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Passing through difference: C.L.R. James and Henry Lefebvre

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers a comparative analysis of the work of Henri Lefebvre and C.L.R. James, both key contributors to the emergence of a humanist form of Marxism in the twentieth century. Independently of each other, both writers, I show, developed a mode of critique which emphasised capitalism's dehumanizing social effects, and which rejected a merely instrumental or utilitarian political response. Consequently, both writers placed critical emphasis on those longings and demands made evident in the insurgent politics of everyday life and popular culture; in what both conceptualised as a search for 'happiness'. But at the same time, the comparison is important because it makes evident the extent of the divisive intellectual legacies of empire within European Marxism. Lefebvre's work bears in itself the marks of a racialised understanding of human relations; the 'human' of which he speaks is limited in ways that James challenged consistently.

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Introduction

In an essay first published in 2001 and reprinted in the volume *Racecraft* (2012), Karen E. Fields constructs a conversation which might have taken place between Emile Durkheim and W.E.B. Du Bois. What motivates Fields' act of dialogical imagination is her recognition that, whilst Du Bois and Durkheim have tended to be considered in isolation from each other, in many respects they faced a 'common historical context' (235), characterised by distinct but interconnected racisms: segregation and intensifying racist violence in post-Reconstruction America, on one side of the Atlantic, and the pervasiveness of European anti-Semitism, encapsulated in the Dreyfus affair, on the other. Fields, therefore, brings these two thinkers together not in order to fit them into a taxonomy, nor to establish a theoretical pecking order, but to turn the differences in their responses to intellectual account.

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Constructing a dialogue is useful, she notes, because it keeps open the recognition that there are 'questions that can be answered coherently in at least two different ways' (229). At the same time, as her imagined conversation makes clear, such disjunctions can be illuminating in a more critical sense: one set of answers may throw a revealing light on the silences implicit in another.

In this essay I try to bring together a different pair of contemporaneous thinkers who were never directly interlocutors and who have, so far as I am aware, never been considered comparatively before: C.L.R. James and Henri Lefebvre. Following Fields I want to consider the homologies which exist between these two thinkers' theoretical and political positions, but also to point to out where their positions seem to be in tension.

Correspondences

If we wanted a methodological name for this endeavour, we might borrow a term that was of particular significance to C.L.R. James himself and talk about a search for 'correspondences' and for the limits of those correspondences. The term refers us back to James' persistent interest in tracing the ways in which racialised capitalism gave rise to correspondent forms of experience across its uneven terrain, as well as his emphasis on the movements of resistance which turned those correspondences to political effect. His first, brilliant expression of this approach came, of course, in *The Black Jacobins*, in which he mapped out the structural, intellectual and strategic connections which linked the Haitian revolution with the French. In this context James drew on Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development, but his application of it was profoundly original. Later on, in the 1950s, James was one of the leading figures within the Correspondence grouping in America which sought to emphasise the experiences that united white and black workers in contexts such as automotive production, as well as the forms of spontaneous resistance by which ordinary people responded to the oppressions that shaped their working lives (Worcester 1996, chapter 5). The allusion, in the group's name, to the late eighteenth century correspondence societies was surely deliberate, given the extent to which those subaltern networks fed into the 'Red Atlantic' traditions famously explored by Linebaugh and Rediker (2000) and of which James himself was an exemplary figure.

Henri Lefebvre was also deeply motivated by an awareness of capitalism's unevenness, and his three-volume *Critique of Everyday Life*, which is my central point of focus here, starts from the idea of the everyday as both a symptom and indictment of that unevenness. As he insists more than once in his *Critique*, capitalism gives us a world in which peasants live in unlit hamlets 'just a stone's throw from dams and powerful ultra-modern hydro-electrical installations' (2014, 250), or where 'the hoe or the swing plough [...] coexist alongside

