

Democratizing Dialectics with C.L.R. James

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Abstract: This essay explores the work of C.L.R. James in an effort to rethink the democratic import of dialectical thought. James is best known as a West Indian Marxist and the author of *The Black Jacobins*, but he is also a deeply democratic thinker and a creative reader of Hegel. Alongside the more orthodox Marxist strand of his thought, James develops a mode of dialectical reflection that is attentive to a sense of democratic uncertainty and that aims to enrich political participation among ordinary citizens. By thinking both with and against James, and by exploiting the ambiguities in his postwar writings on dialectics and American democratic culture, I argue that James inspires a kind of participatory democratic ethos grounded in the language and conceptual resources of Hegelian humanist thought and modern dialectical reflection.

Introduction

My aim here is both to underscore and challenge what has become a kind of democratic suspicion of dialectical thought. On the one hand, I want to support the presumption that dialectical thought, so deeply implicated in the tradition of Hegel and Marx, bespeaks a set of philosophical assumptions that resist the more uncertain and contentious character of democratic politics. I suggest, to put it bluntly, that if dialectical thought yields a strongly deterministic or teleological narrative, then the dialectician amounts to a kind of authoritarian storyteller, the mouthpiece of History or Reason, while the people, members of the demos, are reduced to a set of predetermined characters playing out predetermined roles. But I also want to suggest that this sense of suspicion has come to imperil any real consideration of the language and conceptual resources of modern dialectical reflection. Perhaps a refashioned and remobilized dialectics can enrich our thinking about participatory politics.

This article, then, is an exploratory piece regarding the possible democratic import of dialectical thought. It is also a foray into the much-neglected work of C.L.R. James, a writer and activist of West Indian origin whose work

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embodies the very tensions and possibilities I want to explore. Political theorists know James, if at all, as a mid-twentieth-century Marxist and the author of *The Black Jacobins*.¹ His 1938 history of the San Domingo Revolution is a rightful classic, but the popularity of this text has tended to overshadow James's creative theoretical writings on Hegel and the early Marx as well as his wide-ranging reflections on American democratic culture.² James was a fairly prominent figure in the rise of postwar socialist humanism. His group was the first, in 1947, to offer an English translation of Marx's 1844 manuscripts.³ James was also a deeply democratic thinker who studied sports and popular literature, Hollywood films, and comic strips in an effort to understand the driving frustrations and basic political desires of ordinary citizens.⁴ Most important for our purposes, James struggled to put his reflections on dialectical thought and Marxist politics into conversation with what contemporary readers might recognize as a more radically

¹C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Overture and the San Domingo Revolution*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1989). David Scott has been somewhat influential in reintroducing contemporary political theorists to James's work, although Scott has focused almost exclusively on *The Black Jacobins*. See Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). For an excellent introduction to James's overall political theory, see Anthony Bogue, *Caliban's Freedom: The Early Political Thought of C.L.R. James* (Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997).

²The key texts in our analysis include James's 1948 theoretical study, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1980) and his 1950 manuscript on American social and political culture, *American Civilization*, ed. A Grimshaw and K. Hart (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993).

³Three sections of Marx's 1844 manuscripts were translated between 1943 and 1947 by Grace Lee and Raya Dunayevskaya and circulated within James's political-theoretical group at the time, the Johnson-Forest Tendency. For James's introduction to these translations, see James, *At the Rendezvous of Victory: Selected Writings* (London: Allison and Busby, 1984), 65–72. For some historical background on these translations and James's early engagement with the 1844 manuscripts, see Bill Schwarz, "C.L.R. James's *American Civilization*" in *Beyond Boundaries: C.L.R. James and Postnational Studies*, ed. C. Gair (Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2006), 150–51.

⁴In addition to the texts already noted, a select bibliography includes James's critical study of Melville, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001); his semi-autobiographical work on cricket, *Beyond a Boundary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); his writings on Marxist organization, some of which are collected in *Marxism for Our Times: C.L.R. James on Revolutionary Organization*, ed. M. Glaberman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999); and his writings on black America, some of which are collected in *C.L.R. James and the "Negro Question,"* ed. S. McLemee (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996). For a wide range of writings on politics, history, literature, and culture, and for a more extensive bibliography, see *The C.L.R. James Reader*, ed., A. Grimshaw (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992). A number of James's shorter essays and excerpts from some of his longer pieces are available online from the C.L.R. James Institute (<http://www.clrjamesinstitute.org>).

democratic disposition, an almost religious faith in the creative capacities of ordinary citizens and a more nuanced attentiveness to democratic uncertainty. By tracing the ambiguities in James's thought here, we can both vivify the tensions between dialectical thought and democratic politics and begin to reconsider what this neglected and perhaps unduly dismissed intellectual tradition might now have to offer us.

My discussion is based on a reading of simultaneous or parallel narratives in James's work. James turns to dialectical thought in the 1940s in an attempt to provide a theoretical crutch for a more or less orthodox Marxist politics. This is what I will call the major narrative of James's primary theoretical text, *Notes on Dialectics*. But there is a minor narrative as well, a more nuanced story about Hegel and the early Marx, a story not about a grand historical *dialectic*, but about a more plural *dialectics*, a story about a dialectical way of thinking that James believes can enrich democratic reflection by helping ordinary citizens make sense of their social and political condition. While part of my aim here is to vivify the democratic deficiencies of a teleological dialectic, basically what we find in James's major narrative, the real excitement has to do with this minor narrative, with the more nuanced figuration of dialectical reflection that emerges there, and with the ways in which this style of reflection might encourage and enrich participatory politics.

This minor narrative turns on what James calls an "instinctive dialectic." The reference to the instincts has to do with James's fundamental conviction that human beings ought to see and experience their world as an expression of their creative energies rather than as simply a frustration of them. Working from this loosely humanist perspective, James plays up two aspects of dialectical thought—what I call the moral energy of dialectical reflection, or that which enables one to develop a critical perspective on the present by holding to a faith in something better, and the dialectical directive toward seeing the world in terms of contradictions that cannot, or should not, sustain themselves. James's instinctive dialectic emerges not as a theoretical expression of our socialist fate, but rather as a kind of personal strategy for critical engagement, a means by which ordinary citizens can work their frustrations and anxieties into democratically productive articulation.

