

theme. *Chicago and Downstate* shows us FSA images of Chicago—which were long neglected because it was commonly supposed that the FSA was interested in only rural poverty.

Created within the Resettlement Administration in 1935, the photographic section was later part of the the Farm Security Administration (from 1937 to 1942) before it fell under the aegis of the Office of War Information. Under the direction of Stryker, a former Columbia University economics instructor, the agency's mandate was to record the dismal effects of the Depression on Americans—and the positive results that New Deal programs would (it was hoped) have on those lives. The photographers hired had a contradictory agenda: half documentary, half public relations.

Framing the photographs: *Documenting America* begins with two excellent essays by Lawrence W. Levine and Alan Trachtenberg about the different ways that FSA photos have been "read" over the years. The selection here is the closest thing yet to a photographer's-eye view of the collection. There are 15 lots by 12 different photographers, each addressing an individual theme, whether a place or a group of people. This system of organization provides a good idea of the working methods and problems of the FSA photographers.

Most assignments took weeks or months to complete, in part because Stryker exhorted his photographers to familiarize themselves with a region before they ever set out with a camera. But at least one assignment—Walker Evans' "New York City Block"—was the work of only a day. Evans, of all the FSA photographers, was (at that time) the most well known, the most fastidious, the least interested in the political goals of the FSA and the New Deal agencies in general. By viewing a number of his photographs from the same lot—instead of just one or two—we get an idea here of what sort of decisions Evans was making while he was wandering the street that day.

What results is an intimate yet removed portrait of a single block, with Evans clearly distanced from the residents of this working-class neighborhood but sensitive to nuances of human expression and to marks of life outside the neighborhood.

A modern promotionist: Other lots are far more evangelizing. Rothstein's "FSA Migratory Labor Camp," for example, documents conditions in a camp set up in Visalia, Calif., to house migrant agricultural workers—this in 1940, when California growers and their lobbyists were leading a bitter fight to defeat such aid for workers. Stryker told Rothstein that the agency needed positive pictures of conditions in the camp, hoping that such photos would swing public opinion in favor of the program. The photographer obliged with glowing images of gardens, a medical clinic, a baseball game, a Saturday-night dance.

Most FSA photographers seem to

have Stryker's faith that the New Deal programs they were promoting would do some good. "We were hoping that the programs were helping the people they were supposed to," the photographer Jack Delano told me recently. "And I think we thought

FSA photographers had a contradictory agenda: half documentary, half public relations.

that it did help some in forming public opinion."

The emphasis on "positive" images was clearer after the war began in 1941, when Stryker demanded more photographs that would show Americans pulling together. Marjory Collins' "Small Town in Wartime" photo essay here depicts Lititz, Pa., in November of 1942. The town residents buy meat, get haircuts, make bullets and pretzels, sit on the local draft board and are almost Norman Rockwellesque in their self-reliance,

self-assuredness, self-governance.

"We never meet the town drunkard," write Fleischhauer and Brannan in their introduction to this section. They also point out, though, and rightly, that the photos address a broad spectrum of people and activities in the town—and that breadth is what makes these photos interesting for historians and others.

Fleischhauer and Brannan juxtapose the small-town series with Russell Lee's photographs of the relocation of Japanese-Americans on the West Coast in early 1942. As presented here, the series becomes a narrative of this forced move, beginning with Japanese-Americans reading evacuation orders in Los Angeles and ending with a "reception center" consisting of endless rows of identical shacks.

Because there are a number of lots and topics here, one gets the impression that the U.S. of the late '30s and early '40s was above all a diverse society, a place of great ethnic and regional variety. In that respect this book is similar to the travel and history guides issued by the WPA writers' project, which emphasized that the U.S. was too diverse to be easily

summed up.

One positive aspect of the FSA's later emphasis on Americans working together was that photographers began to go out and take pictures of African-Americans, who had been largely neglected by earlier documentary and news reportage. Half the photographs in *Chicago and Downstate* were taken in Chicago, and the majority of those depict life in the "Black Belt," the South Side ghetto area. These photos date from the early '40s, after Stryker—his vision broadening—had begun to focus less exclusively on documenting rural America. Chicago, represented by 1,800 prints in the FSA file, was one of the cities documented most thoroughly by Stryker's photographers.

