

EDUCATION AND LIBERATION

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ABSTRACT. Drawing on his personal experience as a university student in the 1990s as well as those of a little-known 1960s Montreal-based group, the Caribbean Conference Committee, Austin calls for a return of community education and to the idea that education has meaning and value on its own term. He argues that the joining of theory with practice represents a powerful tool in the struggle for social and economic justice and transformation.

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RÉSUMÉ. S'appuyant sur son expérience d'étudiant universitaire dans les années 1990 ainsi que sur l'histoire d'un groupe des années 1960 méconnu, le Caribbean Conference Committee, Austin préconise le retour à une éducation communautaire et la revalorisation du processus éducationnel comme activité porteuse de sens et de valeurs. Austin avance qu'allier la théorie et la pratique peut s'avérer un outil percutant dans la lutte pour la transformation et la justice sociale et économique.

Canada has a long tradition of student protest. College and university campuses have been and remain important sites of popular dissent, debate, and mobilization around many of the pressing issues of our time. As an undergraduate in Montreal in the early 1990s, there were a number of issues that I and fellow students struggled with: police harassment and brutality and the shooting of young members of the Black community by the police; the white supremacist apartheid regime in South Africa and the plight of Palestinians; Haiti and the overthrow of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide; the relationship between race, gender, and class; neo-liberal globalization, and course curriculum and pedagogy. In those days, some of us felt the need to complement our role as politically active students with independent study. The ideas of individuals such as bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, Paulo Freire, Patricia Hill Collins, Karl Marx, Amílcar Cabral, C.L.R. James, as well as the history of various social movements and anti-colonial struggles framed our analysis and informed the

political work in which some of us were engaged. I say some of us because, in retrospect, that “some” was actually a minority within the minority of students who were politically active on campus to begin with.

Of course, most of what we learned came less from books – whether within the classroom or out – and more from our practical engagement and involvement. The tendency to want to simply “do” – to act without the benefit of informed reflection – was perhaps, in hindsight, as persistent then as it is today. But theory played an important role. bell hooks (1984) informed us about the critical debates confronting feminism from within: how the lack of diversity within the feminist movement hampered genuine solidarity among women, and that the particular experiences of women of colour could not simply be glossed over under the rubric of a broad feminist movement; that men could not afford to sit on the sidelines and observe feminism from a distance as if it were separate and distinct from their own lives; and that gender, race, and class were not discrete categories but part of a complex whole that governed and shaped our lives in various ways (p. 140-141).

Patricia Hill Collins (1991) reminded us of the critical work that women – in this case particularly Black women – play within political and community organizations, often behind the scenes, while men arrogate leadership to themselves. Collins also made a point of illustrating how women’s political work, often in the form of “silent leadership,” is devalued by social scientists, and particularly male ones, in favour of those “big” leaders, again usually men (p. 11). Reading both hooks and Collins challenged us (I am referring specifically to the men here) to examine our own relationships with women in the various organizations and movements that we were part of – the Black Students’ Network, the anti-apartheid struggle, the short-lived Friends of Haiti and Progressive Students Association, as well as campus-community radio (CKUT) and the university’s major newspaper, the *McGill Daily*. Often, we fell short in terms of translating theory into practice, but a seed was planted which continues to be nurtured.

Extrapolating from his experience in Algeria and the global South, Fanon (1967) explained that psychosis is as much a social as it is a psychological phenomenon, and that its prognosis rests “in the hands of those who are willing to get rid of the worm-eaten roots of the structure” (p. 11). His analysis of violent phenomena in the Third World – the violence that colonialism and oppression engenders – helped us grasp the folly of the notion of “Black on Black” violence; that the inherent inequalities and the palpable sense of alienation that societies’ most dispossessed live – particularly younger women and men, and even more so Indigenous Peoples and people of colour – breeds violence because they are the product of violence (pp. 35-106).