This dialectical way of thinking may be interesting in its own right, but James underscores its political import by providing a sense of the specific democratic problem to which such a critical orientation or ethos can respond. In America in the 1940s and early 1950s, James is concerned with what we might call an arrested democratic imagination on the part of American blacks, women, and waged workers. It is not simply that these potential political voices are muted, muffled, and distracted. For James, the democratic problem is that these constituencies have become demoralized politically and have resigned themselves to a belief in the inevitability of the status quo. James's "instinctive" dialectic emerges as a way of reanimating the democratic imagination, of encouraging critical reflection, of politicizing otherwise frustrated human energies. We might find something like this

arrested democratic imagination at work in our own American political present, and so this is an apt time to reconsider James's rather unique efforts to put dialectical reflection into conversation with democratic participation.

I have indicated already that I strive to think both with and against James. And it is perhaps apparent already that insofar as I want to bring James's work to bear on contemporary social and political thought, I must, in many ways, move beyond James. My aim is not to suggest that James, or even a minor version of James, can be fitted seamlessly into contemporary democratic discourse. And my aim is not to provide any comprehensive introduction to James's political thought. My aim, rather, is to exploit the ambiguities in James's theoretical writings on Hegel and Marx and mid-century-American political culture to reflect on the interconnections between dialectical thought and participatory politics. To that end, the essay has five sections. In the first and second, I provide some background on James and outline my approach to reading his *Notes on Dialectics*. In the third and fourth, I unpack James's commitment to a set of Hegelian-Marxian-humanist assumptions and show how these assumptions prefigure James's democratic vision and undergird his notion of an instinctive dialectic. And in the fifth section, I show how James contributes to a conception of a democratic ethos aimed at encouraging and enriching political participation among ordinary citizens.

American Sojourn, 1938–1953

Pick a label. Black Marxist, labor historian, sports writer, literary critic, novelist, pan-Africanist. C.L.R. James is an elusive figure, and when it comes to matters political, we tend to think of James as a kind of political folk hero, an activist, perhaps a Marxist or Leninist propagandist. Rarely is James taken seriously as a political theorist, and this, I suspect, has to do with his avowed commitment to an orthodox Marxist politics, a commitment that is thought to shape, or perhaps shackle, any possible theoretical contribution. I want to expose additional ambiguity in James's thought. What I call James's "minor narrative" derives largely from a set of reflections on Hegel, and we get a picture of a dialectical way of thinking that operates in tension with James's more orthodox Marxist or Leninist assumptions regarding the revolutionary character of the working class and the historical inevitability of socialism. In order to unsettle any notion that James falls squarely in line with an orthodox Marxist or Leninist politics, I offer some background on James's intellectual development up through his most creative and prolific period, his fifteen-year stay in America from 1938 through the early postwar era.⁵

⁵For a detailed biography of James's remarkable life, see Kent Worcester, *C.L.R. James: A Political Biography* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) and Paul Buhle, *C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary* (New York: Verso, 1988).

Born in 1901, James left his native Trinidad for England in 1932. There he encountered Marxist thought, and in 1938 he published his influential history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*. The same year, he left England for America at the request of Leon Trotsky. By that time James had become a committed Trotskyist, and he was to embark on a nationwide speaking tour on “the Negro question” in an attempt to fold American blacks into the international labor movement. His stay in America was supposed to be short, but the American sojourn quickly became less a mission for Trotsky and more of an open-ended learning experience for James.

Following Trotsky’s assassination in 1940, James grew increasingly disillusioned with the theoretical apparatus Trotsky had left behind. Along with Raya Dunayevskaya, Grace Lee, and other members of the group then known as the Johnson-Forest Tendency, James felt a need to move beyond what he regarded as the static and increasingly stale categories of the Trotsky-Stalin polemic.⁶ In the throes of his own theoretical insecurity, James took up Lenin as a kind of intellectual mentor. *Notes on Dialectics*, the key text in our analysis, is very much an attempt to do as Lenin did, to read Hegel and get clear on the dialectic. Where “Lenin had come to the conclusion that you could not understand *Capital* without an understanding of the Hegelian *Logic*,” James “came to the conclusion that a fundamental investigation still remained to be done, on Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (with that had to be associated the smaller *Logic*, a section of Hegel’s *Encyclopedia*).”⁷ Following Lenin, then, James came to think of the dialectic as a method, one that could account for the movement and development of theoretical categories, and one that would provide a necessary grounding for a genuinely Marxist theory and practice. And yet it is this association with Lenin and with an orthodox Marxism that obscures much of what James has to offer theoretically.

James would never renounce his affiliation with Lenin.⁸ But whatever his allegiance to Lenin, or to a certain spirit of Lenin, James would by 1950 describe his position as a “total repudiation of the theory and practice of the Leninist theory of the Vanguard Party for our era.”⁹ For James,

⁶See the Introduction to C.L.R. James, *Notes on Dialectics*.

⁷*Ibid.*, 7.

⁸As Kent Worcester notes, “even in the 1960s and 1970s James had nothing but the highest regard for Lenin as a revolutionary leader, whom he thought of as a democrat and an ally of both the working class and the peasantry.” See Worcester, “C.L.R. James and the American Century,” in C.L.R. James: *His Intellectual Legacies*, ed., S.R. Cudjoe and W.E. Cain (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 182. And when asked in an interview in 1980 to reflect on his “greatest contributions,” James says plainly, “My contributions have been, number one, to clarify and extend the heritage of Marx and Lenin.” See James, Interview with James Early, Ethelbert Miller, Paul Buhle, and Noel Ignatin in C.L.R. James: *His Life and Work*, ed., Paul Buhle (New York: Allison and Busby, 1986), 164.

⁹James et al., *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1986), 10.

"Leninism, the theory of the Vanguard Party ... was a particular theory, designed to suit a specific stage in the development of society and a specific stage of working class development. That stage is now passed."¹⁰ By suggesting that Lenin's theory of the party had been historically superseded, James seems to adhere to a kind of teleological political vision, a rather orthodox Marxist set of assumptions regarding the inevitability of socialism and the revolutionary condition of the contemporary working class. But here begin the ambiguities in James's political thought.

