A blueprint for rebellion: C.L.R. James and the politics of ‘Black Jacobins’

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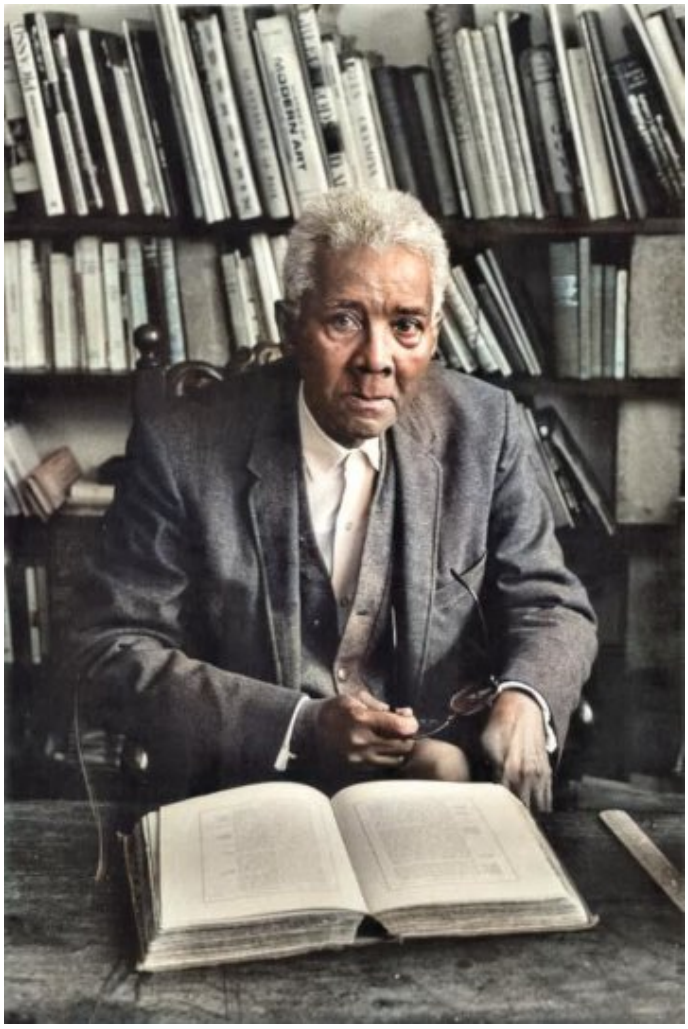

C.L.R. James

Published in 1938, “Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution” became C.L.R. James’ magnum opus, though fans of the sport of cricket might beg to differ. “Black Jacobins” was printed by the British publishing house Seckel Warburg as addressing “the only successful slave revolt in history.” Though this claim has been countered by successive historians, it should be argued that the Haitian Rebellion was truly the first social revolution in modern world history.

Defying the capitalist and racist historiography on Black rebellion that had defined academia and even radical intelligentsia, James displays how it was, in fact, Saint-

Domingue/Haiti which resulted in the greatest shift in social relations. For, despite the French overthrow of the Ancien Régime, which left the bourgeoisie in power, the uprising on what was once known as "the Jewel of the Antilles," when the dust settled, the ownership of the land rested in the hands of the formerly enslaved.

As one historian quaintly notes: the paradox of the Haitian Revolution is in the end, Africans defended ideals of the French Revolution against the French themselves. What the radical historian Robin D.G. Kelley says of the James' abbreviated account of the Black radical tradition, "A History of Pan-African Revolt," is certainly true of "Black Jacobins": "What made this book even more subversive is that James places Black people at the center of world events; he characterizes uprisings of [people previously described as] savages and religious fanatics as revolutionary movements; and he insists that the great Western revolutionaries needed the Africans as much as the Africans needed them."1

The dialectical materialism of James as well as Toussaint L'Ouverture and the other revolutionaries in "Black Jacobins" altered the way we all came to the process of Black internationalist struggle for the last 200 years. It also alters the erasure of the Black Radical Tradition amongst the other great social revolutions. No longer just "France, Russia and China," as Theda Skocpol writes about, Haiti, Jamaica, the Reconstruction American South, Cuba and South Africa, are indispensable for our study of global revolutions.