From C.L.R. James (1993) we learned of the capacity of “ordinary” women and men to do the extraordinary; to be creative and artistic, and their ability

to re-organize society from below. Whether it was a batsman on the cricket pitch in the Caribbean or Pakistan, shopfloor workers in Poland or England, (James, 1958) or – perhaps the penultimate transformative example – the predominantly African-born slaves of Saint Domingue who organized an army that defeated Spanish, British, and ultimately French imperialism en route to establishing the independent state of Haiti in 1804, (James, 1980) James’s work left an indelible mark. We read his books, pamphlets, and articles, but it was through direct contact with individuals who had met and worked alongside him in Canada and who were willing to share that experience that left the most lasting impression of the significance of his work, and theirs.

In the 1960s, James had been central to the work of a Montreal-based group named the Caribbean Conference Committee (CCC). Its members were comprised primarily of students, most of whom had come to Canada with the intention of acquiring an education and returning to the Caribbean to contribute to the region’s development, perhaps by assuming government posts, working in a hospital or other para-public institutions, or teaching at the University of the West Indies. But a small political core within the group had a different path in mind. While only four Anglophone Caribbean countries were independent by the end of 1966, the challenges, indeed the tragic cost of this newfound freedom was already apparent. Constrained by a political framework inherited from colonialism which lacked economic teeth, the Caribbean found itself mired in what one astute observer, referring to the modes of dependency and exploitation that characterize the region, has described as the “coloniality of Caribbean citizenship” (Kamugisha, 2007).

As someone who had been actively involved in international socialist, African, U.S., and Caribbean political organizations and who, by the 1960s, joined forces with Eric Williams, Trinidad’s prime minister and his longtime friend, in the late 1950s, and who had worked tirelessly as the secretary of the failed West Indian Federation, many young West Indians turned to James for guidance. His harsh criticism of the Caribbean’s leadership in part reflected his own, somewhat bitter, experience in the Caribbean between 1958 to 1962:

Today nationalism is under fire and every people has to consider to what extent its nationalism has to be mitigated by international considerations. Of this[,] as of so much else[,] the West Indian middle class is innocent. What happens after independence? For all you can hear from them, independence is a dead end. Apart from the extended opportunities of jobs with the government, independence is as great an abstraction as was federation. We achieve independence and they continue to govern. (James, 1962, p. 135)

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1968) was equally critical of nationalist leadership. He described independence as an empty shell in which its leaders adopt new flags, anthems, and other nationalist paraphernalia, while negotiating pacts with foreign interests behind the backs of the people whose popular support put them in office, pacts that maintained the social and economic

structures in their pre-independence form (p.176). But beneath the surface of James' and Fanon's remarks lay a bigger question: How do you organize to change these conditions? It was precisely this question that preoccupied the dedicated core of young West Indians who comprised the CCC.

In the 1960s, Canada experienced an unprecedented wave of immigration from the Caribbean (Winks, 1997, p. 438; Williams, 1997, p. 105). Many of these West Indians came to Canada to work as domestic workers, in much the same way women from the Philippines do today, or to work on the railroads or wherever they could hustle a living. Others came as university students. Given McGill University's reputation as an elite tertiary institution on the one hand, and Sir George Williams (now Concordia) University's more open admissions policy on the other, Montreal became a city of choice for many of these students, although they also found homes in Toronto, Ottawa, and other Canadian cities. Many of them – and this was true of the CCC's founding members – Robert Hill, his cousin Anthony Hill, Alvin Johnson, Anne Cools, Hugh O'Neale, and Rosie Douglas – were driven by the idea of returning home to participate in the Caribbean's social and economic development. But the CCC was not the only Caribbean group based in Montreal. They were part of the Caribbean's "exile" community which also included members of the influential Caribbean-based New World Group. Edward Said (1996) describes exile as "being liberated from the usual career, in which 'doing well' and following time-honored footsteps are the main milestones." Exile "means that you are always going to be marginal and that what you do as an intellectual has to be made up because you cannot follow a prescribed path. If you can experience that fate," he continues, "not as a deprivation and as something to be bewailed, but as a sort of freedom, a process of discovery in which you do things according to your own pattern, as various interest seize your attention, and as the particular goal you set for yourself dictates: that is a unique pleasure" (p. 62). As Robert Hill argued (1966), West Indians live a form of exile while at home, stifled and suffocated by colonialism and neo-colonialism's glass ceiling; and that it is when they are voluntarily exiled abroad that they begin to discover their identity and destiny and embrace possibilities that home does not immediately afford them. The absoluteness of this claim can be questioned, but there is little doubt about the group's impact. Between 1965 and 1967, the CCC organized a series of annual conferences that brought many of the Caribbean's leading thinkers and artists to the city (Roberts, p.76). These events were attended by West Indians living in Canada, the United States, Britain, and the West Indies and raised awareness about social, cultural, and political developments in the Caribbean. Nothing like these conferences had ever occurred in Canada, and Barbadian writer George Lamming (1966) believed that the inaugural meeting was the first of its kind anywhere (p. 63).