James had always displayed a remarkable confidence in spontaneous or autonomous activity on the part of the socially and politically oppressed. This confidence is perhaps a result of James's own colonial background. "Africans must win their own freedom," he wrote in 1936, "Nobody will win it for them."¹¹ James's experiences in America in the 1940s, his witness to the progressive struggles of women and American blacks, provided further animus for this more radically democratic disposition. And however it may fit into a broader deterministic or teleological vision of social development, there is a sense in which James rejects Leninist vanguardism because it places a theoretical and political damper on the creative expression of the people and because it remains inattentive to the more uncertain and contentious character of democratic political life. James's challenge was to bring a certain Marxian sensibility and a set of reflections on dialectical thought into conversation with a sustained attentiveness to the creative capacities of ordinary human beings. "When the masses, not a few philosophers, grasp the dialectic, the logic, the unity of theoretical, practical, methodological," James wrote to Dunayevskaya in 1949, then "we have reached the Absolute Idea of society, [that is], social man. There begins the development of human power for its own sake."¹²

Parallel Narratives

In 1948 James drafted his major theoretical text, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin*. *Notes on Dialectics* is an understudied text, too understudied, perhaps, to yield any kind of a standard reading. But I want to suggest that two basic stories emerge in the text; one is rather straightforward while the other is a bit more elusive. James gives us a major narrative that has to do with the more dominant orthodox Marxist strand of his thought, a narrative in which the dialectic is invoked to help explain trends in the international

¹⁰James et al., *Facing Reality* (Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1974), 87. I thank an anonymous reviewer at *The Review of Politics* for calling this text to my attention.

¹¹James, "'Civilizing' the 'Blacks': Why Britain Needs to Retain Her African Possessions," *New Leader*, May 29, 1936.

¹²James, Letter to Raya Dunayevskaya, 1949, cited in *C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, 197.

labor movement of the 1940s. But James also gives us a minor narrative that revolves around an idiosyncratic reading of Hegel. For the sake of presentation, I will speak here of “James’s Hegel,” but it is important to keep in mind that James’s Hegel, the protagonist of the minor narrative, cannot be thought apart from a broader constellation of Marxian concerns. James is in the process of developing his own heterodox Marxian sensibility, and his interest in Hegel does not signal an abandonment of a broader suspicion of capitalism or bourgeois liberalism. James is not aiming to retrieve any kind of Hegelian idealism. Yet James does seem to bracket much of the orthodox Marxist political vision in his effort to grasp a dialectical way of thinking in Hegel’s logic.

As the subtitle to the book indicates, James is concerned with three basic characters: Hegel, Marx, and Lenin. But these characters do not always contribute to the same storyline. James makes a distinction between Hegel, on the one hand, and Marx and Lenin, on the other. Hegel, he says, is a thinker of the “instinctive dialectic.” Marx and Lenin emerge as representatives of the “theoretical dialectic.”¹³ The former, as I will explain in detail below, has to do with how each of us might view our daily lives through a dialectical lens, how each of us might learn to think dialectically. The latter has to do with larger historical trends and with how we might read the international labor movement in terms of dialectical logic. Throughout *Notes*, James will make what he calls “transfers” from his discussion of Hegelian instinctive dialectic to its possible expression on a macropolitical register.¹⁴ While James always begins with Hegel and then makes his “transfer” to the “theoretical dialectic” of Marx and Lenin, it is precisely the theories we associate with Marx and Lenin—as well as much twentieth century Marxist and Leninist practice—that tends to overshadow James’s treatment of Hegel and the subtler, more nuanced, and far more pregnant figuration of dialectical reflection which emerges there.

John McClendon recently published the first book-length study of *Notes*, and I want to draw on it here to show how the major narrative can usurp James’s treatment of Hegel. McClendon’s book is an attempt to find an appropriate label for James. Through an “internal critique” of *Notes*, McClendon seeks a “comprehensive apprehension of [James’s] locus as a Marxist-Leninist philosopher.”¹⁵ McClendon argues that James fatally departs from his own expressed commitment to dialectical materialism and “becomes ensnared in dogmatism” by virtue of his tacit adherence to a politically bankrupt brand of Hegelian idealism.¹⁶ According to McClendon, “James

¹³See James, *Notes on Dialectics*, 33.

¹⁴James makes these “transfers” repeatedly throughout the text. See his discussion in *Notes on Dialectics*, 17.

¹⁵John H. McClendon III, *C.L.R. James’s Notes on Dialectics: Left-Hegelianism or Marxism-Leninism?* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2005), xv.

¹⁶For an introduction to this complex claim, a claim that McClendon will develop in detail throughout his book, see McClendon, *James’s Notes on Dialectics*, xxii.

overlooks how Marx and Lenin approach Hegel's dialectic and therefore he cannot replicate Marx and Lenin's mode of apprehending Hegel's *Logic*, that is, penultimately James does not reclaim their materialist reading and ultimately the materialist inversion of Hegel's idealist dialectics.¹⁷ I am generally sympathetic to the claim that James departs from a strong dialectical materialism and, at least at times, seems to develop a more left-Hegelian or perhaps Hegelian-Marxian theoretical orientation. But because McClendon approaches James from the perspective of Marxism-Leninism and frames his reading in terms of Marxism-Leninism, McClendon determines in advance the character of James's Hegel. In other words, McClendon reads *Notes* only in terms of the major narrative and does not allow the minor narrative to come forth in any way.¹⁸

So what would an emphasis on the minor narrative look like? Who is James's Hegel? Throughout *Notes*, James gives us a kind of Hegelian pastiche. While many Hegelian themes are respected and treated with care, others are ignored or rejected entirely. James will celebrate contradiction and the movement of dialectical negativity, but world-spirit [*Geist*] is "one of the funniest things in philosophy."¹⁹ "For our purposes it [world-spirit] does not matter a damn. . . . To hell with it!"²⁰ James's Hegel is one who folds dynamism and movement into the very nature of human thinking. It is one who, while deeply critical of Kant's excessive formalism, takes up and develops Kant's philosophy of consciousness. It is one who extracts dialectical contradictions not from some grand historical narrative, not from some figuration of History or Reason, but from the trials of lived human experience. It is a selective and unique Hegel, and, to say it again, while James brackets Marx and Lenin and "theoretical dialectic" here, his engagement with Hegel is still part of a broader and continuously developing Marxian sensibility.

Because McClendon frames his reading in terms of the major narrative, he gives James a pretty rough treatment. James is criticized for butchering Hegel and Kant, for neglecting the "locus of German idealism," for misunderstanding Marx and Lenin and their materialist inversion of Hegelian dialectics. But James is not interested in getting Hegel right. "I shall interpret freely," he says.²¹ "I do not *guarantee* these interpretations. The point is once they are down we begin to get somewhere. I am not afraid of mistakes."²² James plays around with Hegel. Just as he plays around with Kant—"I am doing injustice to Kant, I am sure, and committing crimes against philosophical terminology."²³ Just as he plays around with the language of dialectics and

¹⁷Ibid., 119.

