Mass Culture and Political Form in C. L. R. James's *American Civilization*

Tim Fisken

Presented at Historical Materialism, London, November 2013

This paper begins from a question: why study pop culture? Or, rather, why study popular culture as someone committed to revolutionary politics or Marxism more specifically? And here I don't mean studying popular culture *in order to* engage in politics in a way which would subordinate the study of pop culture as means to political ends. We see this kind of reductive pop culture critique fairly frequently, in which the condemnation of some cultural artefact as ideologically mystifying, or the praise of it as expressing a radical point of view, are taken as occasions for organizing, rallying around, or against, that work. There's nothing wrong with this, I suppose (although when, as is often the case, the mobilization involved is purely virtual, this kind of activity can combine a self-congratulatory self-understanding as bravely political with little if any political effect). However, this political deployment of popular culture makes for bad criticism because it is (sometimes, and this is admirable, avowedly) uninterested in the particular features of the work under discussion: the interest is in how the work can be deployed as a slogan, not how it functions as a cultural work. What this misses is the aesthetic dimension: how the formal features of the work strike the sensorium of the audience, and what various and ramified effects they produce in doing so. Another way of phrasing my question, then, might be: what can a Marxist political project gain from paying attention to the aesthetics of popular culture? And, relatedly, what kind of aesthetic analysis will be valuable from a Marxist perspective?

It turns out that C.L.R. James presents an answer to this question in *American Civilization*.[1] Written in 1949-50, *American Civilization* is a prospectus for, or explanation of, a book James was planning to write examining contemporary life in the US as an instance of the radical changes being produced by post-war capitalism and the revolutionary possibilities arising from these changes. James's discussion of popular culture forms one chapter of the book, a pivotal chapter on which much of the argument of the rest of the book depends. Further, I will argue, James's account of popular culture is extremely helpful in understanding the political analysis he put forward in the Johnson-Forest tendency at approximately the same time he was writing *American Civilization*. The work of Johnson-Forest and James's subsequent organization, Correspondence, is, to my mind, still some of the best Marxist analysis that has been written, particularly for the way in which, by analysing the conditions of mid-20th century capitalism, it demolishes an ossified and ahistorical Leninism which is, sadly, still with us. But it would be just as ahistorical to simply adopt the Johnson-Forest program wholesale today. Instead, I hope that understanding the method that led to that analysis, which I think is largely contained in *American Civilization*, we can attempt to discover new political possibilities existing within our very different present.

Masses and mass culture

I have so far been using the term 'popular culture' but my title refers to 'mass culture', and this terminological precision is worth a brief explanation. I have been using 'pop culture' in a non-technical way to mean widely distributed entertainment like pop music, Hollywood films and TV, but some people would consider this *mass culture*, which they would distinguish sharply from popular culture. On this distinction (which as far as I know derives from mid-20th century debates in the CPUSA), popular culture relates to culture autonomously produced by the people; mass

1 C. L. R. James, *American Civilization* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1993). Subsequent references in the body of the text are to this work.

culture, on the other hand, is mass-produced culture created in order to be sold to the people. James doesn't use either term (he tends to refer to 'the popular arts') but it is clear that he is discussing the kind of works that fit into the 'mass culture' category (while it is also true that he would be sceptical of anyone who claimed to have discovered an authentic popular culture distinct from this commercial culture). I will from this point on use the term 'mass culture', because it makes clear what sort of culture I am referring to, and also brings to the fore an important term in the analysis of this culture: the masses.

James's interest in mass culture derives, first of all, from the fact that, because it is *mass* culture, it has a different relation to the majority of the population than either elite culture or folk culture. In the past, the culture that was widely available for study was consumed only by a minority of the population, either an elite consuming high culture or a geographically dispersed populace consuming local folk cultures. With mass culture, on the other hand, the whole population consumes the same culture and this, James argues, means that 'where formerly we had to look at the economic relations of society, the political and social movements and the great artistic expressions to get a whole, complete and dynamic view of the society, while as far as the great mass was concerned, we had to guess; today it is not so' (118). James's contention, then, is that mass culture provides 'a window' (119) through which we can see, and understand, the masses: 'In observing the content and form of the popular arts in America today, with their international success, it is possible to deduce the social and political needs, sufferings, aspirations and rejections of modern civilization to an astonishing degree' (37). This is not, however, a straightforward process of reading off the needs and aspirations from the opinions expressed in mass culture. Rather, the first two words here get to the heart of James's method: the form and content of mass culture must be analysed, and, in understanding why a particular form is adopted and how it

comes to bear the content it does, we will gain a better understanding of the form of the modern political subject, the masses.

