received by Mao and Nkrumah, the late James spent his last years in his little flat in Brixton watching cricket – far removed from any new postcolonial power elite.

⁶ For the discussion of the relationship between individual beings and society and between intellectuals and democracy, see James’s texts “Whitman and Melville,” “Letters to Literary Critics,” “Notes on Hamlet,” “Popular Art and the Cultural Tradition,” and “Preface to Criticism,” all reprinted in Grimshaw 1992: 202-260.

GETTING THE REDUCTION OF COMPLEXITY RIGHT

When observing the life trajectories of Du Bois and James, one begins to doubt whether the picture of the Diaspora as described by Paul Gilroy captures the Black Atlantic comprehensively and with all of its complexities and contradictions. The picture becomes even more complex if one takes a closer look at the different receptions of Western civilisation as approached and interpreted by two different traditions of Marxism.

The turn to Marxism enables one to pursue two different paths: one to democracy (James) and one that tolerates dictatorships (Du Bois). Observing the two life trajectories of Du Bois and James more closely, it quickly becomes obvious that different subjective moments and distinct, objective historical conditions explain the two respective receptions of Marxism. In the case of Du Bois, the turn to Marxism came very late, at the end of a long learning and radicalisation process, marked largely by disappointment about the lack of progress in the U.S. The moment of decision was in fact at the peak of the Cold War. Under the most unfavourable circumstances, these subjective and objective moments converged and reinforced each other.

James's case is different, as his early decision in favour of Marxism came at a moment when the process of Stalinisation in the Soviet Union was being passionately discussed for the first time, particularly in Trotskyist circles. Hence, James had been warned. Seen from a historical perspective, James was in a better position. Favourable conditions gave more room for intellectual manoeuvre.

A second distinctive feature has to do with how the two intellectuals dealt differently with their cultural capital or, to use the more appropriate German term here, *Bildungskapital*. Du Bois used his knowledge to gain political power, while James used his knowledge to criticise political power. Their different perceptions and use of Marxism as a theoretical and practical tool were both the cause and reflection of how they interpreted the relationship between knowledge and power.

As such, Du Bois's and James's different Marxist views also mirror the differences between Western and Eastern Marxism. These differences have been described as a difference between an ideology as a legitimisation of political power on one hand, and an ideology as a tool for oppositional critique of political power on the other hand. The whole story becomes even more complex when one reflects on Du Bois's and James's respective interpretations of Marxism in the context of the long history of the black Diaspora. It becomes clear then that the history of different approaches towards Marxism in the context of the Diaspora, liberation movements, decolonisation, and nation building processes still needs to be written. While this article does not have the space to develop this idea, it can only point towards a considerable historical "black box" and the necessity for such a study.

It has justly been stressed that after 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, the contrast between Western and Eastern Marxism has largely become history, perhaps a distinction necessary for historians to deal with but no longer of practical importance. Yet it would be too easy to dismiss Marxism with its emphasis on progress, its belief in the Enlightenment, and its vision of a conflict-free utopian society simply as a part of the European history of ideas. Referring to the Diaspora, these matters become more complex than they seem at first. Is it not the history of the black Diaspora and the "black Atlantic," with all its contradictions, that constantly reminds us of the normative democratic concepts of freedom and equality, i.e. the values that often appear to be European in origin (including their denial), but which are now so universally understood? In this respect, the different receptions of Marxism by Du Bois and James might symbolise two possible attempts to come to terms with the complex legacy of Western civilisation.



In the end it can be argued, against Gilroy, that in order to fully appreciate the contributions of the two Atlantic thinkers, Du Bois and James, a less idolizing and more anti-authoritarian approach towards black leadership and its role in developing political democracy is in order. Using the allegory of the Black Atlantic to construct a new, perhaps more democratic utopia, but without any conceptual tools that would allow one to be critical of both metropolitan colonisers and anticolonial sentiment, remains, theoretically speaking, a highly ambivalent achievement.



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