¹⁸We should note that McClendon does not appear to pick up on James's "transfers" from Hegel and instinctive dialectic to the theoretical dialectic of Marx and Lenin.

¹⁹James, *Notes on Dialectics*, 56.

²⁰Ibid., 26, 31.

²¹Ibid., 95

²²Ibid., 79.

idealism and materialism. My aim is to offer a more generous reading of James, of James's Hegel, and of the more nuanced figuration of dialectical reflection that emerges in this minor narrative. In many ways, as I noted at the outset, I threaten to move beyond James. But my reading is, I think, more in tune with James's remarkably political and theoretical creativity.²⁴

James's Humanism

Having introduced my interpretive approach, I want to begin to explain this notion of an instinctive dialectic by reflecting on James's humanism. James's minor narrative, as I have suggested, operates in tension with his more orthodox Marxist vision of progressive social development, his vision of a fateful dialectical teleology. In the minor narrative, James develops a set of reflections on the dialectical interplays between subject and object, particular and universal. Furthermore, he does so without committing to any grand progressive narrative, at least not in any strong or direct way. Indeed, as I will explain in the next section, James's instinctive dialectic has more to do with personal psychology, with how each of us might learn to think dialectically and articulate our experiences in a dialectical fashion. This instinctive dialectic is built upon a set of loosely Hegelian-Marxian humanist assumptions. I want to flesh out these assumptions and show how they prefigure a more open-ended political vision, one that is more attentive to the uncertain and contentious character of democratic politics.

By bringing Hegel, Marx, and humanism together here and in a rather loose fashion, I mean to play up the basic idea that human beings exhibit a foundational drive for not only physical but also emotional and spiritual fulfillment. Unlike other animal species, I seek meaning in my life, and I am capable of judging my life in terms of its meaningfulness. More specifically, I recognize that I have unique inclinations, unique capacities, unique creative talent, unique potential, and I want to recognize my daily life as an expression of this, an expression of who and what I truly am. I seek to express who I am, my particularity, in the activity of something greater, something meaningful, something, to use Hegel's more audacious language, universal.

²³Ibid., 19.

²⁴I should note that McClendon would almost certainly describe mine as an "anachronistic" reading. McClendon wants to distance his own approach from any reading that is, as he puts it, "arrogantly presentist in orientation." He warns against any temptation to link James to "contemporary political and ideological fads and trends" and to "interpret James in the mode of an external retrospective" that would thereby "distort the integrity of James's corpus" (*James's Notes on Dialectics*, 18). In reading James, I just get the sense that he would want us to interpret him in the way that he interprets Hegel, not as a figure to be got right or wrong, but as a source of creative inspiration for emerging generations of readers with their own political problems.

We need not shy away from this language of universality, for in Jamesian usage it is rather innocuous. As Cornelius Castoriadis has remarked, James “had this wonderful sense of the self-activity of the people, and he was able to translate it in universal terms that were not absolute universals, if I may use this expression.”²⁵ Indeed, this notion of self-activity derives from James’s belief that human beings desire fundamentally a sense of completeness, or what James will increasingly call “happiness.” This completeness or happiness derives from a unification of subject and object, particular and universal. “Both Hegel and Marx in their different ways believed that man is destined for freedom and happiness,” James writes, and this “nature of man,” this human ontology, motivates a “search for this completeness and the overcoming of obstacles which stood and stand in its way.”²⁶ James is committed to the Hegelian and Marxian assumption that human beings ought to recognize their world as an expression of their own creative activity, and that insofar as this world is not such a reflection, insofar as this world prevents such reflection, something is wrong with this world, something needs to be done. We need, as James puts it, an “overcoming of obstacles.”²⁷

There are at least two ways in which James’s humanism prefigures a political vision. First, it pushes James well beyond any quest for certainty and security, well beyond any liberal *modus vivendi*. “An intellectual like Dewey believes that man’s quest is the quest for certainty,” James notes in 1947. “The intellectual believes that all men are intellectuals. That is wrong. Men seek not intellectual certainty. The quest is the mass quest for universality in action and in life.”²⁸ James’s humanism gives him a kind of utopian vision, a sense that political struggle should not compromise in its quest to achieve an almost spiritual fulfillment in the here and now, in the lived reality of daily existence. Grace Lee Boggs captures this sentiment in a comment on her experience with James in the 1940s:

We read and reread practically everything that Marx ever wrote, looking for support for our position that the concern of every revolutionist worthy of the name must be *not* property relationships or just higher wages or more efficient plans but the liberation of the natural and acquired powers of human beings—or, as Hegel put it, not Substance but

²⁵Cornelius Castoriadis, “C.L.R. James and the Fate of Marxism,” in *C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, 285.

²⁶James, “Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity” in *The C.L.R. James Reader*, 161–62. See also James, *Modern Politics* (Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1973), 99–100.

²⁷We might compare this with the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. R. Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994). Lukács describes a “pristine unity” of subject and object, and suggests that this unity prefigures a politics aimed at recovering this unity, a politics aimed at “the abolition of the antithesis of subject and object, thought and existence, freedom and necessity” (123, 142).

²⁸James, “Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity,” 170.

Subject. You can imagine our joy, therefore, when we discovered Marx's 1844 Economic-Philosophical essays which, I am proud to say, we were the first to publish in English translation.²⁹

McClendon will describe this disapprovingly as James's "messianic, and utopian character."³⁰ But a certain messianic or utopian character is crucial to the Jamesian dialectics of the minor narrative. As I will suggest in greater detail below, this quest for universality, this "struggle for happiness," provides a *moral energy* that can help provoke a critical perspective and motivate democratic engagement.

