

Toussaint Louverture: Black Jacobin or African leader?

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At the eve of the French Revolution Saint Domingue was the most prosperous and profitable colony of France. The area that nowadays is called Haiti, one of the poorest countries in the world, produced more sugar, indigo, cotton and coffee than the whole of Spanish America. Two thirds of the overseas trade of France was with Saint Domingue. The colony counted, according to a French contemporary historian, 393 sugar plantations, 3150 indigo plantations, 789 cotton plantations and 3117 coffee farms.¹ On these plantations the manual labour was done by some 500.000 African slaves, just as much as in the whole of the United States of America that had been

¹ Césaire, Aimé, (1950) 1981, *Toussaint Louverture. La Revolution Francaise et la probleme colonial*. Presence Africaine, Paris, pp.21

founded thirteen years earlier. Their struggle for independence had contributed to the already booming economy of Saint Domingue, because much of the colonial trade had been diverted from the British colonies to the French and Spanish dependencies in the Caribbean. Between 1783 and 1787 Bordeaux merchants alone invested about 100 million pounds to meet the growing demand for colonial products from the United States of America, which had lost their preferential trade relations with the British colonies. The fortune of Saint Domingue meant ruin to the Jamaican sugar industry. Productivity of the sugar industry reached unprecedented levels: capital outlay as of 1789 must have been brand new and the technology of the sugar mills fully up to date.² The number of slaves had doubled in less than fifteen years before the slave rebellion of 1791, which meant that more than half of all slaves were born in Africa.³ Alongside these African slaves we find a large group of rich Mulattoes who gathered their fortunes as traders or caretakers of their fathers' plantations. It were these Mulattoes that first aired their discontent about not having the same rights as whites in the colonies. Representatives had travelled to Paris to propose to take over a large part of the national debt in return for equal rights. This was denied and they were referred back to the Colonial Assembly in Saint Domingue to settle the matter. Mulatto leader Vincent Ogé returned to his country with firm determination to demand equal rights there. When in 1790, the French governor refused to remove restrictions, he headed an insurrection, but failed. He fled to the Spanish side but was expelled. Vincent Ogé and 23 of

² Moya Pons, Frank, 1984, *Manual de Historia Dominicana*, UCMM, Santiago, Republica Dominicana, pp. 163

³ Knight, Franklin W., *The Caribbean. The genesis of a fragmented nationalism*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1978, pp. 237 ff.

his associates were brutally tortured and killed⁴. From then on relations between the whites and Mulattoes were strained, to say the least. The more so because shortly after the event, on May 15 1791 the Assemblée Nationale granted Mulattoes born out of free parents their civil and political rights, which was refused by the Colonial Assembly in Le Cap (nowadays Cap Haitien).

Under these circumstances, the French Revolution in full fledge and the relations between whites and Mulattoes profoundly disturbed, a slave rebellion broke out. Abbé Raynal in the 1780 edition of his *Histoire des Deux Indes* had predicted a general slave revolt in the colonies, saying that there were signs of ‘the impending storm’. Raynal’s prediction came true on August 22, 1791, when the maroon Boukman caused the slaves to revolt during a nocturnal religious ceremony at Bois Caïman. Within the next ten days, slaves had taken control of the entire Northern Province in an unprecedented slave revolt that left the whites in control of only a few isolated, fortified camps. The slaves sought revenge on their masters through pillage, rape, torture, mutilation, and death. Because the plantation owners long feared a revolt like this, they were well armed and prepared to defend themselves. They retaliated by massacring black prisoners. Within weeks, the number of slaves that joined the revolt was approximately 100,000, and within the next two months, as the violence escalated, the slaves killed 2,000 whites and burned or destroyed 180 sugar plantations and hundreds of coffee and indigo plantations.

⁴ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins. Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. Allison and Busby, London (1938) 1980, pp 73-74

Soon however the slave rebellion ran out of steam, Boukman had been captured and killed by the white troops and in October 1791 the remaining slave leaders thought of surrender under the condition that some fifty leaders of the rebellion were pardoned and freed. In return the leaders of the revolt would bring the slaves back to their masters. The authorities rejected these conditions. Shortly after, fights between White and Mulatto armies broke out, which made it possible for three new slave leaders, Jean Francois, Biassou and Jeannot to reorganize the slave army.