interplanetary rockets' (610). It is Lefebvre's contention that this unevenness describes social life *within* so-called industrialised societies just as much as it does economic inequalities *between* different national or regional contexts. He thus reads the stunted, repetitive quality of everyday life as a genuine expression of underdevelopment: the everyday is itself a sector which is 'exploited and oppressed by so-called "modern" society' (610). He reiterates this point in the last volume of his *Critique*, urging his readers to grasp the possibility of thinking of the monolithic tower blocks of the postcolonial city and the prefabricated homes of the European post-war housing estate – and, moreover, the lives lived out in these places – as different outcomes of a single process, as part of the same 'conquered country' (800). This reading raises issues to which we will return, but for the moment, suffice it to say that an attempt to bring James and Lefebvre into dialogue is in keeping with their own characteristic concern to challenge the fragmentation of lifeworlds which modernity produces and sustains.

Yet I do intend a certain directionality in this comparison: I want to bring James to bear on Lefebvre in order to look for correspondences but also to look for where the correspondence fails or where that juxtaposition exposes things which Lefebvre leaves unsaid. I want to bring James to bear on Lefebvre, in other words, in order to ask a variation on the question which is at issue in this special edition: 'where is the struggle for racial justice in European intellectual life'? For reasons that I will seek to elaborate, it seems to me that Lefebvre's critique, which expresses concerns and passions absolutely in keeping with those that animated James' own politics, is also marked, in an un-reckoned way, by the intellectual legacies of empire.

I should reiterate that this is an imagined dialogue. To the best of my knowledge James was never in actual correspondence with Lefebvre. He was, of course, very familiar with the French political scene and had been ever since the time he had spent in Paris in 1934 researching *The Black Jacobins*. Moreover, the groups of which he was a part in the 1950s were allied to libertarian socialist groups in Europe, most notably *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Cornelius Castoriadis, writing as Pierre Chaulieu, contributed a chapter to the Correspondence collective's 1958 study-cum-manifesto, *Facing Reality*, inspired by the Hungarian uprising. It seems likely, therefore, that James would have known of Lefebvre. But they would have been unlikely interlocutors, at least at this juncture, given James' staunch anti-Communism. Lefebvre, notoriously, remained a member of the PCF until 1957 and had remarkably little to say about events in Hungary (Shields 1998, 86–87). By that point James had been detained on Ellis Island, subsequently leaving the US in order to avoid formal deportation. It was during that six-month period of detention that he completed *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, his brilliant historical reading of *Moby Dick*, and a text which exemplifies James' celebration of the boundary-crossing currents of subaltern resistance. The final chapter of the book makes an autobiographical turn, interpreting the treatment of detainees on Ellis

Island as a microcosm of wider political experience, and pointing out that the detainees, like the crew of the *Pequod* in Melville's novel, formed a kind of embryonic global citizenry (2001 [1953], 154). From this dignifying comparison, however, James specifically exempts the communists with whom he found himself confined. Their blind adherence to political purpose, and their strategic use of other human beings, he believed, were harbingers of the very totalitarianism that Melville had prefigured in the character of Ahab, the *Pequod's* ruthlessly instrumental captain.

The search for happiness

Notwithstanding Lefebvre's late break with communism, it is in this shared rejection of a politics that treated human beings as merely the means of achieving predefined ends that he and James are perhaps most closely aligned. Both writers came to think, increasingly, of socialism as something which needed to entail more than a merely formal change in the ownership of the means of production. And underlying this position was their shared insistence on a qualitative rather quantitative understanding of human development: 'progress in the way life is organised', writes Lefebvre in 1947, at the end of the first volume of his *Critique*, 'cannot be limited to a technical progress in external equipment, cannot be confined to an increase in the quantity of tools' (268).