James's humanism also prefigures a political vision in that it pushes him beyond any simple emphasis on proletarian class struggle. As we have seen, James has a remarkable faith in the creative activity of the masses, a "wonderful sense," to again borrow Castoriadis's remark, "of the self-activity of the people." And this faith, this wonderful sense, derives from James's belief in a natural human quest for universality, completeness, "happiness." But James remains entirely open to the specific ways in which this struggle for happiness might manifest itself. In 1947, James argued that Marxist thinkers and activists had to respect black political movements and see them as an expression of a broader democratic struggle. Black Americans, he said, "may not formulate their beliefs in Marxist terms, but their experience drives them to reject this shibboleth of bourgeois democracy."³¹ Similarly, James championed the struggles of women and students. For James, these struggles were, in their own ways, expressions of a more basic struggle for happiness. While James will continue to use the language of the proletariat, and while bourgeois culture and practice will remain something to be overcome, James's humanism nevertheless facilitates an expanded vision of progressive political struggle.³² As Paul Berman has noted, James "was too attached to the

²⁹Grace Lee Boggs, "C.L.R. James: Organizing in the U.S.A., 1938–1953," in *C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*, 170.

³⁰McClendon, *James's Notes on Dialectics*, 207.

³¹James, "The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the USA," in *The C.L.R. James Reader*, 183. Many race theorists remain unsatisfied with James's treatment of the black experience and black political struggle. The basic complaint here is that, despite his efforts, James implicitly privileges European Marxist categories of analysis and subordinates race to class. For more on this complaint, see Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Totowa, NJ: Zed Press, 1983) and Tony Martin, "C.L.R. James and the Race/Class Question," *Race* 14, no. 2 (1972).

³²For a helpful discussion of how James and the Johnson-Forest Tendency move beyond any simple notion of proletarian class struggle, see Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* (San Francisco: AK and Anti/Theses, 2000), introduction. See also Brian W. Alleyne, "C.L.R. James: Critical Humanist," in *Beyond Boundaries: C.L.R. James and Postnational Studies*, 189. Alleyne notes, "James's vision of what modernity might become was inspired by transcendent emancipatory political projects like the French and Haitian Revolutions, yet he was demonstrably aware that such ideas

flesh-and-blood events of the world to cling to musty old doctrine."³³ The fact that James moves beyond an orthodox Marxist concern with class politics will become especially important as we try to tease out the democratic import of James's "instinctive dialectic."

Instinctive Dialectic

Having established some necessary groundwork, we are prepared now to address the real substance of James's minor narrative. I suggested, in passing above, that James's instinctive dialectic has to do with how each of us might learn to think dialectically and come to view our experiences through a dialectical lens. James draws on this broadly humanist notion of a struggle for happiness. He takes issue with the human frustrations and anxieties that derive from an inhuman or unhappy existence, from a daily routine and a social and political reality that too often prevents even a struggle for happiness. From these observations, James develops a mode of dialectical reflection aimed at working such frustrations and anxieties into conscious articulation. James's instinctive dialectic signals a mode of dialectical reflection aimed at politicizing human energies in such a way that might ultimately enrich democratic reflection and engagement.

"If we analyze society," James writes in the introduction to *Notes*, "we will note certain mass impulses, instinctive actions, spontaneous movements, the emergence of personalities, the incalculable activities which constitute a society."³⁴ We can make sense of these impulses and actions, these movements and personalities in any number of ways. We can deny them. We can suppress them. We can work them into some rigid and prearranged framework (this was the problem of the Trotskyists, according to James). We can also work with these energies and allow them to express themselves. What James calls an instinctive dialectic is a way of making sense of these energies, a way of organizing our thought in such a way as to allow these energies to move and express themselves. "What is Hegel trying to do?" James asks himself. "He is talking about *new* ideas. His dialectic is *new*, a new way of *organizing* thought. Not of thinking. But of knowing what you do when you *think*."³⁵ While James flirts with some very difficult and fundamental issues of epistemology, and while many readers will find his treatment of these issues

and projects were ideals whose realization had constantly to be struggled for—they were always unfinished. This openness, rare in a Marxist who began his career in the 1930s, is manifested in James's early attempts to incorporate non-class aspects of social differentiation more seriously into his revolutionary praxis."

³³See Paul Berman, "Facing Reality," *Urgent Tasks*, Summer 1981, 107.

³⁴James, *Notes on Dialectics*, 9.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 13.

somewhat weak and underdeveloped, we can, from a politically theoretical standpoint, learn quite a bit from the story he tells.

As we move along, it will become gradually clear what James means when he speaks of “mass impulses, instinctive actions, spontaneous movements, the emergence of personalities, the incalculable activities which constitute a society.” We will get a better sense for the instinctive component of this instinctive dialectic. And we will get a better sense for the political significance of all this. For now, suffice it to say that for any given person, it is far easier to suppress these energies than it is to think with them. To understand what James’s means by “instinctive dialectic,” we have to look at Hegel’s logic.

According to James, human beings think in terms of what Hegel calls “hard knots” or “foci of arrest and direction in mental life and consciousness.”³⁶ In the language of German Idealism, we privilege the work of the “Understanding” (*Verstand*), which “determines, and holds determinations fixed.”³⁷ To *understand* something is to make it intelligible, to bring it into language, to arrest it in time, to identify it; to *understand* is to *stand* still as if *under* the hold of some static force. As such, understanding cannot grasp and enunciate a world that is constantly changing; that is the task of thinking or speculative reason (*Vernunft*)—“reason is negative and *dialectical*.”³⁸ As Hegel writes in the *Phenomenology*, thinking reason “spoils its own limited satisfaction.” Although we may try to hold on to some given mode of understanding, our “thought troubles thoughtlessness, and its own unrest disturbs its inertia.”³⁹

This restlessness, this conscious embrace of negativity or difference, is, of course, dialectical, which means it is driven by the principle of contradiction. In the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, Hegel makes no mistake about the status of contradiction. “Generally speaking,” he says, “it is contradiction that moves the world.”⁴⁰ In the *Science of Logic*, he displays an even greater confidence that this principle, contradiction, is “the root of all movement and vitality.” For Hegel, “it is only insofar as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, has an urge and activity.”⁴¹

To late modern ears, the dialectical principle of contradiction bespeaks yet another mode of philosophical foundationalism, an attempt to reduce the

³⁶*Ibid.*, 9.

³⁷G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1969), 28.

³⁸Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 28.

³⁹Hegel, *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 51.

⁴⁰Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part 1 of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 187.