By that time a certain Toussaint Breda had joined the rebels and acted as the secretary to Biassou. The new army leaders decided to place themselves under the Authority of the French King. Thus, Biassou called himself ‘Brigadier of the King’s Army’.⁵ But why should the slaves be loyal to the king?

Toussaint Louverture 1758-1803

We know when and where Toussaint Louverture died: in 1803 in a cold dungeon in the French Jura, starved on purpose. But we don’t know when he was born; it must be somewhere between 1739 and 1746 and even though Wikipedia says 1743 there is no way to establish his exact year of birth. What we do know from the Haitian archives is that he was born as the son of an Arada prince. His father had been granted savannah liberty by Count de Noe who owned a large plantation named Breda, near Le Cap. Savannah liberty implied that one was free to go and live within the confines of the

⁵ See the Toussaint Louverture project:
http://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Toussaint_letter_to_Biassou_during_Boukman_Rebellion

large Estate. He married a slave from Breda called Pauline. The wedding was a big event that reached the ear of his African wife who happened to be enslaved with her two children at a neighbouring Estate. Upon hearing the news she killed herself by starvation.

Hence Toussaint was the son of a man of some position and profited from that by receiving a good education in a relative well to do environment. His godfather and later father in law, Pierre Baptiste, thought him to read French. Toussaint read Roman history, philosophy and the religious books of the Fathers. It is almost certain that he has read Abbé Raynal's *Histoire des Deux Indes* that was strongly anti-slavery, but also Herodotus, Socrates, Plutarch and Julius Caesar. Most likely he read Machiavelli's *Prince*.

He was to become the general manager of the Breda Estate for the new owner Bayon de Libertas, a cousin of the Count of Noe, who granted him full freedom around 1784. By the time of the French Revolution he had become a man of great wealth and status, which makes the epithet 'coachman' quite misleading.⁶

The term 'coachman' was given to him in the traditional narrative about Toussaint Louverture as exposed in the famous biography of C.L.R. James *The Black Jacobins* published in 1938.⁷ Although the facts presented above are also summarized by James, Toussaint is treated as one of the (former) slaves. In his Marxian scheme he is seen as the vanguard of the black slaves rather than as a black auxiliary of the 'grands blancs'. James' analysis of the slave revolt as a mass movement, inspired by the Jacobin Movement in France, carries some plausibility. Indeed the discourse of freedom and

⁶ Wenda Parkinson, 'This gilded African' Toussaint L'Ouverture. Quartet Books, London etc, 1978, p. 29 ff.

⁷ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*.

equality fitted well in the goals that were eventually set by the leaders of the slave rebellion.

The abolition of slavery was something that fitted well in the Jacobin self-image as of 1794, when slavery was finally abolished by the Assemblée Nationale. Thus in the 19th and 20th century Toussaint Louverture could become a hero of the radical left and a witness of the worldwide impact of the values of the Jacobin movement. The title of James' book leaves no doubt about the thesis presented there. And yet, the painstaking investigation of Aimé Césaire in the archives of the Assemblée Nationale shows that, at least on the French side, things were not so neat as suggested by James. In his magisterial biography, published in 1960, more than ten (OPZOEKEN) years after *The Black Jacobins*, Césaire shows that the Jacobins initially were far from eager to liberate the slaves. They found their liberation not opportune for political and economic reasons. Robespierre had expressed the latter very clearly when he said with reference to the abolition of slavery in the colonies: 'The sugar would become far too expensive for the Parisian workers.' Indeed, the Jacobins had never been in favour of the abolition of slavery until 1794. The Parisian association 'Friends of the Blacks', founded in 1788, was in fact a Girondin club rather than a Jacobin one and was founded by Brissot. Furthermore most of its members belonged to the higher nobility. Despite their name, the Friends of the Blacks campaigned in favour of the rich mulattoes who wanted civil and political rights rather than for the abolition of slavery. Furthermore, the Friends of the Blacks did not foresee abolition in the short run, nor did they support the Saint Domingue slave

rebellion in 1791.⁸ All this has been convincingly documented by Césaire but his book was never translated and even the new edition of 1981 remained obscure.⁹

