Bunce, Robin, and Paul Field. "Know Yourself." *Darcus Howe: A Political Biography*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. 43–50. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472544407.ch-003>>.

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Know Yourself

The year 1968, designated by the United Nations as the International Year of Human Rights, is better remembered as a year of revolution. There were barricades in Paris, riots broke out in the American ghettos in response to the murder of Martin Luther King, the Prague Spring rocked Soviet control of Eastern Europe; for a while at least it seemed that anything was possible. The end of 1968 was a turning point for Howe. He had applied to study philosophy at York and, after a successful interview, was set to begin his degree in October. Howe felt deeply that he needed to pursue further study. The decision to apply to study philosophy was not dilettantism on his part, but an aspect of his emerging understanding of revolution. Already Howe had arrived at the view that radical action must be disciplined by reason. Studying philosophy was a step towards a broader social objective. And yet, he was unsure. He had seen the baleful impact of academic philosophy on the student revolutionaries in Paris. On the one hand, discussion of Camus had become a substitute for genuine revolutionary action, and on the other, students who had mastered the Western philosophical canon saw themselves as superior to factory workers by virtue of their education. And yet his experience of British black nationalism, Egbuna's thoughtless rhetoric and Michael X's unprincipled hustling were equally unappealing. Howe was in search of the virtue between two vices: a philosophy rooted in reality that would lead to social change, rather than the academic learning of the French students or the brash, erratic posturing of Britain's black nationalists.

Howe found his *via media* through his friendship with C. L. R. James. Re-establishing his relationship with James was the turning point, for it led to a momentous decision to abandon formal study, sell his house and travel to Canada in pursuit of Black Power (Howe 2011b).

The 'University of Willesden'

I was never heading for Black Nationalism, it [politics] always had to do with thought. . . . I met Nelo at a time when I could have gone to University and had all of that shattered, but I met a walking University in Willesden.

(Howe 2011b)

Howe had broken off his legal studies in the early 1960s. However, by 1968, he felt the need to continue with his education. Queen's Royal College (QRC) had provided him with a world-class education, but he felt that he needed to go beyond that. His initial plan was to study philosophy at York. There were two hurdles before he was accepted, an interview with Laurie Taylor and an essay. The first went well. The second was more problematic. He was required to write a piece on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Howe freely admits that the book made no sense to him whatsoever. His abiding memory of Wittgenstein was the feeling that 'this fucking man needs a psychiatrist!'. Nonetheless, Howe was a proficient writer and was able to turn out an essay good enough to secure a place on the course. In spite of his early involvement in politics, Howe was still toying with the idea of entering a traditional profession, and as a proficient linguist with some legal training, he thought that the degree might lead on to a job in diplomacy (Howe 2011b).

Accepted on the course, Howe was due to start his degree in October 1968, but events late in the summer changed his mind. Ever since arriving in Britain, Howe had been intending to seek out James. The last time he had seen his grandmother prior to leaving for Britain, she had given him one piece of advice, 'Make sure you go and see Uncle Nelo, you will never regret it.' The advice obviously made an impact, as Howe read *The Black Jacobins* soon after his arrival in Britain. 'I didn't put it down for days,' he recalls. Meeting James was a different matter. He had no address for his great-uncle so re-establishing contact was all but impossible. Yet, a chance meeting changed things. As luck would have it, Howe and James both boarded the same underground train heading north from Baker Street on the Bakerloo Line. Howe was travelling to Finchley Road, James to his home in Willesden. Once again Howe was struck by the fact that James treated him as an equal and was interested in his ideas and activities. As they parted, James invited Howe to visit him at his house on Staverton Road in Willesden Green.

At the time, Howe knew little of his great-uncle philosophy other than *The Black Jacobins*. He had heard from a friend that James was a 'communist',

but that was the extent of his knowledge. That said, once they met, there was an immediate affinity between the two men, a similarity of instinct and concern. They were separated by half a century, yet shared the experience of being brought up in Trinidad, of education at QRC, a love of literature and a love of cricket. The two soon became friends. To Howe, it was more than that. He describes the impression that his great-uncle made on him thus: 'Its remarkable how he sees through you, not in an offensive way, he knows who you are.' QRC had honed Howe's ability to reason, but he only learnt to know himself with James.