⁴¹Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 439.

play of difference and political possibility to a rather simple logic of binary opposition. Rather than welcome difference, rather than allow for that which is new and other, that which exceeds our conceptual determination, dialectical reason is said to deny such difference by reducing it to the opposition of what we already know. As Gilles Deleuze puts it, “difference is already placed on a path or along a thread laid out by identity.”⁴² Hegelian dialectic is but “a perpetual misinterpretation of difference itself.”⁴³ In a late modern world, in light of an ongoing suspicion of philosophical foundationalism, the prevailing sentiment seems closer to Nietzsche—“there are no opposites, except in the customary exaggeration of metaphysical interpretation.”⁴⁴

Where Hegel says that, “every determination, every concrete thing, every Notion . . . [must] pass over into contradictory moments,” James will admit to hyperbole.⁴⁵ He questions how “every determination, every concrete, every concept” can reduce to a play of contradiction. “Hegel,” he says, “as usual you exaggerate.”⁴⁶ But despite this admission, James will defend the principle of contradiction, and dialectical reason more broadly, and he will do so on political grounds.

For James, contradiction is something we impose upon our experiences. It is not something we get from the world, nor is it something we get from the character of our mind. It is not the expression of some ontological or epistemological truth. Hegel, of course, will go on to make stronger metaphysical claims here, but before that he says simply that without the speculative sharpening of dialectical reason, our experience “affords to mind only a fragmentary and uncertain actuality.”⁴⁷ And James works from these more innocuous Hegelian gestures. For James, contradiction is a means to avoid “complete frustration.”⁴⁸ Contradiction is a way to avoid “panic and disintegration.”⁴⁹

Why frustration? Why panic and disintegration? And what does any of this have to do with James’s concern for “mass impulses, instinctive actions, spontaneous movements, the emergence of personalities, the incalculable activities which constitute a society”? For James, these impulses and actions, these

⁴²Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 49–50.

⁴³Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. H. Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 157.

⁴⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12. See also *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 10; and *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 297–98.

⁴⁵Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 442.

⁴⁶James, *Notes on Dialectics*, 92.

⁴⁷Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 37.

⁴⁸James, *Notes on Dialectics*, 105.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 42.

movements and personalities constitute the creative energies of human beings, the self-activity that makes us who we are. And because James is committed, as we have seen, to a certain Hegelian-Marxian humanism, these energies contribute to that "struggle for happiness," that quest for universality in our daily lives. For James, we struggle to see our daily lives, the *object*, as an expression of our own creative energies, *subject*. But all too often, our daily lives are not an expression of these energies; all too often, object is at odds with or suppresses subject. And all too often, we are not quite sure what to do about this problem. Our daily routine is in no way an expression of our creative passions and talents, our objective reality is in no way a reflection of our deep sense of who we really are, and we do not know what to do about this discrepancy. We do not know how to make sense of this condition. Too often, James says, we resign ourselves to this reality, to the belief that this is "just the way it is." As James puts it in a 1950 comment on the American worker, "The worker during the last [twenty-five] years no longer has any illusions that by energy and ability and thrift or any of the virtues of Horatio Alger, he can arise to anything. That is his life, will be his life for ever and ever."⁵⁰ It is as if our political psychology has been reduced to, in Hegelian language, the Understanding which "*determines* and holds determinations fixed." There is no movement in our thinking or our activity, no prospects for change. Our human energies still churn, but they issue in an experience of "frustration" and "panic" and "disintegration."

James's instinctive dialectic emerges at this point as a means of animating the imagination, the critical and political imagination. In his *Science of Logic*, Hegel makes a "broad distinction between the instinctive act and the intelligent and free act," arguing that the latter "is performed with an awareness of what is being done."⁵¹ Instinct, or "instinctive activity," for Hegel bespeaks a kind of spontaneous or impulsive activity. It is not yet dialectical. It is not yet intelligent, not yet free. Instinctive activity will provoke dialectical movement, but insofar as it is a function of the instincts, it has not yet been brought to consciousness, not yet "sharpened" into the dialectical logic of contradiction. James follows Hegel here to suggest that these experiences of instinctive frustration, these experiences of panic and disintegration, can only be overcome if we work our experience into a conscious dialectical framework. Negativity, or movement and change,

can only come completely into play when it is in contradiction with a concrete obstacle, something which, to release its own nature, it must overcome. It is the unbearable nature of the contradiction that creates negativity, "which is the inherent pulsation of self-movement and liveliness." . . . If there is no sharp contradiction, then there is no movement to speak of and there is stagnation, a compromise. That is the only

⁵⁰James, *American Civilization*, 169.

⁵¹Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 42.

reason why there is compromise and stagnation—because the contradiction is not sharp enough.⁵²

We have seen that for James, Hegel gives us a “way of organizing thought.” And the point here is that if we can organize our thoughts, our “understanding” of our social and political reality, into a kind of dialectical picture, we thereby introduce the “unbearable nature of contradiction.” We introduce an imperative to movement. We thus provoke the critical and political imagination in the face of frustration, panic, and disintegration.

It is important to say something more about why James refers to this as an instinctive dialectic. James highlights one instance in the *Science of Logic* where Hegel refers to consciousness as “concrete and engrossed in externality.” James admits this is a “curious phrase for the great Idealist.” But it is here, he says, that “we run up against the dialectic in life.”⁵³ For James, Hegel’s repeated gestures toward embodiment and a consciousness grounded in the concrete point toward a materialist side of Hegel’s thinking.⁵⁴ And for James, Hegel’s materialism issues in a concern for human desire, human need, human feeling, and for the ways in which our thinking is attentive to these. Our thinking, James says, is rooted in “Desire, Will, etc., *human feelings and actions*. We abstract them to think about them. But they come from there. . . . The whole magnificent structure is rooted in the concrete.”⁵⁵ Because James in the first place is concerned with “desire, will, etc., *human feelings and actions*”—because James listens to the instinctive side of life and the frustrations that emerge there—he is driven to concern for dialectical analysis. Again, James does not invoke the dialectic as an expression of some deep epistemological or ontological truth. Hegel’s dialectic emerges in James’s text as a kind of psychological and political tool, a way of making sense of our experiences and channeling our energies toward active political expression. By emphasizing a materialist side of Hegelian thought, James is able to draw on instinctive

⁵²James, *Notes on Dialectics*, 91–92.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 25. For the reference in Hegel, see *Science of Logic*, 24. See also *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 51.

⁵⁴On James’s assessment of Hegel’s materialism, see “Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity,” especially 166. “Hegel,” James says, “led his *Logic* into an impossible and fantastic idealism about world-spirit, etc. But the basis of his work was solidly materialistic.” James’s emphasis on a materialist dimension in Hegel is further evidence that his consideration of Hegel is meant not to check, but to enrich his broader Marxian sensibilities.