Many of the photos are bleak scenes of poverty: there are ramshackle tenement buildings, squalid and cramped kitchenette apartments, meager meals. But the photographers didn't just take pictures of what was wrong with urban life. Many of the Black Belt photographs were intended to show that African-Americans were just as upright and responsible as their white

counterparts. There are photographs of African-American professionals and their families; there is even a tender photograph of Oliver Coleman, a musician—and thus supposedly a disreputable individual—at home with his five-month-old son, poring over his scrapbook.

Unfortunately, the depressing conditions these photos document have not improved over the years. Photo captions describe how new migrants from the South came to Chicago and were supported by relief money. However bad living conditions in the city were, they were often better than what the migrants had had in the rural South.

So there are hints of hope here in even the grimmer photographs: there is a vague notion that—through government assistance and the goodwill of those who were better off (such as those viewing the published photographs)—the lives of even the poorest Americans could be improved. That such an optimistic attitude is almost unthinkable today makes these historical photographs a searing indictment. ■

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C.L.R. James: a one-man gang

C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary

By Paul Buhle
Verso, 197 pp., \$13.95

By Eric Lott

It is no mystery. We're making history.

—Linton Kwesi Johnson

LONDON'S 1981 "BRIXTON" RIOTS unfolded like Allan Bloom's worst nightmare. In April of that year, metropolitan police battled the area's heavily beleaguered Afro-Caribbean residents

POLITICS

—Prospero muzzling Caliban's curse—as the "disorders" spread first down Atlantic Road, then into Chaucer Road and Spenser Road, up Milton Road, and finally toward the borders of Shakespeare Road itself.

Yet if this street synopsis of empire's decline was the sort of thing to wither a Bloom, it was no less kind to the statist left. Later in the summer, riots continued to sweep through the U.K., finally extending to more than 30 locales. The left was taken wholly by surprise and behaved that way, alternately distancing itself from the rioters and attempting to capitalize on their actions.

Left holding the bag: These "July days" constituted an essentially leaderless uprising—"shopping without money," in the words of participants—by working-class kids, black and white, who refused the role of passive victims bereft of a "good job." It could be seen as a grand, spontaneous refusal of the legitimized boredom and irrelevance



C.L.R. James: overseeing the eruptions of empire.

urged upon them by labor elites and political advocates. It appeared from all this that Pan-African éminence grise C.L.R. James had had some (invisible) hand in the events, as Tom Ward later remarked in the *Voice Literary Supplement*. Or as James himself once put it: "There is nothing more to organize. ... Organization as we have known it is at an end."

One of the many good things about Paul Buhle's intellectual biography, *C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary*, is that it clarifies the connections between James' ideas and eruptions like Brixton in 1981, Tottenham in 1985 and New York's Tompkins Square Park in 1988, the latest phase (and form) of Anglo-American class struggle. And it helps

trouble the radical pieties that lately constitute leftward cultural thought—the mostly rhetorical invocations of "gender, race and class," and the cynical games of pin-the-sign-on-the-discourse.

James' life and work offer a potential charge to radical thinking on race, the role of culture in mass movements and the interrelatedness of spontaneity and organization in mass political activity. If Buhle's book did little else, it would be crucial in affirming the centrality of a figure who is still curiously marginal to the metropolises, if not to the Third World.

James' life, which began in Trinidad in 1901 and ended near Shakespeare Road in Brixton where he spent his last years, reads like a resume of this century's radical black cultural and political efforts. Coincident with the Harlem Renaissance and the prestige of Jamaican leader Marcus Garvey, James helped organize a circle of Trinidadian writers and cultural thinkers around the

James' life was a resume of radical black politics.

journals *Trinidad* and *The Beacon*. Leaving for England in 1932, James produced in 1938 his extraordinary version of the black Atlantic originary moment, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*—close in spirit to another such enterprise, W.E.B. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935).