In the same period, on the other side of the Atlantic, James was arguing the same point. He did so most explicitly in a series of essays published in the mid to late 1940s in which he emphasised the contradiction between the promise and reality of twentieth century society: 'The greater the means of transport, the less men [sic] are allowed to travel', he wrote (also in 1947). 'The greater the means of communication, the less men freely exchange ideas. The greater the possibilities of living, the more we live in terror of mass annihilation' (1980 [1947], 72). Yet these contradictions are also the site of struggle, James insists, and that struggle gives evidence of an unstinting popular desire to realise all of the squandered possibilities which are 'postulated' in the idea of the 'human'. Thus, James says, we can talk of 'purpose' in human history not in the Whiggish sense of inevitable progress nor in the way that a teleological Marxism might, but by understanding what every successive act of rebellion seeks to bring to life: the 'history of man [sic] is his effort to make the abstract universal concrete. He constantly seeks to destroy, to move aside, that is to say, to negate what impedes his movement towards freedom' (84). Human history is defined by an unrelenting 'search for [...] completeness (81). One can detect in James' writings of this period a note of unease as regards 'mass society' which is, in many ways, comparable to that found in the thinkers of the Frankfurt School. James, however, never lost faith in praxis nor in the disruptive possibilities

unleashed by the longings of ordinary people. In this regard he was closer to the humanist position of Erich Fromm, say, than he was to Adorno or Horkheimer (see Alleyne 1999; Larsen 1996; Durkin 2014).

In short, both Lefebvre and James, in their different contexts, and independently informed by the re-discovery of Marx's early, more humanist writings (see Lefebvre 2014, 81–105; James 1984 [1947]), sought to focus upon human potentiality as the premise of political struggle. By the same token they came to reject a technocratic definition of what a better society might look like. 'The "good life" is not, it never has been, merely a question of what the vulgarians call "raising the standard of living". Men are not pigs to be fattened' James argued in one of the public lectures he gave in Trinidad in 1960 (1973 [1960], 105). Or, to put it more simply, what both saw as being at stake in politics was the question of human happiness. Independently, each sought to rescue the concept of happiness from the triviality to which advertising and pop psychology had consigned it: 'Economic statistics cannot answer the question: "what is socialism?"', Lefebvre insisted in his 1958 foreword to the second edition of his *Critique's* first volume, 'Men do not fight and die for tons of steel, or for tanks or atomic bombs. They aspire to be happy, not to produce' (2014, 70). And this was, equally, the keynote of James' (originally unpublished) study of American society, which was drafted in 1950. As the text's eventual editors (Grimshaw and Keith 1993) point out, the work that became *American Civilisation* was to have been entitled *The Search for Happiness* and James' critical approach pivoted on a refusal to accept the idea that 'happiness' could be 'reduced to material satisfaction'. Rather, 'he held happiness to be as essential to the human experience as the desire for freedom or equality', insofar as it was 'expressive of [the] complex and deeply rooted needs of human beings, for integration, to become whole, to live in harmony with society' (James 1993, 23–24).

Neither James nor Lefebvre, of course, were blind to the reality of brute poverty: 'who does not prefer everyday triviality to famine' (2007 [1968], 76), the latter asked. But both also understood the ways in which the lived experience of consumerism provided a relentless training in the idea of 'possession', such that any politics aimed only at material redistribution might easily become insular or regressive. Telling, in this regard, is their shared interest in the rise of post-war discourses of 'security' which, as they saw it, surrendered the possibilities of human expressivity and creativity in the name of safeguarding material accumulation. Lefebvre, with particular prescience, identified the rise of 'terror' as a key apparatus of acquiescence with the social order. His discussion of terrorist society is challenging (see, for example, 2007 [1968], chapter 4), but I take it to describe the emergence of a form of internalised control akin to what Foucault described as bio-power: a suppression of freedom which takes place in the name of freedom

and which is made possible by the rise of ‘meta’ processes of regulation and an accompanying demand for endless self-reflective scrutiny. Thus, as far back as the mid-twentieth century, Lefebvre foresaw on the horizon the outline of a ‘gigantic memory- and information- machine’ (158) which would have the capacity to stifle – but never absolutely smother – the spontaneities and desires implicit in ‘creative insecurity’. James, meanwhile, responded to the post-war welfare settlement in Europe in a similarly critical way, reminding his readers of how differently the provisions of that settlement might appear when seen in light of the relationships of empire. James’ objection here, like Lefebvre’s, was focussed especially on the wider sociological effects of the prioritising of a merely material security. He discusses this in various places, perhaps most famously in his account of how the ‘welfare state of mind’, as he called it, was reflected in the rise of a ‘safety-first’ approach in popular cultural practices such as sport which had formerly been characterised by a degree of creative risk (e.g. 2013 [1963], 212–222).