⁵⁵James, *Notes on Dialectics*, 29. One might compare James’s concern for desire in Hegel with Judith Butler’s treatment of twentieth-century French Hegelians. See Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1987). The major Hegelian works of both Hyppolite and Kojève were published in 1947, the same year James began drafting *Notes on Dialectics*. James read and spoke French, but as far as I know, he never commented on or even acknowledged his French contemporaries.

frustration as a kind of cue or index for when and where we might be able to work our lived condition into a politically resonant dialectical picture.

The Democratic Imagination

I have sketched in what I call the “minor narrative” of *Notes on Dialectics* and explained James’s understanding of an instinctive dialectic. Because his minor narrative seems to at least bracket the determinism and teleology of an orthodox Marxist dialectic, James is able to bring dialectical reflection into conversation with the uncertain and contentious character of democratic politics. But this is more than just a formal exercise in creating the conditions for the possibility of such a conversation. In order to develop further the specific democratic import of James’s instinctive dialectic, we must look to another text, namely James’s 1950 commentary on American political culture. In *American Civilization*, James develops a concern with what I call the democratic imagination, and I want to suggest, in this final substantive section, that James’s instinctive dialectic is best understood as a means of animating—or perhaps reanimating—the democratic imagination in the face of social frustration and political apathy.

Notes was written in 1948. As most readers of James see, the two years that follow represent something of a turning point in James’s thought. As Kent Worcester puts it, “James appears to have taken the Johnson-Forest Tendency problematic just about as far as it could go” and is poised to take on a “whole new array of concerns.”⁵⁶ *American Civilization* is largely a study of literature, sports, Hollywood films and radio, mass culture more broadly. If dialectical theory figures in this text, so the usual interpretation goes, it is simply as a kind of background frame for a broader diagnosis of a civilization in crisis. Because most readers of James miss the minor narrative of *Notes on Dialectics*, they tend to miss, or at least do not fully appreciate, the ways in which something like an instinctive dialectic might figure in James’s subsequent commentary on American democratic culture.

American Civilization was not published during James’s lifetime. However, just before he died in 1989, James prepared the manuscript for publication under an alternative title, *The Struggle for Happiness*.⁵⁷ This alternative title is a better indicator of how James’s instinctive dialectic might figure in the text. We have seen how the “struggle for happiness” is James’s shorthand for the quest for universality, the quest for that subject-object unity that is so crucial to his Hegelian-Marxian humanism. We have seen how James’s instinctive dialectic is both derivative of and intended to inform precisely such a struggle. *American Civilization* is very much a continuation of this

⁵⁶Worcester, C.L.R. *James, A Political Biography*, 114.

⁵⁷See Grimshaw, “*American Civilization: An Introduction*,” in James, *American Civilization*.

story, a continuation of the minor narrative of *Notes on Dialectics*. It is a story about how this struggle is built into the democratic culture, inscribed in the very moment of the American founding. It is a story of how this struggle has been, by 1949–1950, largely dismissed and forgotten, erased from the democratic imagination. While James says his study “is an objective analysis” and that he “advocates nothing,” he is clearly worried about an arrested struggle for happiness.⁵⁸ Against this worry, an appeal to the instinctive dialectic can be read into the text as a possible and perhaps even necessary means of reanimating that struggle and provoking the democratic imagination.

James’s major concern in the text has to do with a growing sense of frustration among American blacks, women, and waged workers in general. By 1950 James had spent a good twelve years traveling throughout the United States. He had lived in New York and seen the industrial cities of the north; he had traveled down through Missouri and into the deep South; he had been out west to California and Reno, Nevada, where he drafted *Notes on Dialectics* in 1948. With *American Civilization*, James set out to record his observations on “the intimate lives of the population.” And what he produced in 1949–1950 was a story of “tremendous antagonisms [that] are eating away at the core of the personalities of the great masses in the free democratic society of the US.”⁵⁹ He spoke of “the bitterness, the violence, the brutality, the sadism simmering in the population, the desire [among the American people] to revenge themselves with their own hands, to get some release for what society has done to them since 1929.”⁶⁰ In a key chapter of the text, James draws on the popular arts—radio, television, Hollywood films, comic strips, popular novels—as a kind of index for the mounting frustrations of the American experience. As Kent Worcester remarks,

The Depression ushered in an era of unparalleled savagery in the popular arts. For the first time, the “funnies” (comic strips) depicted acts of depravity and murder. Mass anxieties mounted in the 1930s, and then pushed even deeper into the collective unconscious after 1945 . . . all connoting the crisis of American civilization, the gap between the desire for meaningful individualism versus the drudgery and manipulation of everyday life.⁶¹

This “drudgery” and “manipulation” is, for James, a reflection of an American society that denies the creative energies of the people. For many, everyday American life bespeaks a frustration of that subject-object unity. But what is especially troublesome for James is the impact this frustration has had on the democratic culture. “The crisis in America,” James writes,

⁵⁸Ibid., 277, 272.

⁵⁹Ibid., 159.

⁶⁰Ibid., 121.

⁶¹Worcester, *C.L.R. James: A Political Biography*, 109.

“is a crisis of tens of millions who have only an instinctive conception of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”⁶²

Although the text is largely descriptive, although James “advocates nothing,” he does say that, in the face of such a frustrating experience, “the American people need to be given, not prospects of a happy life and higher wages, but a *method of thought and a conception of social development that makes their own lives and efforts intelligible to them.*”⁶³ James seems to suggest that American blacks, women, and waged workers need a way of thinking that can help make sense of a frustrating experience and help put the struggle for happiness back at the core of the democratic imagination. James suggests that ordinary American citizens, working men and women, need the resources of that instinctive dialectic he so subtly extracted from his reading of Hegel.

There are two ways, then, in which James’s instinctive dialectic might serve a kind of democratic ethos. Implicit to James’s instinctive dialectic is an appeal to the critical function of dialectical thought. James’s instinctive dialectic provides a certain moral energy, a faith that a better world is possible, and this moral energy can help cast a critical perspective on the present.⁶⁴ As I have suggested throughout, James’s commitment to a Hegelian-Marxian humanism, his commitment to a subject-object unity, gives what McClendon described as a “messianic, and utopian character” to his thinking. But it is precisely this moral energy, this faith that the world can and should better reflect our creative capacities that animates the critical imagination in the face of a frustrating and seemingly hopeless condition. Furthermore, James’s instinctive dialectic provides a directive toward decision and political action. I mentioned above that James defends the dialectical principle of contradiction not on epistemological or ontological grounds, but rather on

⁶²James, *American Civilization*, 184.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 289, emphasis mine.