"Black Jacobins" is the result of C.L.R. James' ideological and political development as James moved from the liberalism of West Indian society to revolutionary socialism, pan-Africanism and Black Internationalism.

Culture and anti-imperialism

Cyril Lionel Robert (C.L.R.) James was born in 1901 in Tunapuna, Trinidad, about ten miles east of the nation's capital, Port of Spain, to a family of Barbadian descent.

Affectionately known as Nello by his friends, James was raised in a middle-class and religiously conservative household, where he was deeply impacted by British culture from classical to Late Victorian culture, namely theater and literature.

James read everything from William Shakespeare to William Thackeray and developed a deep interest in the humanities and social sciences. James writes, "I laughed without satiety at Thackeray's constant jokes and sneers and gibes at the aristocracy and at people in high places. Thackeray, not Marx, bears the heaviest responsibility for me."2 James completed his secondary education at the prestigious Queen's Royal College (QRC) in Port of Spain. Excelling in academics and athletics, James became a club cricketer and an accomplished track and field athlete, setting the Trinidadian record in the high jump. It was there that James also developed his love for writing.

In his first act of resistance, James rebelled against the Puritanic Christian beliefs of his parents and the trappings of bourgeois Caribbean culture. James' love for carnival, calypso, jazz and cricket literally moved him beyond the trappings of his class privilege and racial subjugation in colonial Trinidadian society.

It would eventually be his works as a sports journalist and biographer that influenced his migration to England in the early 1930s. Yet, after his completion at QRC, James had decided to remain in Port of Spain, where he served as a schoolmaster teaching English and History.

At QRC, James taught the radical scholar and future Trinidadian prime minister, Eric Williams. As a teacher and part-time journalist, James joined two groups that expanded his love for literature and began the process of advancing his political ideology. Now a liberal Trinidadian nationalist, James became the secretary of the Maverick Club, an elite social club free of white colonial participation: "For the most part we were Black people and one brown," James noted.

James also participated in an anti-colonial literary society called the Beacon group. James' love for Victorian literature became the counterpoint through which he began to attack colonial British society through what has been defined as his cultural activism.

With the Maverick Club, James staged operas and other theatrical performances. With his class at QRC, James put on a fully public rendition of "Othello." James's production of the Shakespearean classic undoubtedly anticipated his chronicling of the man that Abe Reynal defined as "The Black Spartacus": Toussaint L'Ouverture. Understanding the centrality of art and cultural production to radical scholarship and social movements, at the climax of "Black Jacobins," James notes, "There is no drama like the drama of history." It was not enough just to tell the truth. One must make it fun.

C.L.R. James and the Black radical tradition

In 1958, the Caribbean American radical Cyril Briggs was red-baited by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Cold War U.S. strategy had sought to blame the surge of Black communist activity in the United States on outside agitation, removing any form of Black agency.

In his retort, the founder of the African Blood Brotherhood and former Communist Party member Briggs stated, "I don't know what Communists or communism have to do with my position, because this has been my position since 1912, before there was, as I understand it, a Communist Party in the United States. It will continue to be my position despite any attempt by this committee to intimidate me."3

Briggs' story is true of James and many other Black Marxists since. Communism did not bring them to Black liberation politics. Black liberation politics brought them to communism. Though many would like to remove this context from the production of "Black Jacobins," it would be ahistorical. "Black Jacobins" is the result of James'

movement towards revolutionary socialism and African liberation politics upon his migration to England in the early 1930s as he fell into Trotskyist circles.

“Black Jacobins” is not just a historical text but also a Black manifesto — a declaration of revolutionary independence. In the preface to the 1963 version of the book, James writes that “Black Jacobins” was “intended to stimulate the coming emancipation of Africa” but “only the writer and a handful of close associates thought, wrote and spoke as if the African events of the last quarter of a century were imminent.”