In these respects James and Lefebvre, it seems to me, offer powerful resources to help us think through the present political conjuncture. Both, certainly, recognised the ways in which a defence of ‘standards of living’ could be used to legitimate forms of violence and exclusion. Such moves are all too obvious in the anti-migrant demagoguery of a Trump or an Orbán, of course, but are more insidiously played out in claims from the liberal centre – Hillary Clinton, for example (The Guardian 2018) – or amongst academics (Goodwin and Eatwell 2018) – which reproduce the very populism they claim to be challenging by blaming migrants for political insecurities, and by reconsolidating the imagined community of the nation as the bearer of ‘legitimate concerns’ about the ‘possible destruction of the national group’s historic identity and established ways of life’ (6). Lefebvre and James certainly anticipated the potentially regressive drift of a politics focussed on narrow notions of welfare and security. Such a politics, they noted, inculcated a kind of a self-interested positivism, a defence of mere ‘having’. The response of both was to seek to retrain political attention to the question of ‘what might be’, and to the ways in which that question was implicitly expressed in the ‘liveliness, complexity and abundance’ of ordinary ‘needs and desires’ (Lefebvre 2014, 326).

The politics of the popular and the everyday

It is in the same vein that Lefebvre ends *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (2007 [1968]) with a kind of aphorism: ‘to be aware of being unhappy presupposes that something else is possible, a different condition from the unhappy one’ (206). This contrariwise framing of the point – the reading which moves from the expression of negativity *towards* the alternative which that negativity presumes and thus starts to bring within reach –

helps us grasp a second significant correspondence between James and Lefebvre. This is their shared scepticism about a form of politics which presumed that revolution was something which emerged, *deus ex machina*, from outside of popular life, whether as the preserve of a political movement or as the result of the working-out of implacable historical forces.

In contrast to such a view, both writers turned their critical attention towards those forms of resistance by which ordinary people asserted their creativity in the face of the regimentations of working life or the stultifications of daily experience. This is, of course, the nub of Lefebvre's famous account of the *duality* of everyday life: 'It is in the everyday and its ambiguous depths that possibilities are born and the present lives out its relation to the future' (2014, 196). Lefebvre was not naive, of course. As is noted above, he repeatedly drew attention to the forces that generated popular 'vulgarity', as he called it: the acquiescence with what is given to us, so that daily existence comes to be defined by monotonous pragmatism – which shirt to wear, which car to buy? Under the rule of this crass realism 'daily life is confined to what is [...] it congratulates itself on its limits and encloses itself in them' (747), whilst the promise of newness is eaten out from within by commodification and by mass mediated spectacle. On the other hand, Lefebvre insisted, the victory of vulgarity was only ever provisional and incomplete: 'at the heart of everyday positivity', he writes, 'the negative springs up in all its force' (807). There is a long section in *Everyday Life in the Modern World* which, much like the account by James which is cited above, describes modern society in terms of a series of contradictions: proliferating signs amidst a loss of communication; loneliness amidst overcrowding, and so forth. Yet Lefebvre, characteristically, ends the passage by insisting that 'resistance is the desire that lives and survives in the quotidian' (2007 [1968], 185).

And of course, just that same set of concerns is familiar in James' writing as well. No less than Lefebvre, James came increasingly to emphasise the immanent modes of resistance at play in ordinary work places, in popular culture and in the wider contexts of daily life. He and his co-authors would, in *Facing Reality* (1974 [1958]), start by describing the emergence of a globalised struggle between what they called 'the monster' (i.e. the 'self-perpetuating body' (5) of forms of regulatory control) and the largely disorganized but persistent popular attempts to contest that control: 'people are rebelling every day in ways of their own invention', they write. 'Always the aim is to regain control over their own conditions of life and their relations with one another' (5).

