THE BLACK JACOBINS
READER

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Cover art: François Cauvin, *Toussaint L'Ouverture*, 2009. Cauvin depicts Louverture wearing a guinea fowl as a cap. This is Cauvin's reference to the history of the guinea fowl, or *pintade*, as a symbol of Haitian resistance to slavery.

5 | *The Black Jacobins*, Past and Present

SELMA JAMES

In 1804 the independent republic of Haiti was born. Seizing on the revolution in France, the slaves had taken their freedom and gotten revolutionary Paris to ratify it. But as the French Revolution's power waned, to prevent slavery's return the Haitians had to defeat the armies of Spain and Britain as well as Napoleon. Amazingly, they did.

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The Black Jacobins, published in 1938, was part of the massive working-class movement of the 1930s in many countries, including in the British West Indies. Its impact has been overshadowed by World War II, which it tried but failed to prevent (including trying to defeat Hitler in Spain in 1936–1938) and then the movement of the 1960s, which built on the 1930s and the experience of world war. The book was a contribution to the movement for colonial freedom—for Africa first of all, when few considered this possible. (A quarter of a century later, Ian Smith of apartheid Rhodesia was still able to say he could not conceive of Black majority rule "for a thousand years.")

The book came from the pen of an anti-imperialist campaigner who was also a leader of the Trotskyist movement in Britain; not long after, he began to break with its premises. But both framed the book.

By 1963, an exploding anti-imperialist movement and the civil rights movement in the United States had created a new market for republication after years out of print.

Between 1938 and 1963, it had been read and studied first of all by colonials in the English-speaking and French-speaking Caribbean islands (in the translation by C. L. R.'s Trotskyist comrade Pierre Naville).[1] Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire probably read it. Trinidadians told us in the late 1950s that *The Black Jacobins* had sustained them trying to build not only the movement

for independence but an anticapitalist youth movement. People from the Pan Africanist Congress in South Africa told us in the 1960s that they had typed and copied sections for comrades to read clandestinely. It must have been known to people in the colonies wherever English was a second language. In 2011 when former Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide returned home from exile in South Africa, he told me that *The Black Jacobins* had put Haiti on the map; people didn't know where it was before. He also told me that former South African president Thabo Mbeki said he knew they would win against apartheid when he read *The Black Jacobins*.

The book was called on when the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, whose destructive power was increased manifold by dire poverty,[2] reignited interest in Haiti and its revolutionary past. Many who wanted to know who Haitians were seem to have turned to *The Black Jacobins*, the classic history of the revolution the slaves made.

Later research has added substantially to our information and therefore our understanding of the revolution, but this has not challenged its classic status. It's worth asking why.

First, C. L. R. stands uncompromisingly with the slaves. Now we read about "partisan historical scholarship"; the historian was expected to be "neutral," especially seventy-five years ago—that is, not on the side of the subversives. In academia, few ignored that then or ignore it now. They did not commit themselves entirely to the slaves. Even today most historians find it hard to call the revolution anything more profound than a revolt or rebellion—not to demean the significance or the courage and organization demanded by every rebellion (and there have been many), but a revolution is qualitatively broader and deeper—it overthrows the state.

C. L. R. has all the time in the world for antiracist whites who loved the revolution and its leaders, but his point of reference, particularly in the first ten chapters, is the struggle of those who were wresting themselves away from being the property of others. Above all the book recounts their determination to be free, whatever it took.

C. L. R. doesn't glamorize; rather, he demands that we see the slaves' actions from their point of view: "The slaves destroyed tirelessly. . . . And if they destroyed much it was because they had suffered much. They knew that as long as these plantations stood, their lot would be to labour on them until they dropped. The only thing was to destroy them."[3]

Nor does C. L. R. shield us from the terror and sadism of the "civilized" masters. But the catalog of tortures, rather than merely torturing the reader,

deepens our appreciation of the former slaves' power to endure and overcome, and their self-transformation from victim to protagonist. We are thrilled and inspired, learning from the Haitians' determination to be free what being human—and free—are about.

Second, Toussaint Louverture possessed all the skills of leadership the revolution needed. An uneducated, middle-aged Caribbean creole when the revolution began, he was soon able to handle sophisticated European diplomats and potentates who foolishly thought they could manipulate him because he was Black and had been a slave.