As well, he intended his second edition of the book to attempt “for the future of the West Indies, all of them, what was done for Africa in 1938.” Both of James’ editions proved to be prescient adventures seen as an independence movement emerged in the Caribbean in the 1960s as it had in Africa during the 1940s — and let us not forget the social and cultural revolutions taking place in Black North America as well.

“Black Jacobins” has become not just a blueprint for revolution, but a blueprint for writing about revolutions. The text stands out because of the fact that it is not simply a historical analysis but also a historiographical analysis in which James engages the traditional historian critique of the Haitian Revolution as well as the overall discourse on Black agency.

“The only place where Negroes did not revolt is in the pages of capitalist historians,” James wrote in 1939. Notably, James did not simply say “conservative” or even “white supremacist.” Instead, he states “capitalist historians,” which expresses the limits of conservative and white supremacist scholarship. Conservative historians such as Ulrich B. Phillips had penned apologies for slavery. Yet, it was the liberal scholar that attributed Black freedom to well-intentioned European and white American reformers.

In a remarkable line in the preface, James says that the traditionally famous historians were more artists than scientists: “They wrote so well because they saw so little.” This trend–his critique of traditional historiography–continues later in the text; he criticizes French historians’ patronizing and critical views of Toussaint while lacking major critique of Laveaux (Etienne Laveaux). As well, another instance of historiographic critique is in his explanation of the destruction of the white population of Saint-Domingue, which James describes as being caused by voluntary white emigration to the United States of America in the late 18th century. In James’ critique, historians seemed more interested in apologizing for white racism than actually intensely critiquing the actions of the Black revolutionaries.

It is worth noting that James also departed from Marxist scholarship of the moment, including that of his childhood friend Malcolm Nurse, who had by the 1930s assumed the nom de guerre George Padmore. At that moment, in stark contrast to James’ Trotskyism, Padmore was a Stalinist. Yet, despite the anti-vanguardist position taken by some adherents to Trotskyist socialism, the difference between Padmore’s “The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers” (1931) and James’ “Black Jacobins” was not whether a vanguard party would emerge to lead the cause for Black liberation, but exactly how that revolutionary leadership would emerge.

The question of power

This became the essence of what James would later call “The Question of Power.” Very similar to James in his text, Padmore chronicled the exploitation of Black workers, condemning slavery, colonialism and the exploitation of the Black masses by opportunist reformists. Yet in the end, Padmore saw it as the role of the progressive white working class to educate “backward” Black workers.

In an obituary to the historian and revolutionary, Walter Rodney, C.L.R. James recalled a conversation he had with Leon Trotsky about Vladimir Lenin’s leadership and political analysis. Trotsky told James, “Lenin always had his eyes upon the mass

of the population, and when he saw the way they were going, he knew that tomorrow this was what was going to happen."4

Far from a submission to spontaneity, revolutionary leadership came from within, " This defined Toussaint's leadership. A formerly enslaved coach driver, Toussaint had risen to the level of a well-read landowner. But once the revolution began, Toussaint committed what the Guinean-Cape Verdean revolutionary, Amilcar Cabral, called "class suicide." Toussaint abandoned his wealth and privilege, fled to the hills and built amongst the rebels.

Throughout the text, emphasis is placed on the collective organization of the slaves as well as the remarkable sense of justice and restraint repeatedly shown towards mulattoes, big whites ("grand blancs" — the planter class) and the small whites. Common identity and place of origin as well as religious commonality emerge as signifying factors in "Black Jacobins."

"Voodoo was the medium of the conspiracy. In spite of all prohibitions, the slaves travelled miles to sing and dance and practice the rites and talk." The first leader of the conspiracy was a head slave and high voodoo priest named Boukman. James describes Boukman as following in the tradition of a maroon slave revolutionary, Mackandal, who attempted to lead an overthrow of slavery in Haiti a generation earlier.

African slaves poisoned their masters, broke tools and destroyed crops. Obviously, James attempts to explain the role of slaves in the destruction of capitalism; henceforth, he compares them to "the Luddite wreckers." As stated earlier, even amidst the remarkable white-on-Black violence that takes place throughout the text, the slaves and Toussaint are repeatedly described as practicing restraint.