The keynote of the sentence just quoted, it seems to me, is the idea that rebellion is self-fashioned, a matter of people's 'own invention'. To understand why James should believe this to be so, we might remember his long-standing awareness of how racism was both experienced and resisted in everyday life. One indicative document, here, is the pamphlet he helped to

produce in support of a sharecroppers' strike in Missouri in 1942. James had travelled to Missouri in his capacity as an organiser with the Socialist Workers Party but his central concern – at least as he later recalled things – had been the production of a publication that would give voice to the demands which emerged directly out of the experiences of the communities involved. Thus, for example, one striking passage is directed towards the officials of the Farm Security Administration:

You and the home economists and the county demonstrators are always coming around to us telling us to eat liver and to eat eggs, for Vitamin A and Vitamin B. [...] We can get eggs only if we learn to lay them and we can give the children milk only if we turn into cows. You see them once a month when you come around. We see them every day growing up hungry and starving [...] If you want us to get vitamins, come out in support of our demand for 30 cents an hour [...] Otherwise we don't want to hear any more of your Vitamin A and Vitamin B (1977 [1942], 93).

It was, James insisted, precisely the extent to which poverty and racism were grappled with in the context of ordinary, lived experiences of this kind that made possible wider and more penetrating insights into the operation of a racialised capitalism. In the contemporaneous dispatches he wrote for *Labor Action* he claims, just as he had done previously with regard to the revolutionaries of Haiti, that 'despite their many limitations, these workers, in a fundamental sense, are among the most advanced in America' (1941, 3). And the root of these lessons lay even further back for James, in his reflections on the modalities of popular anti-colonial feeling in the Caribbean. In *Beyond a Boundary*, for example, recalling his childhood in Trinidad, he would recall his paternal grandfather Josh Rudder winning a symbolic victory against imperial racism when he proved himself able to fix a broken engine which had defeated the collective expertise of the white, university trained engineers who were considered his superiors. Rudder's subsequent refusal to explain what he had done was, James understood, an act of anti-racist self-assertion in a context where such acts could not easily take a more explicit form. He gives us the lesson in Rudder's own voice: 'They were white men with all their M.I.C.E and R.I.C.E. and all their big degrees, and it was their business to fix it. I had to fix it for them. Why should I tell them?' (15). Much like Du Bois before him, then, James insisted that out of the everyday experience of racism forms of hard won critical understanding emerged, and with them a politics which had its own history and trajectory. In his essay 'Every Cook Can Govern', he argued for the creative possibilities that might be unleashed by a politics which 'was not the activity of your spare time, nor the activity of experts paid specifically to do it' (1977 [1956], 168). As so often in his writing, he has in mind here the historical model of Athenian democracy, but it is clear that his view was shaped in the first instance by what he had learned from figures such as Rudder.

In summary then, I am arguing that from very different starting points, James and Lefebvre worked their way towards a certain shared territory: what we might call, borrowing a phrase from Ben Highmore's discussion of the latter, a romantic Marxism (2001, chapter seven). Romanticism might mean many things, of course. In this case I use it to describe a version of Marxism focussed less on questions of formal equality than on the struggle for richness of life and one which emphasises the politics of human creativity, need and desire. A Marxism, moreover, which refused to treat either popular culture or everyday life as scenes of straightforward political defeat but which understood them as contested territories on which aspects of that struggle were played out.

