

C.L.R. JAMES, The SPEAKER and his CHARISMA

by

Constance Webb

The first time I heard Cyril Lionel Robert (C.L.R.) James, Sr. speak was in the spring of 1939 in a church loaned to the Socialist Workers Party (S.W.P.) by a black minister in Los Angeles, California. The party of the Fourth International, led by James P. Cannon, was splitting apart between the majority who claimed Russia was a degenerated worker's state and the minority, led by Max Schachtman, who believed it had taken the form of bureaucratic collectivism. On a national level, the lack of an acceptable position on the black struggle was causing problems throughout all the branches of the party.

The church was overflowing with several hundred people, some of whom were standing along the walls and crowding the doorways. Members had come in from all the Los Angeles area branches bringing with them "contacts" whom they hoped to win over to the Trotskyist position. Excitement was at a peak, because the comrades were stimulated by the visits and speeches of party leaders from other cities and states. This speaker was a member of the International Executive Committee and was on his way to Mexico for a meeting with Leon Trotsky. His books, The Black Jacobins and World Revolution, had been reviewed favorably in the New York Times and Time Magazine; he had written and produced a play starring Paul Robeson; and he was from England.

From the moment C.L.R. rose from his chair, behind the pulpit, the audience seemed to settle down for greater enjoyment than on other occasions. He came forward, from the back of the dais, where he had been sitting quietly, legs crossed, and approached the podium. In his right hand, partially under his arm, he carried what looked like an entire sheaf of papers with bulging edges poking out

in complete disorder like stalks of wheat. He looked out into the audience as he walked forward, with what seemed to be interest in the faces, rather than an assessment of the size of the crowd.

He was over six feet two inches; slim, but not thin, with long legs. He walked easily, with his shoulders level. His head appeared to be on a stalk, held high with the chin tilted forward and up, which made it seem that his body was led by a long neck -- curved forward like that of a racehorse in the slip. Shoulders, chest, and legs were powerful and he moved decisively. But like highly trained athletes, the tension was concentrated and tuned, so that he gave the impression of enormous ease. He was without self-consciousness, simply himself, which showed in the way he moved, and like baseball players doing nothing, waiting their turn at bat, one recognized a special quality.

The impact of his first sentence was astonishing. Silence dropped over the church like the opening of a curtain on a first night. Great orators are very rare, as rare as great violinists. C.L.R. was an actor on a stage, and with his fine features as handsome as a movie actor. He was our captive and we were a captivated audience.

His first words, in a melodious voice, the English accent faintly tinged with the lilt and cadence of the West Indies, were: "It is now two P.M. and I intend to speak for forty-five minutes, or until exactly two forty-five." And he kept his promise to the minute. Remarkable as such timing was, it was what he said and the way it was said that moved the audience. Only two men, in the twentieth century, were his equal as orators: Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The ideas seemed to develop as he went along. While he spoke, they evolved to completion and created a feeling of participation during the process. And most important, he cut right through a mass of seemingly unrelated and even contradictory notions with crystal clarity. The effect was: "But, of course that's true. How simple it is." There weren't any difficult or shockingly new ideas to ponder over and absorb, but a feeling that he revealed truths that one already possessed.

Toward the end of his speech, the blacks in the audience began to respond, their voices punctuating each telling point. The words met half-buried ideas, which had been struggling to emerge. Here was the broad, wide, world of imagination and heart. Here was an international movement; he linked our activities on the West Coast with those of people in Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa. The essence of what he had to say was simple and adopted later as the position of the Trotskyists:

The independent struggle of the Negro people for their democratic rights and equality with the rest of the American nation not only has to be defended and advocated by the Marxist movement. The Marxist movement has to understand that such independent struggles are a contributory factor to the socialist revolution.

The American Negroes in fighting for their democratic rights are making an indispensable addition to the struggle for socialism in the United States.

The summary began and the voices rose around him, timed and framed like a musical passage. C.L.R.'s eyes gleamed and his face showed that the audience was giving him something vital, as if he were learning from it. It was not so much a great style as that he was a born orator, and great orators are also great actors. And like all actors, he had charisma, a word that most radicals dislike, because the idea frightens them. C.L.R. had this to say about charisma:

In every art, it does not matter how wide, how deep, are the ideas that are being propounded, they are always refracted through a personality. Some terrible performers, like [Paul] Robeson, make an immense impression through their force of personality.¹

Years later, another Marxist, Juan Juarbe y Juarbe, consul general to the United States from Cuba, said: "Marxists have always left out the role of the individual personality. Fidel's [Castro] charisma and its impact on the revolution cannot be under-estimated."

¹Letter to Constance Webb, April 21, 1944.

C.L.R.'s speech was titled: The Negro Question. In 1939, use of the word "black" was an insult. Black people, who were moving from the South into the industries in the North, insisted that they be dignified by "Negro," not "black," nor "Nigra," as the southern upperclasses pronounced the word. The subject was vital to the members of the Southside Branch in Los Angeles, California, Spring 1939. For the party's position was feeble -- worse, there was inadvertent racism, innocent but deadly. Blacks were stereotypes. They were martyrs and heroes -- Gabriel, Vesey, Attucks -- or defenseless creatures who were beaten and lynched. In the coming revolution, they would be "on the barricades" led by the Trotskyists.