Out of bounds: During his years of intense political activity in the America of the '40s and early '50s, James was already overseeing at a

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distance indigenous anti-colonialist forces in Africa and the Caribbean (Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana and Eric Williams' Trinidad) that would soon flower in the U.S. The '60s witnessed James' superbly genre-blurring *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), that mix of memoir, cultural politics and cricket. It was also an important period of contact with a younger generation of radicals such as historian/activist Walter Rodney (murdered in 1980 by the Forbes Burnham regime in Guyana). By any accounting, James has been one of this century's chief public intellectuals.

Indeed, riffing on Perry Anderson's coinage, "Western Marxism," Buhle shrewdly notes both the absurdity and the partial justice of James' continued exclusion from such a schema: "James can be found outside so-called Western Marxism but not outside either the West or Marxism." James had a far closer relationship to popular political struggles—and mass life generally—than the brilliant but frustrated academics Anderson chronicled.

Like the British New Left a generation later, James saw in the horrors of Stalinism not a reason to retreat to academic or Cold War reservations, but a dire political challenge demanding the most stringent and active critique. James forged an alternative trajectory for the engaged Marxist intellectual: peripatetic, sometimes marginal and sometimes not, as attentive to working-class ethnography as to forms of the state, as beholden to the varieties of mass culture as to Shakespeare.

For though he would spend his life at Caliban's side, James took from Shakespeare and the 19th-century British novel a sense of the extraordinary complexity of human personality and sought to apply that sense to the working-class aesthetic innovations of calypsonians and cricket players. His midcentury journal *Correspondence*, Buhle observes, caught working-class responsiveness to *I Love Lucy*, not to mention the cultural meaning of wildcat strikes, as no other (more celebrated) organs of the left. Hence what Buhle refers to as

James' "dialectical acceptance" of the West's accomplishments as a springboard for other projects that would "transcend the West's palpable limitations."

Marx and Shakespeare, their inextricability and occasional reciprocal cancellation, seemed the very motors of James' world-view. Culturally James believed that "large areas of human existence" had never been accounted for by programs of either the bourgeois or the Marxist variety. In the matter

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of art (a category James refused to discard), reactionaries were as likely to score as radicals; James, for instance, found his friend Paul Robeson's *Othello* stagey and insecure.

On the other hand, James was no aesthete—rather a revisionary Trotskyist, though he shied away from the high-culture Trots around *Partisan Review*. James recognized that cultural forms such as cricket and Shakespeare had been instrumental in bourgeois and imperialist domination, but he saw equally that once in play such forms are readily appropriable.

A sticky wicket: More importantly, James held that all art of any worth provides a space for the realization of individual as well as mass consciousness, of a new and ultimately political way of putting reason and feeling back together. It is in this context that one understands James' lifelong attachment to cricket. In *Beyond a Boundary*, surely a founding text of cultural studies, James countered both bourgeois fetishists of high-cul-

tural value and prole-cult enthusiasts with perhaps the finest example of West Indian cultural appropriation.

In fact, it appears that James came to politics through cricket, an art he found fully equal to dance, theater, or opera. As Buhle notes from Sylvia Wynter's fine work on James, "James' cricketers struggled to realize themselves on the pitch," reaching toward an autonomy and a radical historicity that effectively traced the "disguised processes of emancipation." (The cricket film *Playing Away*, set in Brixton and written by young black British writer Caryl Phillips, is indebted to such insights.)

Not for nothing does Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism* situate James' test in relation to early New Left monuments like E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. "What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?" James wrote. It is a question that all of his writings of Marxism, politics and history had prepared him to ask.

Among many other things, those writings, spanning 50 years, give the lie to Harold Cruse's dictum in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* that American Marxism has been a kind of intellectual chain gang for black radicals, inevitably putting the cuffs on the question of race. It is fascinating to watch Pan-African James grapple with a moment in which, as Alan Wald's *The New York Intellectuals* and Buhle's own *Marxism in the U.S.A.* recently reminded us, a small but thriving Marxist culture existed in the U.S. Galvanized by Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, James made anti-racism and anti-colonialism major Trotskyist issues—coming into his own as one of this tendency's foremost theorists, constantly attracting brilliant disciples and comrades.