As I've noted, however, both writers were aware of the pitfalls of the category of the 'popular', of the way in which it could sustain claims that were naïve at best and at worst, cynically instrumental. When Lefebvre, for example, insists 'on the "irreducibility" of desire, on its persistent "unexpectedness", he does so, at least in part, against what he called the "illusion of immediacy in everyday life" (Lefebvre 2007 [1968], 187); in other words, against a kind of closed-circuit positivism which moves from the statement "that's how it is" to the resignation which says "it can't be any different" (187). James, for his part, and as I have argued in more detail elsewhere (Smith 2011), was consistently cautious about the lures of cultural nationalism. He, like Fanon, drew repeated attention to the way in which political elites might turn such politics to anti-popular effect, using it to buttress their own version of the message that "it can't be any different". It seems to me that it is in this light we should read James' provocative response to the emergence of a Black Studies curriculum in American universities in the late 1960s. James supported such developments as a matter of political choice – 'I am compelled for the time being to take sides' – but he nonetheless insisted: 'for myself, I do not believe that there is any such thing as Black Studies' (1984 [1969], 186). Just as Lefebvre cautioned that the defence of culture can quickly reduce to a defence of 'what is', James likewise feared that Black Studies would become a celebration of qualities ascribed to 'blackness' in itself. What made rebelling slaves in Haiti fight with the courage that they did, he noted, was not some 'special bravery of blacks' (194), but what that struggle promised to open up for them: 'men who are fighting for freedom and to whom freedom is a reality fight much better' (194). James was thus profoundly aware of the danger of an ontological corraling of political struggle, of an essentialist construction of the category of the popular: his response was to insist on seeing politics always as a question of opening up, of becoming rather than being.

The face of our nation

Both writers, then, emphasise 'the human' as the end, rather than the means, of political struggle, but this is not the whole story. There is a sense in which the human that Lefebvre invokes – at least at the start of his *Critique* – is already

a different human from the one which James understands. More than once in his earlier writings 'the everyday' appears, not as a way of keeping open the question of human becoming, but rather as evidence of already assumed differences between human beings.

Near the start of his *Critique*, for example, Lefebvre cites a passage from Marc Bloch which 'reads' the French countryside as the achievement of a vast, collective labour: 'We have learned how to perceive the face of our nation on the earth', says Lefebvre, 'in the landscape, slowly shaped by centuries of work, of patient, humble gestures. The result of these gestures, their totality, is what contains greatness' (2014, 154). Lefebvre's concern, of course, is to bring that focus on the social labour of ordinary life into the present, to map the processes by which the resilient creativity of popular life has been broken into 'sectors' by the forces of 'control', whilst also recognizing how far forms of insurgent knowledge and longing are yet lodged within it. Yet in doing this, even as he turns 'the everyday' into a weapon of critique against modernity, Lefebvre comes close to accepting that those practices of everyday life give expression to radical differences between human beings, revealing each nation's own recognizable 'face'. This metaphor is drawn straight from the language of physiognomy. It is not quite 'race', but it is not quite not. More importantly, the phenomena so described are taken to constitute 'totalities' in themselves, as if the 'face' of France was the exclusive achievement of those designated French, as if it were not also the product of myriad other unacknowledged forms of labour spread out across the Atlantic world and beyond.

Later on, Lefebvre would congratulate himself that a focus on everyday life had become increasingly central to the concerns of anthropologists and historians. Here again he seems to endorse an understanding of the everyday life as evidence of 'essential' differences between peoples:

For the historian of a specific period, for the ethnographer, for the sociologist studying a society or a group, the fundamental question would be to grasp a certain quality, difficult to define and yet essential and concrete, something that 'just a quarter-of-an-hour alone' with a man from a distant or extinct culture would reveal to us (2014, 29).

In the pages which follow, Lefebvre reiterates his defence of a Marxism premised on the full development of the human being: 'without the notion of the total man, humanism and the theoretical conception of the human fall back into an incoherent pluralism' (90). He insists, again, that it is in everyday life that we must learn to trace the blueprint of that wholeness: 'Everyday life [...] defined by what is "left over" after all distinct, superior, specialised, structured activities have been singled out by analysis, must be defined as a totality' (119). There is little in these sentences with which one can imagine James disagreeing. Yet Lefebvre's understanding of everyday life, at this point at least, cannot serve to make whole the fragmented

human, because it is already a means of defining specificity. If everyday life is constitutive of 'a certain quality, difficult to define yet essential and concrete' which characterises the 'man from a distant culture', then all that can be made whole is each 'man' on their own cultural, ethnic or national 'planet'. Thus Lefebvre immediately qualifies his own claim: 'this "whole" must be taken in the context of a specific country and nation, at a specific moment of civilization and social development' (110). With this, the theoretical conception of 'the human' falls back into an 'incoherent pluralism' before it takes another step.

