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## George Padmore and Modernity in the Postcolony: Leslie James's *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below*

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George Padmore and Modernity in the Postcolony: Leslie James's *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below*.

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Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the End of Empire* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 274pp.

When I first began seriously studying the major figures of the black radical tradition, I was struck by how little had been written on George Padmore. The basic facts of his life were well known. Born Malcolm Nurse in Trinidad, he became a Communist in the United States before eventually breaking with Moscow over his anti-imperialist commitments; he was a central figure in London's anticolonial circles, mentoring young African radicals, in particular Kwame Nkrumah, who would return to his native Gold Coast and lead the British colony to independence; and at Nkrumah's invitation, Padmore moved to Ghana to serve as his advisor. At the time, there was only James Hooker's 1967 biography, *Black Revolutionary: George Padmore's Path from Communism to Pan-Africanism*, which covered Padmore's life in broad strokes, though his sense of two distinct Padmores, one a Marxist, the other Pan-Africanist, missed how Padmore never made such a clear distinction in his writings and activities. In 2009, Fitzroy Baptiste and Rupert Lewis published the collection of essays *George Padmore: Pan-African Revolutionary*, which presented a range of scholarly treatments of Padmore that reveal a complex political figure. Susan Pennybacker's work and my own both deal with rather brief slices of his life; Carol Polsgrove offers a more sustained look at his political journalism, while Hakim Adi's recent work on pan-Africanism and the Comintern offers possibly the most complete account of his activities as a Communist in Europe. Despite this ever growing body of work, there remains a great deal to be told.

Leslie James's *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the End of Empire*, augments what we know about Padmore with possibly the most sweeping account of his political thinking and his work with Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana. The result of years of research in a range of archives in several countries, James's book departs from the conventions of biography in order to pay particular attention to how Padmore approached postcolonial governance at the dawn of African and Caribbean independence. Impressive in its reach and ambition, she asks that we consider "the full extent of Padmore's ideological position, his methodological practice, and the significance of his political career across the decades of decolonization in Africa, the

Caribbean, and Asia” (196). Effectively moving beyond a narrow reading that would take the pan-Africanism of his later years as explaining his entire life, James instead presents a portrait of an activist intellectual whose nimble mind remained “engaged in a political and social project of movement that did not slow near the end of his life” (196).

Spread over eight chapters, James begins her work by sketching the intellectual and social terrain of the Trinidad into which Malcolm Nurse was born. Chapters 1 and 2 lay particular emphasis on his intellectual background and the social environments he moved within, but the pace of the narrative in these chapters truncates the details of his life up to the mid-1930s. This is somewhat understandable given the amount of detail about his early life in several recent studies, though it might have helped to have seen a more explicit treatment of how his thinking responded to and grew out of the social worlds and organizational activities of these years. James intriguingly suggests that Padmore’s intellectual activism was informed, at least in part, by his decision to come to the U.S. Unlike some of his Caribbean contemporaries, like C.L.R. James or George Lamming, who went to England to become writers, Padmore came to the U.S. “to train for a profession” (23). He may have left Trinidad with no intention of engaging in activism, but it seems that something about the circumstances at Fisk, the people he encountered, the environment he entered into, had a profound impact on his outlook. The narrative moves equally as swiftly over the details of his various organizational and political involvements and personal relationships in the United States, charting in broad outline his drift toward the U.S. Communist Party (where he assumed the name George Padmore), his ascent within the Comintern to head its Negro Bureau, and ultimately as time as head of the International Trade Union Committee for Negro Workers in Hamburg, Germany, where he would stay until 1933, when the rise of Hitler and the Nazis led to his arrest and deportation to England, where he eventually broke with Stalin’s Comintern.