C. L. R. liked to say much later that while the establishment's authorized version of U.S. history was that Abraham Lincoln had freed the slaves, it was in fact the slaves who had freed Lincoln—presumably from his personal limitations and the conservative constraints of high office. Here C. L. R. says that "Toussaint did not make the revolution. It was the revolution that made Toussaint." Then he adds: "And even that is not the whole truth."[4]

In other words, while the movement chooses and educates its leadership, an observer is unlikely to trace this ongoing process however accurately events are recorded. We can be sure, however, that the great leader is never a "self-made man," free of the influence of those of us more lowly, as he or she is sometimes presented in an almost religious way. Leaders are a product of their individual talents and skills (and weaknesses), shaped by the power of the movement they lead in the course of social upheavals. The Haitian Jacobins chose and educated Toussaint Louverture, and he led them to where they had the will and determination to go—up to a point, which I touch on later.

This was groundbreaking considering that in 1938 there were and still are those organizations that claim that their vanguard leadership was crucial for a revolution's success. C. L. R. had something to do with the movement breaking free of such dangerous delusions. On the other hand, trying to avoid betrayal, many believe leadership is unnecessary and inevitably holds the movement back. In Haiti the slaves made the revolution, and Toussaint, one of them, played a vital role in their winning their freedom.

Third, C. L. R. compares the revolutionary slaves with how class is traditionally defined. They were not proletarians, "But working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar-factories which covered the North Plain, they were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time, and the rising was, therefore, a thoroughly prepared and organized mass movement."[5]

This is C. L. R. the Marxist rejecting rigid definitions of class. It was those who did collective forced labor who ensured collective planning of the insurrection. The result is to open further the question of how to define who is working class long before this was on the movement's political agenda. What about not only unwaged slaves but others who don't sell their labor power on the market—subsistence farmers (often women) and other unwaged women and men: Should they be excluded from definitions of who is a worker?

By the time he wrote the 1980 foreword, C. L. R. was more confident in his assertion. By then some of us in the women's movement had helped change the climate. And new research showed that the unwaged slaves were found to have made wage slave demands! "They wanted to have three days off from work or two and a half days or at least two days."[6] He refers to Haitian historian Jean Fouchard, who had found evidence also that as early as 1793 "black women dared to demand wages equal to those of the men."[7]

There is more to learn about these revolutionaries. In 1938 C. L. R. knew that the revolution was spearheaded by the Maroons, the runaway slaves, some of whom formed their own alternative fortified societies, which lasted for years and even decades. (The Brazilian Quilombo dos Palmares lasted almost a century.) C. L. R. tells us about François Mackandal, one of Haiti's great Maroon leaders and an enormously talented orator and organizer. Two things are of particular interest here. First, Mackandal was from Guinea, an African, not a creole born in the Caribbean. Second, "He was fearless and though one-handed from an accident, had a fortitude of spirit which he knew how to preserve in the midst of the most cruel tortures."[8] He had built an organization of slaves over six years to prepare for the murder of the entire white plantocracy.

Fouchard confirmed that it was the Maroons who had led the Haitian Revolution. C. L. R. made clear that overwhelmingly the slave population was, like Mackandal, African. "The enormous increase of slaves [due to a thriving economy and—not unconnected—to people being worked to death] was filling the colony with native Africans, more resentful, more intractable, more ready for rebellion than the creole Negro. Of the half-a-million slaves in the colony in 1789, more than two-thirds had been born in Africa."[9]

Fouchard's detailed research proves that the dominant force among the Maroons were the Africans who had made the Middle Passage. He is justifiably indignant that "Those who have previously studied the Maroons have not considered the runaway new Negroes [that is, new to Haiti and slavery] with the attention they deserved yet they are the most significant expression

of absolute refusal of the slavery they condemn." The new Negroes were "newly disembarked, ignorant of the language and the geography of the country" and thus "their necessary dependence for escape on accomplices."[10] That is, the Maroons must have organized to help those escaping—already revolutionary organizing.

Marcus Rediker indicates an early source of the slaves' collective rebellion. The slave ship was not only a chamber of horrors, a prison, a death trap but a training ground. Rediker indicates some of the ways that "a multiethnic mass of several hundred Africans, thrown together . . . learned to act collectively."[11] To do this, he says, they had to learn to cross language and culture divides among the various tribes and nations represented by the captive passengers.[12] Those who were more likely to survive the Middle Passage were the strongest, possibly the more able, and may have learned about organizing across divides. Wouldn't they most likely become runaways and join or form a Maroon encampment?