What might be described as the group's political core – Robert Hill, Franklyn Harvey, Anne Cools, Alfie Roberts, and Tim Hector – also formed the nucleus of the C.L.R. James Study Circle, a CCC-affiliated group dedicated to studying James' work. They adopted James' notion of self-organization – the idea that workers and the underclass can organize themselves for change without being guided by political parties or an elite vanguard, an idea that became central to the CCC's political analysis. The Montreal New World Group paralleled and complemented the work of the CCC and several of its members were also actively involved in the group, but the CCC's emphasis on self-organization is perhaps the main ingredient that separated them from New World's more economics-based approach. The CCC also collaborated with Facing Reality, the Detroit-based Marxist group that was co-founded by James, distributed James' various books and pamphlets, and helped publish some of his more obscure works, including one of his most important books, *Notes on Dialectics* (Hill, 1970; James, 1986, p. 64).

The CCC produced its own publications: three bulletins – *Caribbean Symposium: The West Indian Nation in Exile* (6-8 October, 1967), *Caribbean Conference Bulletin* (September 1967), *Caribbean Conference* (October 1967) – and, under its new name, Caribbean Nation, the journal *Caribbean International Opinion* (October 1968). While the bulletins chronicled the group's events and included short articles, *Caribbean International Opinion* situated the Caribbean within a global context through its historical essays on slavery and the Haitian Revolution, the French Revolution, as well as articles on contemporary issues such as racism in Canada, France in 1968, and the Vietnam War.

This much-neglected group also attempted to influence official Caribbean politics. In 1966 it presented a brief to Caribbean heads of government during the Canada-Commonwealth Caribbean Conference in Ottawa (July 1966), and the group's influence extended beyond its immediate activities. Former CCC members played key roles in two watershed events in the history of Blacks in Canada – the 1968 Congress of Black Writers and the 1969 Sir George Williams Affair. A scandal involving an FBI *agent provocateur* on loan to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police – sent to spy on former CCC member Rosie Douglas – played a significant role in the establishment of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (McQuaig, 1981). Members of the group were also instrumental in establishing several important New Left groups in Jamaica, Antigua, and Trinidad, and played a crucial role in the early stages of the Grenada Revolution. In short, the CCC was critical to many of the most noteworthy events in the history of Blacks in Canada, and in the history of the Anglophone Caribbean.

My point in describing the group's work is not to provide a litany of activities and achievements, although the CCC represents a prime example of what a small organized and focused group can achieve. The chief concern here is

with the group's approach to education. Its activities were designed to educate Caribbean people and the general public about Caribbean culture and politics in a way that could not be carried out in a classroom. They were designed to engage their audience politically, although the group was by no means anti-academic. Rather, they recognized the limits of their formal training and that as community educators and organizers, initially in Canada and eventually in the Caribbean, education, by necessity, extended well beyond the academy. As I have mentioned, almost all of the group's members were students at the time. But, given their particular political interests, their formal study was inadequate. As a result, their "informal" study became central to their work, so much so that in the case of Tim Hector, it almost cost him his coveted degree (Hector, circa 1966).