James's reasons for approaching mass culture in this way are fundamentally materialist – the specific qualities and effects of mass culture derive from the particular conditions under which it is produced, distributed, and consumed. The first and most important condition of production is simply scale: 'The producer of the film or the newspaper publisher of a strip aims at *millions of people*, practically the whole population, and *must satisfy them*' (122, James's emphasis). The entertainment industry, that is, must produce a product which will be purchased by a huge number of people. This puts constraints on both the form, which must be accessible, and the content, which must be appealing. 'The result', of the mass commercialisation of art, James writes, 'has been a new extension of aesthetic premises' which

> has transformed the production of art. New content, new principles, new forms, new conventions are in process of creation with the masses of the people in the United States as first and decisive arbiter. The men who seek to supply this imperative social need as a rule, and rightly, do not consider themselves artists. They are business men. They find their performers where they can get them. They are careful to observe in matter and manner the limitations of the economic and financial powers upon whom their business depends. But they are … dependent upon the mass audience for their success. (36)

James is aware of the dismissal of mass culture as a mere means used by capitalists to distract the masses, but he dismisses this dismissal as 'totally unhistorical' (122) because it fails to pay attention to the specific features of the cultural products which are successful at different times. 'The question still remains, why, at this particular time, this particular method of distraction should have arisen and met with such continuous success' (122). That is, to use the examples James considers, why were gangster films successful in the 30s when they had not been previously?

Capital may not be interested in the reasons for the success of its products, as long as it can make money from them, but we should be; 'we have to examine more closely the conditions in which these new arts, the film, and with it the comic strip, the radio and jazz have arisen, in order to see exactly why they become an expression of mass response to society, crises, and the *nature and limitations of that response*' (122, James's emphasis).

This idea, that in studying mass culture as a popular response to prevailing conditions, we can comprehend that response in a way which includes its limitations, is important to understanding James's theory of mass culture. His insistence on the importance and even value of mass culture is not a Panglossian vision of mass culture as an unmediated expression of proletarian revolution. The entertainment capitalists are in a contradictory position, wanting to avoid expressing the aspects of mass life which would threaten their position as capitalists, but constrained by economic necessity to produce a product which is acceptable to the masses. 'The industrial magnates, a movie producer so anti-union as DeMille, and great numbers of people in authority would wish nothing better than to employ the finest available talent in order to impose *their* view of the great political and social questions of the day upon the mass. *They dare not do it*' (123, James's emphasis). This contradiction is resolved, in the time James is writing, into a compromise: 'The films … if only negatively, represent some of the deepest feelings of the masses, but represent them within the common agreement – no serious political or social questions which would cause explosions' (123).

More generally, this dialectical ambiguity in the form of mass culture is due to the dialectical ambiguity in the life of the working class, which mass culture must both appeal to and reflect, indeed must appeal to by reflecting. 'It is the need of the great modern population of the United States', James writes, 'to have the daily incidents of its life, the everyday commonplace inconsequential actions of life dramatically represented' (138). He does not investigate the source

of this apparent need, but he does deduce one important consequence: 'Art has now assumed a very intimate relation to the daily lives of the great masses of the people …. There enters into the field of art a closeness to life unknown in past periods of human history' (139). It is this intimacy with day-to-day life which is the real value of mass culture for James, because it represents and reflects our life back to us and, in this reflection, allows our life to become an object of study for us, on the level of both content and form, and it is, particularly, this formal analysis of day-to-day life which informs James's understanding of politics.

James's interest in mass culture, then, derives from a more general feature of his political outlook, and that of the Johnson-Forest tendency of which he was a leading member, which is that the possibilities and necessities of revolutionary organisation derive from quite specific features of the material life processes of the working class. This is why James thought it so important to

> devote substantial space to the lives of the great masses of the people in factories, offices, and department stores, their home lives, and seek a co-relation in this with what is so lightly called the "entertainment industry", but what is in reality one of the most powerful social and psychological manifestations of the American life and character. (37)