When C. L. R. first read Fouchard's book with its new and precise information, he was delighted. He thought it outdated *The Black Jacobins*: "It lasted for thirty-five years. That's long enough for any history book!"

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In chapter 11, *The Black Jacobins* takes a quite different turn. Slavery has been abolished but Haiti is still a French colony and will soon face the attempt of postrevolutionary France to reimpose it. While the story of the revolution expresses the movement of the 1930s, the story of postslavery, preindependent Haiti tells us what that movement had to confront.

C. L. R. must present Toussaint's clash with those he had led to victory. As with so much else, Haiti faced earlier than others all the problems of shaping its course following the overthrow of the state. Theirs is also the story of what happens to the leader who, having led the revolution, believes he knows better than his people what is best for their future.

We are told that to restore order from the chaos and blood-letting after years of war, Toussaint "instituted a military dictatorship."[13] This is a shock.

Worse follows. C. L. R. tells us that Toussaint believed the Haitian economy demanded the plantation system. "The ultimate guarantee of freedom was the prosperity of agriculture. This was Toussaint's slogan. The danger was that the blacks might slip into the practice of cultivating a small patch of land, producing just sufficient for their needs. He would not allow the old estates to be broken up."[14]

The 1930s had struggled to make sense of Stalin's forced collectivization in the Soviet Union. In that decade the world, and C. L. R. with it, had been shocked into slow recognition that forced labor could be imposed by the very organization that had led a revolution. How different was that from Toussaint reimposing the plantation system? We must bear in mind that Trotskyism, from which C. L. R. had not yet broken, characterized the Soviet Union of forced labor as a workers' state.[15]

> He confined the blacks to the plantation under rigid penalties. He was battling with the colossal task of transforming a slave population, after years of licence, into a community of free labourers and he was doing it in the only way he could see. On behalf of the labourers he saw to it that they were paid a quarter of the produce. This alone was sufficient to mark the change from the old to the new despotism.[16]

But it was despotism. After all, the revolution had begun by burning the plantations to the ground. Ultimately the laborers fought and won. How much do we know of the society that replaced the plantation? We are told:

> Left to themselves, the Haitian peasantry resuscitated to a remarkable degree the lives they had lived in Africa. Their method of cultivation, their family relations and social practices, their drums, songs and music, such art as they practiced and above all their religion which became famous, Vodun.[17]

If this is so, the Africans were likely to reproduce the communal societies they had brought with them; they knew only this and the hated slavery. The general view at the time (and even today) was that communal village life was "primitive" and had to be superseded for there to be progress. In the 1960s, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania had a different perspective. He characterized the village he had grown up in as "tribal socialism." It had weaknesses, he said, but with independence it could become the way Tanzania could develop, ending poverty and women's subordination while bypassing capitalism.[18] Of course we cannot say for sure, but it may well be that this was the course the population chose once they had won the right to do as they wished on the land.

For Toussaint, the French, not the Africans, had "civilization." Once Toussaint and the Black population diverge, C. L. R. had to choose his point of reference. It was not always the ex-slaves who provided his direction.

When C. L. R. tells us that Toussaint "had no interests apart from theirs," that is, the laborers,[19] it is unclear whether this is what Toussaint thinks or whether C. L. R. agrees. His later statement is unambiguous: "Between Toussaint and his people there was no fundamental difference of outlook or of aim."[20]

C. L. R.'s restrained critique was, I think, not to risk undermining our appreciation for what Toussaint accomplished despite acts that were "worse than errors." The revolution itself had powerful enemies even at the distance of well over a century. He is more protective of Toussaint in 1938 than in the 1960s, when he decided to revise his 1936 play about him, giving his nephew Moïse more of a role and enhancing his case against his uncle.