Caribbean fiction, history, and politics, including the Cuban Revolution, were the main focus of their work, but the group also followed developments in the United States, Europe, and Africa with keen interest. Their reading list was eclectic. In addition to James they read Caribbean writers such as George Lamming and Wilson Harris alongside Hegel, Marx, and Lenin. They also studied and critiqued the writings of Shakespeare, Rousseau, Jean-Paul Sartre, Raya Dunayevskaya, and Herbert Marcuse alongside Fanon and Malcolm X. Their informal reading overlapped with their university studies. For Hector, a philosophy student at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, this involved challenging one of his professors over the ideas of Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset's apparent denigration of "masses" (Hector, circa 1966), and for Hill, who studied political science, the study of Heraclitus and Greek 'polarity' at the University of Toronto illuminated his reading of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, Marx, and ultimately the ideas of James (Hill, 1966). In their day, these were among the thinkers that captured their imagination. Today that list would look different. But the point here is less about content and more about process. CCC members did not simply read texts as texts. They engaged them and discussed and debated their ideas among themselves. In *A View for Freedom*, (2005) Alfie Roberts described this process:

I was in constant communication with people like Franklyn [Harvey] and Tim [Hector] and there would be endless exchanges on different questions. If you were not sure you ran home to your books and checked. So we never really adopted any dogmatic positions. Once I figured I wasn't sure I ran to my books and then came back and said "so and so and so". We were practicing that type of open, democratic way of conversing and doing things.

Eventually we started to embark on other activities and we cultivated other relations in Montreal outside of ourselves. You need to have contact with people because it is only by interacting with a wider group of people that you get to understand humanity in a more comprehensive sense and make assessments... much more profoundly than if you didn't interact with people. So we consciously sought that type of extension of our activities outside the university as well. (p. 72, 73)

Roberts makes a number of important points. First he talks about education as a process of constant dialogue in which ideas are discussed and debated. They engaged and challenged one another without fear of disagreement. Disagreement was not something to avoid, but a component part of their education and evolution. Second, the group made a consistent effort to clarify its ideas, not only through discussion and debate, but by verifying facts and complementing their own observations with additional reading. Third, Roberts describes the group's discussions as open and democratic, suggesting that participation involved actively contributing ideas, and active listening. In the second part of the quote, Roberts speaks about the links that he and other members of the group made outside of the university environment, and beyond the Caribbean community, a process which, as they forged ties with the various groups from Africa, Asia, and eventually Indigenous Peoples and Quebec nationalists, no doubt put a human face to what they read. For Robert Hill (2005), the Vietnam struggle was "among the greatest events of the twentieth-century" and played a crucial role in the formation of his generation's political consciousness (p. 100). CCC members were wholly supportive of the Vietnamese struggle against U.S. imperialism and Tim Hector became somewhat of a prominent figure on the anti-Vietnam War lecture circuit. Hector (2002) has described how, in his attempt to understand the conflict, he spoke to as many Vietnamese as he could find: "Every South East Asian student or worker I met I plied with questions aplenty. Some got sick of me," he recalls, but history "is best understood by learning from those who experience it." It was partly through this kind of process that the group developed a body of ideas which not only found a place in their publications, but later became an integral part of their praxis.

Reflecting on his experience within the CCC and the C.L.R. James Study Circle while living in Canada, Hill (2009) recently remarked: "Education was preparation to take part and play a role in the new stage of Caribbean history... more specifically, the next stage in the centuries-long struggle of the Caribbean people for freedom, dignity, and nationhood." Hill continues: "To undertake this role outside the Caribbean... these students launched a series of community-based initiatives that were both a defence of their community as well as a testing of their intellectual cultural resources. They had one great advantage," he goes on, "namely, they saw no distinction between the campus and the community and they based their actions on this mutual convergence of interest." Once again we witness the selfless preoccupation with education, education for a higher purpose than professional advancement. CCC members were educating themselves for their community, at home and abroad, and their primary concern was with the Caribbean's marginalized and neglected, the underclass, and with the fundamental role that this group plays within a given transformative process. This was "education for liberation" and in this sense they epitomized Antonio Gramsci's "organic intellectual" (Gramsci, 1980, pp. 5-6).