Mass culture, that is, is enabled by a particular configuration of production relations (in an expanded sense, including all the ways in which the working class reproduces itself): 'mass production has created a vast populace, literate, technically trained, conscious of itself and of its inherent right to enjoy all the possibilities of the society to the extent of its means' (36). James concentrates on two features of this mass production: one, as we have already seen, is sheer scale; the other is what we would nor call Taylorisation, the way in which this enormous scale of production is built from work which involves increasingly simplified movements (a point made by Marx in *Capital*[2]). This simplification of movement, and the possibilities that derive from it, are

2 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Ben Fowkes, Reprint (Penguin Classics, 1992), p. 617.

illustrated by Chaplin, whose work James describes as ‘pantomime raised to the greatest possible degree of universality’, a new way of moving possible because of ‘changed social conditions and the mechanical possibility which are an integral part of them’ (141). Here James shows how formal features of material organisation are reflected in cultural forms, with a Taylorised work process producing a culture which combines ‘a simplification of the medium due to great social changes and an increase in the total complexity of the relations which can be built up from it’ (140-1).

This combined simplification and complexification is the cultural side of the development of abstract labour. Abstract labour involves a simplification of the elements of labour which is also a universalisation because, in terms of abstract labour, any worker can be replaced by any other. On one side, then, we have the manifestation of the work force in which each worker is treated as interchangeable; on the other side, according to James, we have the Hollywood star system. The star system, celebrity, is ‘a new type of symbolism, a symbolism that goes to the very heart of the modern age, in its denial of personality to the mass and the determination of the mass to realize some form of individuality in however vicarious a form’ (142). Stars, that is, are elevated as personifications of individuality – not because of any individual personality traits they may have, but quite the contrary, because of their lack of distinguishing traits, their universality. Stars are ‘standard patterns of modern character’ or ‘synthetic characters’ (146); they personify in individual form the abstract universality of the masses in modern society. This mass identity may be, James warns, a basis for totalitarianism, but it is not only that. Abstract labour, by abstracting away the particular limitations of particular jobs, holds out the possibility of creating an unlimited and universal individual, ‘an integral human being, a full and complete individuality with the circumstances of that fully integrated individuality’ (119).[3]

3 Here again James is expanding on an insight of Marx’s. In the process of describing the horrors required to reduce labour to an abstraction, Marx turns to consider how this also necessitates the creation of ‘the totally developed individual, for whom the different social functions are different modes of activity he takes up in turn’ Marx, p. 618.

Mass politics and after

It is this universal mass subject that is being produced in the development of capitalism that James identifies as the revolutionary subject, and he draws organisational conclusions from the conception of the mass subject that derives from his analysis of mass culture. I write 'organisational' rather than 'political' because James's conclusions are in one sense anti-political. James argues that the form of organisation created in the day-to-day lives of the masses are not merely directly revolutionary, but directly (if implicitly) communist. James puts this most strikingly in the 1956 *Facing Reality*, with the declaration that 'it is agreed that the socialist society exists',[4] but this idea was already present in his use of the idea of the 'invading socialist society' in the 1947 pamphlet of the same name.[5] This conception is anti-political inasmuch as, by locating organisation directly in day-to-day life, it rejects the idea of a *separate* sphere which organises the rest of life, the sphere of politics or the state.

James here is anti-political in the sense that Marx was throughout his career, from his early identification of the illusory distinction between state and civil society in *On the Jewish Question*, to his mature critique of political economy. The difference, James argues, is that the connection between politics and economics presented itself as a *problem* for Marx: the 'practical illusion' of their separateness was too real, and needed to be actively struggled against.[6] In contrast, in James's time, the possibility of direct self-organisation of the masses was increasingly apparent, especially in the Hungarian workers' councils which inspired the writing of *Facing Reality*. James indeed argues that the Hungarian revolution is unique in taking as its premise the abolition of the separateness of the political sphere. 'Previous revolutions have concentrated on the seizure of political power and only afterwards faced the problems of organizing production according to new

4 C. L. R James and Grace Chin Lee, *Facing Reality* (Correspondence, 1958), p. 106.

5 C. L. R James and Raya Dunayevskaya, 'The Invading Socialist Society', in *A New Notion*, ed. by Noel Ignatiev (Oakland: PM Press, 2010).

6 James and Dunayevskaya, p. 35.

procedures and method' but 'the Hungarian revolution has reversed this process .... The Revolution from the very beginning seized power in the process of production and from there organized the political power.'[7] The overcoming of the distinction between the political sphere and material life also takes with it the organisational consequence that Marxists have, since Lenin, drawn from this distinction: the need for the revolutionary party.