The narrative slows considerably by Chapter 3, as it turns explicitly to Padmore’s political thinking about the end of Britain’s colonial empire. James identifies a general transformation in Padmore that occurred during World War II, as he focused on the “cultivation of a more liberal, ‘respectable’ network that could bring enhanced legitimacy to the broad anti-colonial coalition he was working to create” (48). It was in this context that he developed a mode of activism where “writing was a form of action” that involved “the application of ideas into practice” (11). Part of Padmore’s pedagogical practice included mentoring young African radicals who made their way to his London flat at 22 Cranleigh House. It was in this context that he began to cultivate a “respectable” network of African leaders able to operate within the rapidly changing post-WWII terrain of the Cold War, decolonization, and radical independence movements

(49). James argues that the central paradox confronting Padmore concerned how a program for black liberation centered on a transnational vision could coalesce within the contingencies of an independent nation-state with its own nationalist narrative and project (13). Certainly, by the 1940s he had become preoccupied with questions of independence, governance and political power, cultivating a vanguard leadership, and how best to gain control of the machineries of state. To help explain this transformation and how it manifested in his activism, James focuses in chapter 4 on Padmore's journalism and more scholarly works as the medium through which he addressed these questions. Yet, Padmore did not work in isolation, he wrote within a particular anticolonial milieu, specifically London from the 1930s to the 1950s, where in such groups as the International African Service Bureau, the Pan-African Federation, and through organizing the 1945 Pan-African Congress, Padmore engaged intellectually with people like Amy Ashwood Garvey, C.L.R. James, I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson, Ralph Bunche, and Jomo Kenyatta. It would have been helpful to have some sense of how his thinking grew from those interactions, as well as from his relationships with the Indian radicals Krishna Menon, K.D. Kumira, Mulk Raj Anan.

In chapter 5, we encounter Padmore the organizer and thinker. James dispenses with any notion that Padmore had rejected communism, pointing out that while he was a staunch anti-Stalinist, he nonetheless considered the Soviet Union a socialist workers' state. Such a distinction, however strategic it may have been in an emerging Cold War context, may have drawn too fine a line between Stalinist totalitarianism and the Soviet state. Padmore was attempting to reconcile his continued commitment to socialism with the reality that a proletarian revolution, which so many Communists and Socialists at the time believed lay just on the horizon of war torn Europe, never came. Britain's empire may have been weakened, but it remained intact, and it was in this context that Padmore, as James rightly points out, began to think about national independence as coming not through revolution, but politics. In chapter 6, she argues that Padmore's attention turned to cultivating British opinion in support of colonial self-government, his singular focus on the Gold Coast "a calculated convergence upon a region he believed to be the most fertile ground for promoting colonial solidarity, among a group of people best placed to negotiate independence from their imperial ruler" (132). To his mind, the Gold Coast also offered the best possibility of realizing Pan-African unity and implementing socialist development strategies in Africa. Still, as it was for many anticolonial radicals, postcolonial independence meant far more than merely controlling the mechanism of government (157). The task confronting the postcolonial state, as C.L.R. James

famously put it in 1963, was to offer something *new* to humanity, lest independence become “a mere administrative convenience.”<sup>1</sup>

James turns her attention in chapters 7 and 8 to what this something *new* meant to Padmore. She follows historian Frederick Cooper in confining herself to what modernity meant to Padmore, how he “struggled with the idea” in thinking about political rule in Ghana, rather than pursue what Cooper dismissively calls “scholar’s modernity,” by which he means “modernity as an analytic category” (156). While this is helpful in flushing out the complexities of Padmore’s thought, a more critical approach to modernity itself would have helped make better sense of the consequences of how he understood modernity. Like many anticolonial radicals, Padmore condemned colonialism as an anti-modern force “retarding the economic development of Africa, and the cultural progress of the Africans” (156), a view that broke with an earlier generation who believed that attaining the cultural markers of modernity (education, values, dress) demonstrated one’s equality with Europeans, while also holding African societies and peoples in contempt. Thus, when James points out that to Padmore modernity meant “economic progress, organizational institutions, and industrial and technological development” (159), she also reveals an understanding of modernity that operates on specific cultural registers.