The Southside Branch of the Socialist Workers Party was composed mainly of college students who had grown up in the San Joaquin Valley. They were members of the Young People's Socialist League (Y.P.S.L), the youth branch of the party. Despite their youth, the members of this branch were in some ways more sophisticated than most comrades in the Los Angeles organization, even though many members were transplanted from the East Coast. These young comrades had several years of hard experience. They had entered the Socialist Party at the direction of the Trotskyists leadership, and broken away, taking the majority with them. They had grown up in a notorious valley, had faced armed members of the Associated Farmers, and fled from vigilantes.

The San Joaquin Valley had a long and bloody history. In March 1933, the Associated Farmers (A.F.) pushed through emergency disaster ordinances, which allowed them to take over the Valley in times of crisis. They built several concentration camps in 1936, one near Salinas, another near Fowler, complete with barbed wire and substantial fences with gun towers at each corner. The A.F.'s interpretation of crises were strikes by the migratory workers and attempts at unionization by the American Federation of Labor. Members of the Fresno branch of the Trotskyists had defied the A.F. and its retinue of bankers, mayors, the head of the Welfare Bureau, police, a representative from the State Legislature, the president of a local Chamber of Commerce, and several hundred American Legionnaires in the organizing attempts.

Because they had grown up in the midst of these violent struggles with the A.F., the members of the Southside Branch were very concerned about racism and the lack of leadership by the party. Their branch was also located on the southside of Los Angeles, in the black community. They had made friends in the neighborhood, even with black women, at a time when only black men attended radical affairs, mostly to pick up white women. But to the dismay of these young people, bigotry appeared when least expected.

At a city-wide picnic, in Griffith Park, the Southside comrades arrived later than the the rest of the membership. As they came over the brow of the hill with three black friends, a comrade caught sight of them and and called to the others. All the comrades then began to cheer: "Yeah! The Southside brings them back alive!"

One of the branches in New York lost members when the Political Committee (P.C.) discouraged intermarriage among its members. The leadership said that intermarriage "might antagonize the workers. It is the working class which will make the revolution and solve the Negro problem."

C.L.R. demolished the Trotskyist position that the struggle of blacks was subordinate to the trade unions and that organized labor would lead in the formation of a new society. He also disposed of the Communist Party position that a separate, independent state should be set up within the United States for black Americans. The Communists would not decide for the blacks, and segregate them within the nation, blacks would be in the forefront and, as a matter of fact, were already in motion. Moving out of the sharecropping slavery of the south into the factories of Detroit and Chicago. The party slogan was "Black and white, unite and fight!" C.L.R. pointed out that this translated into: "You join us and we'll fight for you, and tell you when to fight.

From Vera Cruz, after his stay in Los Angeles, C.L.R wrote:

I have written to Max [Schachtman] asking for a N. [Negro] column in the S.A. [Socialist Appeal]. No reply, up to now. Patience, my dear. They will be jogged into action if not by me

then by L.T. [Leon Trotsky]. He is the keenest of the keen on the N. question. You will gasp when you read what he says to the party (strictly between us). It is roughly this: The attitude of the S.W.P. [Socialist Workers Party] to the N. question has been most disquieting and unless the Party can find a way to the Negroes, i.e., the most oppressed, it will degenerate. The Negroes as the most oppressed must become the very vanguard of the revolution.²

Sometime later, he sent the notes from his meeting with Trotsky in Coycoyacan. Trotsky told him that when the black masses began to move, the majority of the comrades in the Trotskyist Party would draw back or leave the organization.

C.L.R.'s speech clarified the role of blacks and our own role as members of a party. But, as is the case with all organized groups, the leaders and subleaders, and many rank and file members waited until Trotsky formally agreed with the position on independent struggle before they would accept it. A month or so after C.L.R. returned to New York, he wrote that work had begun on the question.

The Appeal [Socialist Appeal] will be out 3 or 4 times a week. The Negro column will, after this issue, be a pamphlet on the Negro and War. We shall save the type and print as soon as it has appeared...Work for that in your branch and on the Coast.³

The political dissension within the party was also intensifying:

What is happening to the Party in Los Angeles? Here the situation daily becomes more serious. Split on the Russian question and still more serious a gulf opening wider every day on the question of the regime. Cannon majority against Burnham-Schachtman minority. Against Cannon are Schachtman, Burnham, Abern, Gould, and practically all the leaders of the youth. L. T. [Leon Trotsky] intervened on behalf of Cannon. But now it is clear that at least half the N.Y. membership and certainly a majority of the youth are anti-Cannon despite L. T.'s intervention. I am not going into the rights and wrongs of the case, but under such circumstances it is pathetic to see each side laying all the blame on the other. It seems that this quarrel has a long history. But what is obvious is that this time the minority will not give in, will not allow itself to be split, and in all probability, has a large majority of New York membership and youth behind it. Cannon has made attempt after attempt to isolate one section of it. But Burnham-Schachtman-Abern-Gould-Erber refuse to be split and the situation is at a deadlock.