By 1956 James had completely rejected the Leninist party, writing that 'one of the greatest achievements of the Hungarian Revolution was to destroy once and for all the legend that the working class cannot act successfully except under the leadership of a political party.'[8] The political party is unnecessary because it 'constitutes essentially a separation of the organizing intellectuals and workers with an instinct for leadership, from the masses as force and motive power' and this separation becomes not only unnecessary but actively harmful after 'the growth of large scale production',[9] production on a scale that organises national, if not international, economies. This reason for rejecting the party form clearly draws on arguments James was making earlier, in *American Civilization* and earlier in polemics within the Fourth International, where he argues that the new conditions of post-War capitalism are replacing the party as representative organisation with 'a social organisation for action' which 'will be political only in the formal sense, but its appearance will signify a readiness to break the old society to pieces'.[10]

James's subsequent investigation of mass culture in *American Civilization* and of workers' self-organisation in *Facing Reality* clarified that this social organisation for action was being developed be workers in the course of their production and struggles over production, with the role of a self-consciously Marxist organisation being the more modest recording and publicising of this developing proletarian self-organisation.[11] That is to say, the role of the Marxist organisation is to

7 James and Lee, p. 8.
8 James and Lee, p. 10.
9 James and Lee, p. 10.
10 James and Dunayevskaya, p. 56.
11 James and Lee, p. 113.

represent the working class to itself – just the role that James had previously argued was played by mass culture; but, with the rise of Marxist organisation, James anticipated this representation being carried out by the working class under its own control.

James argument, then, is that the conditions that produce a mass society and hence mass culture have already produced the conditions of possibility for something like the Marxist organisation he envisaged, an organisation predicated on the unity of political and economic which earlier Marxist organisations struggled to establish. This reflects James's general understanding of organisational change and development, in which the radical and purely theoretical perspectives of an earlier form of organisation become the concrete, practical starting point today's organising.[12] This also suggests an approach we should take in considering what use we can make of James's work today: what are the radical perspectives of James's day, and what has happened to them? How have they been integrated into today's capitalism, and what would it mean to take this integration as the concrete foundation of our political activity?

Which is a larger question than I can answer here. To finish, I want to mention a few ways in which it seems to me we should be rethinking some of James's central concepts. The first concept here is that of the 'mass' – is it still useful to think of the working class, the majority of the population, in terms of the 'masses', with the implication of increasing homogeneity and spontaneously developing organisation which James associates with it? There is a widespread concern that, in the west at least, the decline of manufacturing has removed the basis of mass working-class organisation, with increasingly dispersed and insecure work removing the kind of spontaneous organisation James's political position depends on (and it is worth noting that the early stages of this dismantling of mass industry are identified by James as the main political-economic challenge facing workers in the 50s). However, theorists particularly from the Italian

12 James and Dunayevskaya, p. 34.

post-Workerist school (which was itself influenced by James and the Johnson-Forest analysis) argue that this change in forms of work, because it increases the importance of various forms of communicative work (symbolic and affective labour) increases the scale of working-class self-organisation. Yet this communicative work is often subject to all kinds of controls and stratifications which seem to make working-class organisation harder: think of global supply chains which objectively link workers across the world in ways which are hard for any of those workers to control, or increasingly complex border regimes which permit certain flexibilities in labour mobility through an expanding regime of control over labour.

If the concept of the masses has undergone some complication since James wrote, so has the concept of mass culture. In some ways popular culture has become even more massified and homogenised with the growing centralisation of cultural production in a small number of huge media conglomerates. This increase in scale might lead to an increase in the universalisation James saw in mass culture; but it might also lead to a monopolistic position in which there is less need to please the audience and more dependence on financial backing, leading to a renegotiation of the 'truce' which, in James's day, prevented mass culture from being a direct instrument of capitalist propaganda. At the same time as the financial organisation of culture has become more centralised, however, we have also seen a diversification in the forms of distributing and consuming mass culture, with the growth of multi-channel TV and the internet. Do these increase the possibilities for a reflection of working-class life back to itself, or do the reinforce the atomisation of the post-Fordist worker? Perhaps we could see massive media corporations and the mass media they produce as the last gasp of Fordism, and their current reorganisation in the face of new technology as the final penetration into recreation of the kind of changes in production that James was beginning to identify with automation in the 1950s. If that is right, the closer connection between the materialities of pop cultural consumption and the wider spheres of

production would make the study of our current post-mass culture an even more useful form of analysis than was James's study of the popular arts of his day.