Black by popular demand: James crucially theorized the relationship of black nationalism to black class consciousness; as he put it in *The Black Jacobins*, "the race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics.... But to neglect

the racial factor as merely incidental [is] an error only less grave than to make it fundamental." James' insights have proved indispensable to such recent work as Paul Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, whose premise is that for black people, race is the medium in which class is lived, and to reduce the problem to either of these overlapping grids (cultural nationalism or economic determinism) is inadequate. James indeed pinned his Marxist hopes on American blacks, whose hatred of bourgeois society he believed outstripped that of any other sector of the U.S.

In James' view, blacks themselves—and not in some left party's name, least of all the Communist Party's—would act independently upon American democracy, in the process transforming the prospects for socialism. *Prisoners of the American Dream*, Mike Davis' savage dismissal of the Democratic Party's usefulness and hostility to black and Hispanic workers ("50 million strong"), is only the most unrelenting recent example of James' vision.

These ideas are available in Buhle's biography of James, but at a certain price. Buhle has a sententious streak that appears to strive for James' prophetic laconicism but too often misses the mark. And Buhle's strong suit, the history of the Marxist left, intrudes at untoward moments, substituting sectarian squabbles for historical context, political groupuscules for cultural formations.

This habit also obscures certain of James' private motivations, such as his relationships with women. James, almost alone on the Marxist left, worked in an emphatically collective spirit with remarkable

women like Constance Webb and Raya Dunayevskaya; but he had a tendency to masculinist mentorship, bound up with sexual intimacy, that Buhle leaves unexamined (though he does fault James for only incidentally concerning himself with matters of gender). Buhle more than compensates for these lapses, however, in his lucid and dynamic portrait of a thinker who uniquely combined a vatic Marxism and a global anti-racism.

Which returns us, more or less, to Brixton. In this as in most political questions, James was ever disdainful of left party bureaucracy, and had an unshakable faith in what he once called "the elemental urge to socialism." (Buhle cracks that some of James' compeers have found him altogether too mystical.) Always a believer in the inherent validity of spontaneous mass actions, James' map of the elemental urge stretched from the medieval "free" cities, the British Levellers and the Paris Commune to the Petrograd Soviets, Polish Solidarity and Brixton.

He would have had absolutely no patience with the depressing cant that because the uprising in Tiananmen Square was crushed it was also useless. Regarding Brixton, likewise, James articulated a social logic that continues to menace Anglo-American Prosperos: "That, my friends, is the revolution. There is no highly educated party leading the backward masses. There is no outstanding leader.... There had been no prearranged plan. They met and joined, they shouted and stormed off [note this particularly] in the direction of the Moss Side Police Station."

Eric Lott writes regularly on Caribbean politics and culture.

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NOTEBOOK

Faces: The Toll of Workplace Deaths on American Families

National Safe Workplace Institute
230 pp., \$16.95

Every year more than 10,000 workers die from workplace accidents, another 50,000 more from workplace illnesses. Who are they? *Faces: The Toll of Workplace Deaths on American Families* introduces us to Jeff Link, 25, and Bill Freeze, 19, asphyxiated in a plating factory, to Debra Becton, a young mother of three killed when her heavy construction machinery went out of control, and to Nettie Shaw's husband Garland, a furniture maker killed

when his machine flew apart and hit him in the head.

We don't learn much about the accidents (and more's the pity, since the stories don't always reveal how preventable most of these accidents and deaths are). But we do find out a bit about the dozens of men and women selected from those killed in 1987 and 1988—their hobbies, churches, reading habits and hopes. Most of all, we learn how much their families miss them.

That's a special contribution that grew out of the experience of Joseph A. Kinney, who founded the National Safe Workplace Institute and published this book in response to his anger and frustration about his brother's death in a workplace accident. The book includes several short essays by experts on topics such as sending the boss to jail and casualties on the farm, as well as media coverage of workplace health and safety. (Available from the institute, 122 South Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60603, \$16.95.)

—David Moberg