This is where an analysis of modernity would have helped make better sense of Padmore’s seeming contradictions while he worked in Nkrumah’s government to institute socialist development policies in Ghana. As historian Odd Arne Westad has argued, the Cold War involved a conflict between “two opposing versions of European modernist thought,”<sup>2</sup> a conflict over approaches to freedom, self-determination, and social justice in the decolonizing world. In other words, both were committed to the enlightenment ideals central to modernity. As James acknowledges, Padmore distinguished between what he saw as a pre-modern Africa and modern Europe, a point that she presents as disconnected from his commitment to a Soviet-style modernity where a charismatic leader (Kwame Nkrumah) would lead the postcolonial state through the aegis of a vanguard party. Padmore, as did other anticolonial activists of his generation, considered the Soviet Union “one tool in his arsenal to attack European colonial rule and Western racism,” and in particular believed the Soviet stance of national liberation “challenged the idea that colonial peoples could not become ‘modern’” (110). Implicit in such a strategy, however, was his sense of Africa as a constellation of “backward,” pre-modern societies. In his most well-known work, *Pan-Africanism of Communism?*, Padmore identified industrialization and “the

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<sup>1</sup> C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1963, reprint New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 417.

<sup>2</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4

stimulus of Western political ideas and technocracy” as the only forces that could “liberate the Africans from their conservative traditions and prejudices” and break the hold of “tribal mores and customs” that continued to stall “the dynamism necessary to modernization and progress.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as he explained at independence, a socialist Ghana would mean “creating a new type of human society” that would inspire “our brothers who are still struggling to free themselves from foreign rule and alien domination” (168). In order to build a modern African nation, he intended to cultivate a younger generation of enlightened African nationalists who could break free of an older, tribal leadership and tradition-bound modes of authority (180)

To think about George Padmore as a Caribbean radical who brought with him to Ghana a lifetime of political organizing and, it would seem from James’ study, a rather diminutive view of Africa that was also common among African Americans in this era, we should be careful not to gloss these rather troubling aspects of his political commitments. Whether Padmore’s understanding of modernity contributed to or encouraged Nkrumah’s drift toward authoritarian rule in Ghana is difficult to know. Without taking up this questions, James invites us to ask whether such ideas lend themselves to the problems of political power in the postcolony. Rather than conceive of the something *new* in a way similar to C.L.R. James or Amílcar Cabral, both of whom sought to move beyond the liberal democratic nation-state, Padmore’s thinking seemed to resemble Norman Manley’s sense of that the task confronting Jamaica on the eve of independence was how to develop cultivate a modern, educated citizenry, or as Manley put it, developing “the backward peoples” so that they could “stand at any real status alongside those who have gone ahead.”<sup>4</sup> While we might inquire about how much Padmore’s understanding of modernity informed the more troubling aspects of Nkrumah’s rule in Ghana, it is clear that the belief in developing backward peoples or societies, often a radical postcolonial project to be guided by an enlightened vanguard, often came to similarly tragic ends, as was the case with the New Jewel Movement in Grenada.

*George Padmore and Decolonization from Below* brings all of these issues to the fore, presenting readers with possibly the fullest, most compelling view yet of a radical African diasporic thinker whose life and thought have been horribly neglected. While subsequent works might give greater attention to the details of Padmore’s early life in Trinidad and the U.S., or his organizing activities, or personal relationships, James has provided us with a robust discussion of his ideas that has pushed us further along the road of grappling with the central

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<sup>3</sup> George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism? The Coming Struggle for Africa* (London: Dobson Publishers, 1956), 373.

<sup>4</sup> Norman Manley quoted in Anthony Bogues, “Politics, Nation, and PostColony: Caribbean Inflections,” *Small Axe* 11 (2002): 8.

problematics confronting the postcolony, African or otherwise. While it misses the opportunity to explicitly engage with the larger questions about the specter of modernity in black radical thought and how its assumptions and enlightenment ideals permeate, and thereby delimit both liberal and socialist influenced liberatory projects—an engagement one expects given the text’s ambitious title—what *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below* nonetheless necessarily and productively sets the stage for any serious future study of Padmore and the black radical tradition.

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