2, ³Letters to Constance Webb, May 1939 and September 1, 1939.

I am a member of the I.E.C. [International Executive Committee] and am waiting to intervene when the question comes, as it must, before the International. But to date the majority says of the minority 'Irresponsible, jittery and unprincipled, subject to social-patriotic pressure.' The minority says of the majority 'Stalinist, bureaucratic, and unable to lead the party.' A split on such issues would show the utmost irresponsibility on both sides.

The more I hear, the more I see that the party, the rank and file, must lose the leadership complex, listen to both sides, and impose a decision. Here on the organisational question, as it is called, the party must resolutely intervene and assert its authority. It should approach the question from this point of view. If you leaders cannot agree, then we shall examine the questions at issue and say: 'Do this or do that.'⁴

It was not only what C.L.R. said, but the way he made the points. They were placed as precisely as some great cricketers place a ball, dropping it exactly where they intend it, time after time. The speech, its delivery, his charisma heightened one's sense of capacity, quickened the blood flow, and made one feel that anything could be accomplished.

His hands appeared delicate, in contrast to his height and breadth, and he used them with a natural grace, not cramped or self-conscious. His voice, through the proper genes, discipline, and practice, as painstaking as all artist's, reached the back of the hall without microphone. Most of all, he gave the impression that he was made for nothing else. As he spoke, all of his life, an entire personality, was summoned and poured into the audience. And the audience recognized this quality.

Very few, if any comrades in Los Angeles, in 1939, had met anyone from the West Indies. C.L.R. was a man beyond their understanding -- a middle-class Englishman, straight out of Thackeray. And they had never heard a black man speak with such authority and grace. Mrs. Marcus Garvey and some of the comrades told him: "You're not a black man." Or, "You don't act like a black man." C.L.R. had given very little thought to himself as a

⁴ Letter to Constance Webb, September 4, 1939.

black man, until he reached the United States. And he was not obsessed with the problems as were American blacks and southern whites, all of which gave him a special quality.

Part of C.L.R.'s oratory was not wholly conscious, or deliberate. At least when he was actually onstage. But he prepared thoroughly. He took his job, politics and speaking, very seriously, but he was delightfully absurd, loved cartoons, and could laugh to himself all day at something amusing. He liked to tease. Once he found an imitation gold and glass ring, of the type given in a box of Crackerjacks, and put it on his little finger. It looked awful. When anyone complained that it was ugly, he defended its beauty -- and the more often he wore it.

His preparations for appearances were continuous. He wrote: "Though not as often as before, I am still firmly allied to all sorts of absurdities, but, a very private confession, in the early mornings when I have just got up. And, here we approach insanity. I am absurd to myself alone or to some imaginary person -- [I make] the most wonderful jokes (they seem so to me at any rate); or at other times I make speeches. On what? On anything. To the Negroes on Fascism, to a party convention calling for a new spirit in the leadership, to workers just before an assault against the capitalist system, on the Nazi-Soviet pact. Then I sit down and make notes of the things I said and they form the basis of future articles and speeches. Subject, words, etc., come as spontaneously as the absurdities, an excess of animal spirits. It interests me enormously."⁵

But when he had a meeting, he prepared for a speech as actors prepare for a role, as an athlete tunes his body, as a musician does his scales. Notes in hand, he walked back and forth, speaking. Sometimes repeating the whole and sometimes going over certain parts, tightening the sentences, rephrasing to clarify ideas, glancing at the notes as he walked up and down the room. When he faced an audience, he almost always carried books and papers. He

⁵Letter to Constance Webb, August 31, 1939.

put them on the desk or stand, and then never looked at them again. He did this time and again, whether the speech was one-half hour or three. He never fumbled and never missed a beat. Only one time, was he afraid he'd need notes:

Do you know what happened on Sunday at the membership meeting? I was so tired from talking to a hundred people for three minutes each at the [fund raising] party the night before that I was nervous about my speech and for the first time for many years used notes. But I got through very well -- in fact, after two minutes I found I didn't need the notes. Anyway, the experience was good for me. I realized how difficult it must be for nervous or inexperienced speakers.⁶

C.L.R., like all performers, reached ever greater heights of oratory when the audience responded enthusiastically. And that, too, was charisma -- the audience sent its personality in waves and nourished the artist -- and it was this sending and receiving that created great moments.

Along with his oratorical gifts, C.L.R. brought back to the United States a sense of historical perspective, at least to those who knew him. He understood more about the American scene than any of the American comrades. He linked the most personal struggle of an individual to what was happening in the rest of the world and reminded his audiences from whence they came, before telling them where he thought they were going. But he paid a price and, as a matter of fact, we all did. Only a fraction of C.L.R.'s ideas were written down -- some of the very best were lost. But those who heard him speak still remember most of what he said, the sparkle in his eyes, how he moved on a platform, felt the power of his charisma which clarified important aspects of their lives, and gave them a new way of looking at the world.

⁶Letter to Constance Webb, October 18, 1939.