⁶⁴We might compare James here with Theodor W. Adorno who, in the mid 1940s, wrote, “The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. . . . Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will one day appear in the messianic light” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott [New York: Verso, 2002], 247). Insofar as James plays up the critical function of dialectical thought, he displays a real theoretical affinity with the early Frankfurt School. In *Notes*, James acknowledges his debt to Marcuse’s *Reason and Revolution*, and he met Adorno and Horkheimer in New York in the 1940s. Despite the affinities, James’s popular democratic enthusiasm and generally more hopeful tenor seem to have prevented any productive correspondence with the far more pessimistic critical theorists. For a brief discussion of James’s encounter with the early Frankfurt School theorists, See Buhle, *C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary*, 106.

political grounds. By learning to imagine our world in terms of contradictions that cannot, or should not, sustain themselves, James's instinctive dialectic provides us with an imperative toward democratic engagement, an imperative toward political decision. Rather than simply accept a daily experience that frustrates our creative energies, we learn to confront that experience with a humanist moral energy, and we look for contradictions, obstacles to be overcome, changes to be made. By sharpening our frustrations into a working dialectical picture, we thereby provoke the critical and political imagination.

As one way in which we might put dialectics into conversation with democratic politics, James's instinctive dialectic clearly contributes to a conception of a democratic ethos rather than to any substantive figuration of ideal democratic structures or institutions. The meaning of democracy here is to be understood in the way Sheldon Wolin understands the term. That is to say, James's democratized dialectics has to do with the lived experience of democratic life, with "acquiring experience of the political."⁶⁵ Democracy, as Wolin has influentially formulated it, "is about the continuing self-fashioning of the demos"; it is "a project concerned with the political potentialities of ordinary citizens, that is, with their possibilities for becoming political beings through the self-discovery of common concerns and of modes of action for realizing them."⁶⁶

Similarly for James, democracy is an expression of the self-activity of the people. In our discussion of the instinctive dialectic and in our emphasis on the materialist side of Hegelian thought, we have seen that human thinking for James is rooted in the lived experiences of daily life. Reflection, for James, is rooted in "Desire, Will, etc., *human feelings and actions.*" Democracy is no different. While reflection on the part of the demos may filter up, as it were, and affect political structures and institutions, democracy for James always starts at the bottom, from democratic reflection about the experiences of everyday life. The task of democratic theory, James seems to suggest, is to encourage reflection, to animate the democratic imagination, to provide, in this case, frustrated American citizens with "a method of thought and a conception of social development that makes their own lives and efforts intelligible to them." Against the background of an arrested democratic

⁶⁵Sheldon S. Wolin, "The Liberal/Democratic Divide: On Rawls's Political Liberalism," *Political Theory* 24, no. 1 (1996): 98. For a helpful essay on the idea of a participatory democratic ethos in the context of Wolin's conception of the political, see Stephen K. White, "Three Conceptions of the Political: The Real World of Late Modern Democracy," in *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political*, ed. W. Connolly and A. Botwinick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁶⁶Wolin, "The Liberal/Democratic Divide," 98; and Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. S. Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 31.

imagination, James's instinctive dialectic emerges as a resource, however limited, for the provocation of critical reflection and democratic engagement.

Conclusion

The poet and novelist Wilson Harris once described James aptly, albeit in passing and without explanation, as a "unique Marxist thinker whose dialectic is attuned . . . to necessity for individual originality as much as it is involved in analyses of historical processes in the life of the people or the body-politic."⁶⁷ We have come a good distance from the orthodox Marxism of the major narrative and the usual and rather antidemocratic impulses of modern dialectical thought. My emphasis on James's minor narrative, on James's Hegel and the instinctive dialectic, draws us away from any strongly deterministic or teleological narrative, away from a political vision grounded in the dialectic. James's minor narrative indicates a more local and plural dialectics, a way of thinking or a mode of critical reflection that any one of us might cultivate and that is more attentive to a sense of democratic openness, uncertainty, and irreducible contentiousness.

James's instinctive dialectic emerges in response to a specific set of concerns about democratic participation, a problem I have described as an arrested democratic imagination. This is a problem that has resonance in our own time. It has become almost cliché for participatory democrats to invoke the "dark times" label for the American political present. Whatever is meant by this appeal to a kind of democratic darkness, we can certainly point to a vast number, and perhaps an increasing number, of ordinary citizens who have fallen captive to something like an arrested democratic imagination. In the face of a frustrating and rather unsatisfying daily routine, many citizens have become demoralized politically, disillusioned with the very idea of democratic participation, and resigned more or less to a belief of the inevitability of the political status quo. James's wager is that these demoralized and disillusioned ordinary citizens might do well to cultivate a dialectical way of thinking. James's wager is that the cultivation of a dialectical mode of reflection may help reanimate the democratic imagination by providing the moral energy to get democratic thoughts and actions moving again and a conscious framework for the political articulation of some of our most basic human needs and desires.

James's instinctive dialectic contributes to a conception of a participatory democratic ethos, and not, or at least not directly, to any figuration of the ideal structures and institutions of a democratic state. While the idea of a political ethos has become a prominent notion in recent political theory, there is also growing concern about the possible depoliticizing effects of this turn to

⁶⁷Wilson Harris, "A Unique Marxist Thinker," in *C.L.R. James: His Life and Work*, 230.

ethos or to ethics more broadly.⁶⁸ James underscores the notion that the cultivation of a political ethos, the cultivation of a certain style of critical reflection, is essential for a robust democratic politics. For him, democracy necessarily begins with the reflections and “self-activity” of ordinary human beings. By following James in putting the humanistic and critical resources of dialectical reflection into conversation with concerns about democratic participation, we can begin to theorize a more critically engaged and politically productive figuration of a democratic ethos. In the end, James’s instinctive dialectic is simply one version of a democratized dialectics, one way in which the language and conceptual resources of modern dialectical thought might be refashioned and remobilized to enrich and inspire our reflection on contemporary democratic politics. This rich yet neglected tradition of modern dialectical thought may have more to offer us.

⁶⁸See, for example, the essays collected in M. Garber, B. Hanssen, and R. Walkowitz (eds.), *The Turn to Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2000).