In other words, if Lefebvre was indeed a romantic Marxist, then his romanticism differs from James insofar as he tends to define modern society by opposing it to something supposedly outside of itself. See, for example, his argument that modern man has lost the capacity for a genuine 'anguish' or sense of 'mystery', such as might be felt by 'a primitive man lost in a jungle [...] a being who feels utterly weak and helpless in the face of nature' (2014, 145). Later, in the second volume of the *Critique* he relies on the same comparison in order to define the fragmented nature of modern experience (613–6). 'Primitive' societies, he argues, despite their 'brutality', created objects that were symbolic and functional simultaneously, whereas capitalist production forces aesthetics and utility apart, so that modern society is characterised by an 'absence of style'. The point here is not simply that Lefebvre shared some of the 'noble savage' myths of European intellectual culture, but that his critical project begins by enacting the familiar conceptual trick (as discussed, for example, by Iton (2008) or Dussel (1995)) by which modernity can only be known or grasped, even critically, by opposition to something which is defined as lying outside or anterior to it, something which it has left behind or expelled in order to become itself. With this in mind, his juxtaposition of postcolonial material poverty and the spiritual poverty of everyday life in the metropolis, which I described at the start of the essay, seems newly problematic. If the critical possibility of everyday life becomes thinkable only by summoning up, as a definitional shadow, those who are assumed to be incapable of being modern, then these two experiences are rendered incommensurable after all, the former only ever a racialised mirror in which the other discovers itself. What Lefebvre ignores, it seems to me, is the centrality of this very distinction to the conceptual ordering of modernity which, otherwise, he is at such pains to contest.

Openings and closures

This, of course, is where the contrast with James is so very telling. Because for James it was impossible to tell the story of modernity without making the struggles of racialised and enslaved communities integral to the account. James refused to see those struggles as external phenomena by virtue of which the modern might better, or more critically, know itself. If

Lefebvre consistently sought out the 'openings' that might be found within the regulatory orders of modern society, for James the archetypal historical 'opening' was to be found in Toussaint L'Ouverture and in the revolution of which he was a part. But, crucially, that 'opening' was no less immanent to the emerging structures of the capitalist order than those with which Lefebvre was concerned. The greatest achievement of James' historical account in *The Black Jacobins* was to insist, as Høgsbjerg (2014) reminds us, on the *modernity* of slave rebellion: Haiti is to be understood as neither periphery nor other, but as a pivotal and constitutive modern event in its own right.

This does not mean that James downplayed the *specificity* of anti-racist or anti-colonial politics. Indeed much of his most explicit writing on these issues was concerned with emphasising the particular historical modality of such resistance. He published, for example, a series of essays on 'The Negro Question' in the late thirties and forties, in which he sought to come to terms with these questions (see James 1996). Here, characteristically, he criticises the tendency of orthodox Marxists to treat anti-racist struggles as recruitment opportunities, or as adolescent episodes to be passed through *en route* to a truer version of class struggle. James' insistent response was to turn this interpretation inside out: rather than try to incorporate those struggles into a prefabricated account of history or politics, he allows awareness of their specificity and relative autonomy to break open presumptions about the nature and direction of politics as such. Thus it was, to a significant extent, the fact that he thinks through and with the histories of anti-racism which led him to reject the kind of deterministic Marxism which thought that the future could be known in advance by access to a plan or a theory of which it was the sole custodian.

James insisted no less on recognizing that those struggles created openings beyond themselves. He makes this point partly as a matter of historical fact: his account of the American Civil War, for example, recovers the role that the Abolitionists played in preventing a compromise between the Northern bourgeoisie and the Southern plantocracy, just as he had previously recognised the role of the Haitian revolution in preventing an alliance of European forces against the revolution in France. But his point is also a more conceptual one: these struggles are literally 'openings' in the sense that lead beyond themselves, broadening out the prospect or horizon of freedom, of what freedom might mean. Such histories of resistance have their own determinations, their own modalities, but by the same token they enlarge our sense of what is conceivable as, or for, 'the human'.