The crisis over imposing the plantation leads Toussaint into killing the leader who fought him on behalf of the laborers' movement—Moïse. "Moïse . . . beloved by the blacks of the North for his ardent championship of them against the whites. He stood high in Toussaint's favour until he refused to carry out Toussaint's severe labour legislation in the North."[21]

It is clear from C. L. R.'s evidence that Moïse was the person Haiti needed after slavery. Moïse sought to have unity among the Blacks and mulattoes. It certainly seems that he was killed not only because he was the leader of a movement against Toussaint's plantation but because of the superiority of his leadership. C. L. R. comments to underscore the enormity of Toussaint's "crime" that "to shoot Moïse . . . was almost as if Lenin had had Trotsky shot for taking the side of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie."[22]

In the constitution Toussaint wrote and imposed, "he authorized the slave trade because the island needed people to cultivate it. When the Africans landed, however, they would be free men."[23] Commenting on the constitution, Moïse "called Toussaint an old fool. 'He thinks he is the king of San Domingo.' "[24]

It was ambition for power, a kind of madness that often afflicts those who have been put into positions of authority by the movement; this leads them to believe they have earned the right to impose their will.

Toussaint could not conceive of Haiti moving forward independent of what he calls French civilization; the African and creole population could not move up from slavery without what the French had to teach them—although what that is exactly is not spelled out. At first he considers that Haiti would be a French colony and that the population would become French. We must assume he was not thinking of Napoleon's imperialist France, which

later attempted to reimpose slavery, but of the revolutionary population that agreed to abolish it.

Unlike Toussaint, who was ultimately kidnapped and murdered by the "civilized" French, C. L. R. had a chance in the 1963 appendix to spell out his contempt for the Haitian elite which venerated "French civilization." But C. L. R. is not cleared of the charge that he too had a belief in what Europe calls "civilization."

This term is at best unhelpful and usually dresses deep racism in respectability. Who is not civilized? When Mahatma Gandhi visited London in the 1930s, he was asked what he thought of British civilization. His reply was filmed and became famous: "I think it will be a good thing." We can all agree.

Ten years after *The Black Jacobins* was published, C. L. R., immersed in working-class organizing and having broken with Trotskyism, completed a study of Hegel and Marx. In *Notes on Dialectics*, he not only breaks with the vanguard party but identifies and analyzes the corruption in the new governing class, of which Toussaint was an example.[25] In this light, the delusions of grandeur Moïse describes is for C. L. R. no longer merely a personal failing of Toussaint but a class characteristic. This enables us to call Toussaint on the class nature of his ambition without demeaning the great Haitian Revolution or his enormous contribution to making it.[26]

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Some of us feel strongly the need to acknowledge and support today's Black Jacobins. Actor-activist Danny Glover is a shining example. Speaking after the U.S.-led coup that overthrew President Aristide, he wrote:

> The first time I went to Haiti was 30 years ago . . . I'd read C.L.R. James's *Black Jacobins* in college, about a country and a revolution I had never heard about. I wanted to see who these people were. Haiti did the unthinkable . . . it undermined the whole premise of white supremacy by overthrowing slavery. It was the first victory over slavery of Africans. And for that it has continued to be dismissed, beaten and just torn apart . . . we have to find ways on every level to come to the aid of Haiti. My position is that President Aristide remains the duly elected president of Haiti, that position I will not waver from or be moved from.[27]

When I visited Haiti for the first time, I saw the names of places associated with individuals, battles, events that I knew from the book. I also saw the revolution.

C. L. R. had said that he could see the French Revolution in the faces of the fashion models from Paris. For the first time, I understood what he meant. In Haiti, the revolution is on the faces even of the children. There is a dignity, a seriousness, a resilience, and an expectation of winning against almost insuperable odds. Although there are those who trace African roots in the religion and culture generally of modern Haiti, there seems little interest among those who write learned papers in exploring the revolutionary roots of who Haitians are now, the way their revolutionary impertinence has shaped them, and informs their present struggle.

The indomitable spirit that won in 1804 defeated the murderous twentieth-century dictatorships of the Duvaliers (approved by Washington) after thirty years in 1986. It twice elected President Aristide, with 67 percent of the vote in 1990 and 92 percent in 2000—a liberation theology priest who set out to raise Haiti "from destitution to poverty," built schools and hospitals, tried to regenerate agriculture, and raised the minimum wage. It steels the determination of the women I met who carry on fighting for justice against the rapes and murders of the 1991 and 2004 coups. It boycotted election after election when Aristide's Lavalas (flash flood) party was banned from standing (80 percent of the electorate refused to vote at the U.S.-led "selection" that put Michel Martelly in power)—a level of mass organization we almost never see anywhere else. It continues to campaign for withdrawal of the UN troops that have occupied Haiti at the behest of the imperial powers since 2004 and for compensation for the UN-imported cholera that has killed nearly 9,000 people and infected more than 800,000.