Much of the CCC's discussion and debate unfolded in the form of letters, a form of communication that, with the advent of the Internet, with all of its laudable benefits, is becoming somewhat of a lost art. Given that the group's members lived in various cities in Canada, letters became one of their preferred mediums of exchange. And their correspondence represents some of their most lucid writing as, unconstrained by the strictures of formal academic writing, they felt free to explore, imagine, and project in confidence and without fear of sanction. In one exchange that involved Hector, Roberts, Martin Glaberman, the veteran Marxist and longtime associate of C.L.R. James, and the Marxist theorist Raya Dunayevskaya of *News and Letters*, they grappled with the Cuban Revolution and, through it, the vicissitudes of revolutionary politics. According to Hector (1966), Cuba's leadership had failed to live up to its promise. It led the country above the heads of the population and for the vast majority of Cubans, the Revolution was like a parade passing them by. Dunayevskaya (1967) agreed with Hector's views and encouraged Roberts - who adamantly supported the Revolution, championed the leadership of Fidel Castro, and argued that steps were being made to address what might be described as its birth pangs (Roberts, 1967) - to temper his enthusiasm for the Revolution, lest he be disappointed with its ultimate outcome. Glaberman (1967) also cautioned Roberts against over-exuberance, but he too expressed his admiration for Castro's leadership and Cuba's achievements after only eight years and begged the question, to what extent are the Revolution's shortcomings attributable to the menacing, destabilizing U.S. presence in Cuba.

Here the point is not to determine who was right and wrong within this debate, although it is noteworthy that Hector became one of the strongest supporters of the Cuban Revolution when he returned to the Caribbean. Whether in letter form or during their meetings, education for CCC members was, to borrow from, and slightly distort, the ideas of the celebrated philosopher of education for liberation, Paulo Freire (2000), a dialogical process (pp. 87-95). Their dialogues and debates were part of the push and pull process through which they clarified their thoughts.

Much of what we learned about the CCC and C.L.R. James in the early 1990s came directly from one of its former members, Alfie Roberts, who lived and worked in Montreal and was a constant presence at community and political gatherings. Roberts was always willing to share both his vast organizational experience and the accumulated knowledge one acquires from both being actively involved in a community over several decades, and voluminous reading. As we traveled our own road, we also encountered countless individuals who had committed themselves to social and political change. And as we grappled with the world around us, this experience was formative and we gained tremendous insight into how to approach the issues that preoccupied us at that historical moment. Decades have passed since the CCC folded, but the need for the kind of education described in this article persists. The rioting and

protest in Montréal-Nord following the August 2008 police shooting of 18 year-old Freddie Villanueva highlights the palpable sense of marginalization and alienation that youth – and particularly people of colour – feel in this society. Inadequate schools, high unemployment, police brutality, harassment and violence, and institutional racism define much of their existence. But how do they – how do *we* make sense of this condition? How do we analyze and assess it in a way that permits us to work towards changing the deep-seated social, historical, and structural factors of which this condition is a concrete manifestation?

Theory, at its best, is a powerful social and political tool. Far from being abstract, theory is congealed experience which, in a concentrated form, can bring years of accumulated knowledge to bear on a particular issue or cause and help to prevent strategic mishaps. In my view, the wedding of theory and practice – engaged study, theoretical and otherwise, of the issues involved, combined with, and informed by, concrete actions, and vice-versa; drawing on experiences of the past in order to inform our understanding of the present as we assess the prospects for the kind of change that is not simply desirable, but necessary if we are to combat the socio-economic and environmental catastrophes that even some of the most conservative observers are now forced to acknowledge – this is perhaps where we begin. Our experience in the early 1990s taught us that the world is our classroom, a place full of ideas and possibilities, and that history is replete with examples of how, even during – and often as a result of – deep-seated crisis, change is eminently possible.

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