Those essays of James' were written in the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s. Nearly fifty years after that point, in the last volume of his *Critique* (published in 1981), Lefebvre finally addressed himself to these kinds of questions, pushed to do so by the emergence within the European political scene of what he

called a politics of difference. In that context he bemoans the fact that the Left has 'failed to understand the right to difference, still less to assimilate it', and argues that 'a positive struggle for the right to difference would have enhanced the effectiveness of struggles for and in democracy' (2014, 785). He recognises and decries, moreover, the tendency of the Left to imagine equality as a horizon of sameness, as something which exists 'only in non-differentiation, in similarity, or rather in abstract identity' (790). On these grounds then, Lefebvre celebrates the lived experience of difference as one more 'opening' against the homogenization of everyday life. He presents a politics emerging from that lived experience as a guard against the imposition of a flattened, merely formal notion of equality. This leads him to conclude, in his peroration to this passage: 'Social demands [...] must pass through the differential phase, and retain something from this passage' (794).

Lefebvre's account is more subtle and complex than I can easily summarise here, and to try to do so risks treating him unfairly. But all the same, it is hard to imagine James using such a phrase, smacking as it does of just the kind of politics he had so vehemently contested in the 1940s and afterwards, with its tendency to see anti-racism as having a merely episodic value. But nor, for that matter, was James all that much interested in celebrating the encounter with difference for its own sake. There is, one feels, a lingering whiff of exoticism about such a position: those who are 'different' remain in some sense the 'others' of modernity, just as they were at the outset of Lefebvre's *Critique*. The only alteration is that now they are somewhat closer at hand, on the same city streets. Their conceptual and political role remains, however, that of the *vis-a-vis*, or the counterpoint, by which modernity is to be critiqued. It is thus the 'encounter' with difference which opens up new 'possibilities' and allows for an escape from everyday mundanity. For all that he shares with Lefebvre, James would have had little truck with such a view. His concern was not with the politics of difference as such. It was, rather, with the way in which the history of struggles against forms of oppression based on the attribution of difference helped to keep open the premise of human being for everyone.

Conclusion

Henri Lefebvre and C.L.R. James were, in their different ways, quintessential twentieth century intellectuals. They were born with 6 months of each other in 1901, and both lived to within sight of the century's end: James died in 1989 and Lefebvre in 1991. Even in the face of the horrors of the twentieth century they shared a common assertion that history is not closed and that social control is never absolute. It is, perhaps, in that stubborn but qualified optimism that they are most alike. As we have seen, both repeatedly insisted on the dialectical truth that every statement of unhappiness and every act of refusal presupposes the possibility of a world other than the world as it is.

But too often it seems to me that Lefebvre requires the existence of an ‘other’ in order to make this dialectical move. To put it another way: his *Critique* bears in itself the marks of the racialised understanding of human relations which is one persistent legacy of empire in European thought. In the first volume of that work, setting the scene on ‘well-trodden ground’, he defends the dignity of ‘everyday life’ with a geographical-cum-cultural metaphor: ‘the polar and equatorial zones are scarcely fit for habitation, and all civilization has developed in the temperate zones – the zones of everyday life’ (2014, 144). James, of course, fought a life-long battle against this particular lie, insisting repeatedly on the path-breaking cultural and intellectual contributions of those from the Caribbean: Toussaint; Steelpan; Carnival; Mighty Sparrow; Garry Sobers – all products of an ‘equatorial zone’. But it is not just the substantive point which matters. It is that Lefebvre’s comment bespeaks a mode of ‘critique’ which is already racialised, and which even in its later version positions human ‘otherness’ as kind of pivot by which to reach beyond what is. James, by contrast, understood the racialised boundaries of modernity as part of what must be undone – *dialectically* undone – before one could claim, with Césaire, that there is a place for all at the rendezvous of victory.

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