Today's Jacobins are fighting today's imperialism: the United States, Canada, France, the multinationals, the Clintons (who "helped" by making a way for sweatshops paying the lowest minimum wage in the Western Hemisphere), and others making deals with the tiny Haitian elite. The "international community" and "civil society"—that conglomerate of nongovernmental organizations which act for governments that have created or coopted and now fund them—has been crucial to reimposing the deification of the market—which the slaves destroyed when they burned down the plantations and won the land to cultivate for their own survival and happiness.

Despite occupation and repression, the murder and disappearance of many grassroots leaders like Lovinsky Pierre-Antoine, the Lavalas movement remains unbowed. Tens of thousands flood the streets to defend the Aristide family every time his freedom is under threat, including every time he is summoned to court on trumped-up charges.

Scandalously, in 2004, at the behest of the United States and just before their coup, heads of state (except Mbeki of South Africa) snubbed Haiti's bicentenary celebrations. Even Latin American countries stayed away, despite their debt to revolutionary Haiti. As C. L. R. points out in his appendix: "Pétion, the ruler of Haiti, nursed back to health the sick and defeated Bolivar, gave him money, arms and a printing press to help in the campaign which ended in the freedom of the Five States."[28]

Only Venezuela and CARICOM (the Caribbean Community) opposed the UN occupation. Even they are now collaborating with Martelly, despite previous objections to electoral fraud and Martelly's attempts to reinstate dictatorship.

As the reader will see from the brief, potent contributions of Mumia Abu-Jamal and Russell "Maroon" Shoatz, two prisoner colleagues, this history book remains integral to present struggle, though this is often missing from commentaries that praise it or its author. It offers an answer to the ultimate question in the mind of every struggler: Can we win, against racism, against every form of slavery, against all the repressive powers that intend to be in charge of us forever? It replies: We did, and we can again.

Notes

1. The cover of this translation had its author as "P.I.R. James"—colonials were often treated carelessly.
2. The theft by nongovernmental organizations ensured that Haitians continue to live with the impact of the earthquake.
3. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Penguin, 2001), 71.
4. James, *The Black Jacobins*, xix.
5. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 69.
6. James, *The Black Jacobins*, xvii.
7. Jean Fouchard, *Les Marrons de la Liberté* (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole, 1972), 355.
8. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 16.
9. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 45.
10. Fouchard, *Les Marrons de la Liberté*, 395.
11. Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (London: John Murray, 2007), 264–65.
12. It's worth mentioning that Africans often speak a number of languages because villages and tribes may have their own languages, which their neighbors master, resulting in a general linguistic facility not known in Europe. We don't know if this is true in other parts of the nonindustrialized world.

13. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 196.
14. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 196.
15. He must already have questioned this view: he said that "the German comrades" had told him how wrong he was, that it was state capitalism.
16. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 196.
17. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 307.
18. There were many communal societies on the African continent. Of course they had changed over the years in a variety of ways—they were affected by the slave trade, when many villages were destroyed altogether. Even after European imperialism across the continent, the communalism of African societies had survived, as Tanzania's *ujamaa* demonstrates. See Ralph Ibbott, *Ujamaa: The Hidden Story of Tanzania's Socialist Villages* (London: Crossroads Books, 2014), and Selma James, "Introduction," in Ibbott, *Ujamaa*, 13–39, particularly note 15 for references including Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks* and the perspective of Walter Rodney.
19. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 213.
20. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 233.
21. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 209.
22. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 231.
23. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 215.
24. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 216.
25. But it is not inevitable. It never happened to Fidel Castro, with whom Toussaint is compared in the appendix.
26. C. L. R. James, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin* (London: Allison and Busby, 1980). For anyone who wants to wrestle with a relevant passage of *Notes*: "We say that this cause seemed to have such a powerful effect because there was an *effect* waiting to be caused. The cause *and* the effect are in the *substance* of the thing."
27. Danny Glover, "Haiti and Venezuela—A Personal View," *Rise* (Summer/Fall 2004): 37.
28. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 321. In fact there were six states: Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Panama, and Venezuela.