Like any friendship, Howe's relationship with James was multifaceted. Soon they were meeting every day. Sometimes, Howe ran errands for James, buying him cigarettes or whatever else he was short of. The two men had a similar sense of humour. 'CLR James' Howe recalls, 'a kind of cynical wit, he would laugh at his own jokes! He was funny! Very, very funny!'. James was always asking questions and was always interested in Howe's life and his experiences. More often than not, conversation turned to politics and sometimes to race. Why race? 'You can't choose your terrain, and you can't choose your issue,' opines Howe, 'but race here returned with a vengeance.' Whether it was remarks made by Enoch Powell in the press, the persecution of black radicals by the police, the legacy of colonialism in Africa and the Caribbean or day-to-day harassment on the streets of Notting Hill, racism was the problem that would not go away. The two would talk about how to deal with the issue. Was black nationalism the right way forward? What about the energies of moderates like David Pitt? What role did the British working class have to play in the struggle for freedom? Where was the battle against racism to be fought, in Britain, America, the Caribbean or Africa? They also talked more generally about Howe's plans and the prospect of studying philosophy at the University of York.

Late 1968 and early 1969 were an extraordinary period in Howe's intellectual development. Looking back, he remarks: 'I did my post-grad with James!'. The metaphor is a good one, because at the post-graduate level, no one has a monopoly on expertise, student and supervisor are forging a new path together into an intellectual *terra incognita*. Indeed, as Howe recalls, James was never didactic in any traditional sense. Rather, he encouraged Howe to read and, through a Socratic method of questioning and discussion to think out loud, to reach his own conclusions. There was also an intellectual rigour to these discussions. Howe recalls that 'his debriefings were the most fantastic thing to witness, and the most terrifying thing to go through; because the questions were so ordinary – they appeared ordinary – and he would get it all out of you in a relaxed way. He

was never into, “What do you believe about that?” – No.’ James asked apparently prosaic questions. What year did Howe start QRC? Did he play cricket? What books did he enjoy? He took Howe’s reading and intellectual life for granted.

Howe also uses the metaphor of a journey to describe the period. The insights that came from this friendship with James should not be understood as a conversion experience or as an intellectual epiphany. Howe was already on a journey and his direction was already set. ‘He wasn’t recruiting a revolutionary; he wasn’t doing that at all. He could see the instinct in the things that I would say, and I knew I needed to educate myself beyond QRC.’ James did not alter his trajectory, he ‘caught me going somewhere’.

James was always encouraging Howe to read, to know himself through reading. They read together. They read the last three chapters of Marx’s *Capital*, examining the way in which work organizes and disciplines the working class. They read Fanon’s *A Dying Colonialism* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, considering the brutality of French colonialism and the evolution of revolutionary violence. They also read parts of *Black Reconstruction in America* by W. E. B. Du Bois. One passage they looked at together stood out:

This the American black man knows: his fight here is a fight to the finish. Either he dies or wins. If he wins it will be by no subterfuge or evasion of amalgamation. He will enter modern civilization here in America as a black man on terms of perfect and unlimited equality with any white man or he will enter not at all. Either extermination root and branch, or absolute equality. There can be no compromise. This is the last great battle of the west.

(Du Bois 1977: 703)

This notion of fighting for the right to participate in society on the basis of absolute equality chimed with Howe’s fundamental political commitments.¹

Perhaps the two most important books that he read during this period were penned by James himself. First was *Modern Politics*, a collection of six lectures given in Trinidad in 1960, which were subsequently suppressed by the Eric Williams’ government and only published in 1973. The first two chapters set out the history of a universal struggle from the democracy of ancient Athens and the Paris Commune to the failure of the Second International. The lectures were not written to undercut the black nationalism that emerged in Britain during the 1960s but their universalism underlined Howe’s distrust of the nationalist aspects of the black radicalism that he had been exposed to through Egbuna’s writings in Britain or Karenga’s in America. The second was *Facing Reality*, a book written by James with contributions by Cornelius Castoriadis. The book,

which dealt with the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, had a renewed relevance, given the events of the Prague Spring and May '68 which, like events in Hungary before it, pitted democratic socialism against the authoritarian Stalinism of the orthodox left. Section four of *Facing Reality* directly addressed some of the burning issues that the events of 1968 had raised in Howe's mind, specifically, the relationship between philosophy and revolution, and the immediate issue of the value of a philosophy degree.

Section four of *Facing Reality* argues that the dominant tradition of Western philosophy has ceased to be of value as a guide to action. Discussing two contemporary schools of philosophical thought, James argues:

These learned obscurantists and wasters of paper are of value in that they signify the end of a whole stage in the intellectual history of mankind. Philosophy as such has come to an end.