Distinction is placed on this being an organized revolution and not merely a slave riot, as it was repeatedly described. "The slaves had revolted because they wanted

to be free," James writes. But as the famous adage goes, without struggle there can be no progress, and progress for Haitian revolutionaries took over a decade. Toussaint led the fight against the white and mulatto slaveholders, the Spanish, the English and the French before the Black slaves of Saint-Domingue were able to declare complete independence in 1804.

The lessons of Saint-Domingue

Besides Toussaint and Boukman, major players in this text are:

- Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who is described as a fearless ex-slave who was willing to be more violent with whites;
- André Rigaud, a mulatto revolutionary and French loyalist from the South;
- Jean François, a native of San Domingo who was good looking and very proud;
- Georges Biassou, a Black revolutionary "fire-eater";
- Léger Félicité Sonthonax, a French abolitionist and Jacobin; and
- British Col. Thomas Hedouville and British Gen. Thomas Maitland, English dispatches to Saint-Domingue.

The story plays out as a struggle between the most privileged of the population versus those seen as grassroots leaders. The whites and mulattoes are treated with the most suspicion throughout the book. They are even treated with more skepticism than metropole white's Sonthonax, the right-wing Jacobin.

Seemingly critiqueing his contemporary times, James goes back and forth with his critique of French liberal efforts to end slavery — such as the efforts of the "Friends of the Negro" society. While they had very well-intentioned rhetoric, they are depicted as powerless early on in the book and unwilling to take extra steps to eradicate slavery later on in the book. At the points where they do find legislative success in France, it is because they were aided by the revolutionary actions of

slaves back in the Antilles.

Recalling his love for drama, “Black Jacobins” is told in acts. James begins with the conspiracy of the island’s maroon societies led by François Mackandal and ends with Jean-Jacques Dessalines’ final thrust towards Haitian Independence.

Toussaint’s central leadership, in “Black Jacobins” is defined by his keen sense of strategy. Toussaint successfully united various forms of Saint-Domingue’s society: Free and enslaved; Christian and Vodun; African and mulatto.

Unlike almost every other African slave rebellion, the rebels in Saint-Domingue solicited foreign support for the cause of the rebels and not the slave owners, as Toussaint played European nations against each other. However, Toussaint’s organizational strength in the end became his weakness. Captured by the French and imprisoned in a cold prison in the French Alps, Toussaint fell victim to his own Eurocentrism.

His “failure was the failure of enlightenment, not of darkness,” James wrote. Comparatively, Toussaint’s successor, Jean Jacques Dessalines “could see so clearly and simply … because the ties that bound this uneducated soldier to French civilization were of the slenderest.” The path towards freedom for people of African descent now is just as it was in Haiti, James believed: Clear your mind of any negative ideas of Africa. Turn your head away from Europe and towards Africa to find freedom.

“Black Jacobins” was the final leg in a three-part chronicling of the Haitian Revolution and the Black Radical Tradition. First, James produced a play on the life of Toussaint starring Paul Robeson. Second, James produced the pamphlet, “A History of Negro Revolt,” later retitled “A History of Pan-African Revolt,” and lastly, was the masterpiece: “Black Jacobins.”

With three distinct forms of media, James altered Black consciousness and world history. Accompanied by W.E.B. Du Bois' "Black Reconstruction in America" and Herbert Aptheker's "American Negro Slave Revolts," no longer could it be said that freedom was something given to African people. Subsequent authors like Cedric Robinson, Robin Kelley, Walter Rodney, Angela Davis, William Martin and Michael West, Vijay Prashad, Robin Blackburn, Steven Hahn, Gerald Horne, Hakim Adi and others have followed in James' stead. But James' work remains the pinnacle of Black radical scholarship.

1. Robin Kelley, "Introduction" to "A History of Pan-African Revolt" by C.L.R. James, 17.
2. James in "Beyond a Boundary"quoted in Cedric Robinson's "Black Marxism, 70.
3. HUAC, tinyurl.com/v3oru7s
4. "Walter Rodney and the Question of Power," C.L.R. James, 1981, tinyurl.com/thvngp9