(James et al. 1974: 65)

James did not write off all philosophy by any means. He argues that the tradition from Plato to Hegel was of considerable value. Classical, medieval and even modern philosophers could not reconcile the competing demands of the classes struggling with one another – no philosophy could do this. But they could expose the 'old and rotten' (Ibid., 66) and in so doing, clear away the dogmas that stood in the way of progress. They could also provide a degree of liberation and foster a worldview conducive to scientific advancement and the emergence of modern democracy. That said, following Marx, he argued that the emergence of capitalism and the growth of the modern proletariat rendered traditional philosophy redundant. First, James argued, the modern intellectual elite was no longer advancing human liberation; rather it sided with the interests of the wealthy. Secondly, the working class now understood reality with greater clarity than any number of philosophers. In sum, philosophy, in the traditional sense, had ceased to be an instrument of social progress; humanity needed to look to the actions of the working class to resolve the contradictions of the modern world. James' words provided an intellectual underpinning to a truth that Howe had already learnt through his experience of the poverty of the philosophical revolutionaries in France.

In *Modern Politics* and *Facing Reality*, James drew together the wellsprings of Howe's intellectual world. *Modern Politics* began with the Bible, a book that Howe had come to know well through his father, the church and Sunday school. *Facing Reality*'s critique of contemporary philosophy explored the significance of Descartes' 'I think therefore I am', the unofficial slogan of Howe's education at

QRC, arguing that Descartes' formulation was the foundation of 'the expansion of individual personality and human powers through the liberation of the intellect,' the philosophical foundation, in other words, of the modern democratic impulse (Ibid., 67–8).

While stressing that James never 'propagandized' him, Howe nevertheless quickly grasped a series of foundational approaches to politics. Though Howe had an intuitive sense of them from growing up in Trinidad, James was able to draw out and crystallize their significance. First, James rejected the notion of the vanguard party. Lenin had put forward this notion in 1902, arguing that in the face of the Tsarist police state, a mass party could have no hope of effecting revolutionary change. The idea had been revived after Lenin's death to justify the dominant role of the Communist Party in Russia. In its Stalinist form, it asserted the primacy of the professional intellectual over the passive working class. James had decisively rejected this idea in the 1950s while studying Hegel's dialectic.

Despite his own education in the elite QRC, Howe understood that there was a natural egalitarianism about the working-class culture of Trinidad, for while Trinidad's working class respected education, there was no desire to defer to the learned. Indeed, there was an instinctive suspicion of anyone who sought to raise themselves up above the people and lead. Howe described the process which shaped his view in the following terms: 'in Trinidad and the Caribbean people have a tendency not to genuflect before leaders. So that was spontaneous, I learnt that empirically as I went along with my ordinary life.' Reading James brought out the political significance of these early experiences:

When I read *Facing Reality* by CLR James, and *Modern Politics*, those two books made it clear that this kind of "I know therefore I lead" . . . the ordinary working person in the Caribbean, descendants of slaves, they weren't putting up with that.

(Howe 2011b)

James' rejection of the vanguard party was, however, only part of the picture. As well as a negative, James provided a positive that had a lasting influence on Howe. Howe encountered one formulation of James' view in Section Six of *Facing Reality*:

- (a) All development takes place as a result of self-movement, not organization or direction by external forces.
- (b) Self-movement springs from and is the overcoming of antagonisms within an organism, not the struggle against external foes.

(James et al. 1974: 105)

These were James' conclusions, based on his readings of Hegel's work on the dialectic. Hegel, for James, constituted the end of Western philosophy. For James, it is the people then, and not the leaders, who make history, the people move when they are ready to move, irrespective of the leader's admonitions. Crucially, for Howe this perspective 'cures that disease of the political leader and the vanguard party'. Howe summarized James' thoughts on the dialectic in the following phrase, which was to become his slogan: 'All movement comes from self movement and not from external forces acting on the organism.'

Note

- 1 Some of the flavour of Howe's 'debriefings' with James is captured in the reading lists published in *The Black Eagle* and in *Black Dimension*. *The Black Eagle* prefaced the reading list with the Socratic advice, 'HELP YOURSELF – KNOW YOURSELF – BUY AND READ' (GPI JOU 35/3, 5). The final reading list contained much that Howe had read with James, including works by Fanon, Du Bois and James himself.