Césaire shows that the Jacobin ideology found receptive ears with the ‘petits blancs’ rather than with the ‘grands blancs’ in Saint Domingue. It were the small craftsmen, shopkeepers, soldiers and other urban white folks that embraced Jacobin ideology, not the aristocratic plantation owners like Bayon de Libertas. And the Mulattoes favoured the revolutionary ideology only so far as it would support their own claim for civil rights, not those of the middle class whites in the colony. These ‘small whites’ hated the Mulattoes for being rich and insisted on maintaining legal discrimination against them. Hence the small whites and rich Mulattoes were bitter enemies, while both of them hated the slaves and found them repugnant. It were the ‘grands blancs’, like the master of Toussaint who had most contact with the slaves, be it in bed or in the sugar mills.

The revolutionary ideology was a threat to the plantation owners who had to defend themselves not only against the rich Mulattoes who wanted power sharing but also against the small whites who aspired to take their property away. It was only when the slaves rebelled that the grands blancs, petits blancs *and* the Mulattoes wanted to join forces, although by 1791 that was easier said than done. But there is more to it, so the most recent investigations seem to suggest. There is reason to assume that the grands blancs, once the Mulattoes were defeated, feared the small whites more than

⁸ See Condorcet *Beschouwingen over de negerslavernij* (Reflections on Negro Slavery) translated from the French 1987 edition by Meindert Fennema and Giessen, with an introduction by Meindert Fennema, Heureka, Weesp, 1989. This text has never been translated in English.

⁹ Aimé Césaire, *Toussaint Louverture*.

anything else. They might have secretly supported the slave revolt that broke out August 1791 to teach the small whites a lesson. At least this position is defended in a recent biography by Madison Smartt Bell.¹⁰ Smartt Bell has some circumstantial evidence to support his vision. The Breda plantation was miraculously spared from looting and burning, even though the rebels past it on their way to Le Cap. Even more surprising is the fact that of the 330 slaves of Breda only 22 joined the rebels. Indeed most historians have found it remarkable that Toussaint did not support the rebellion openly until he had sent his mistress, Mme Bayon de Libertas, to Miami. Furthermore, in the beginning of the rebellion in 1791, the slaves claimed to fight under the banner of the French king, rather than that of the republic, which would from a radical democratic perspective, have been the (ideo)logical way to do. C.L.R. James finds this especially hard to explain and he more or less blames it on their ignorance. However, as we have seen, Toussaint was anything but ignorant. Even in 1793 after the decapitation of the French king, Toussaint remained a royalist, this time loyal to the Spanish crown. It was not until May 1794, long after slavery had been abolished by the Jacobin commissioner Sonthonax – in August 1793 - and months after this had been ratified by the Assemblée Nationale in Paris, on February 4th 1794, that Toussaint took the side of the French Republic. And again, this was not due to his trust in Sonthonax, who landed in Saint Domingue September 18th 1792 to support the rich Mulattoes rather than de black slaves. It was due to his trust in General Laveaux, who happened to be a French aristocrat and military man. Remember that Toussaint was an aristocrat himself, all be it an African one. His proximity to the aristocracy in Saint Domingue was expressed in his important position in the Lodge of the Freemasons at Le

¹⁰ Madison Smart Bell, Toussaint Louverture, A biography, Pantheon, New York, 2007

Cap. Socially speaking Toussaint had been closer to the plantation owners than to the slaves, whose leader he would become. If anything political did him take side with the French it was certainly the invasion of the island by the British troops, that hoped to weaken France by conquering their wealthiest colony. Without the resistance of Toussaint's slave army, the British would most likely have succeeded. Their defeat also meant the ascendance of Toussaint to absolute power over the French part of the island.

In this light it is less surprising that the slave leaders initially did not demand abolition of slavery, but merely abolition of whipping and other forms of cruelty. In Toussaint's vision the slaves needed to stay with their masters to work on the plantations, but under better conditions. He defended such a position until the end of his life, well after the abolition of slavery. While fighting a cruel war against the armies of the whites, Toussaint always went out of his way to spare the white soldiers and officers once they were conquered. He was particularly eager to spare the 'grands blancs'. In his conception Saint Domingue could not do without the expertise of the former plantation owners.

All this is not to say that Smartt Bell is right in his claim that initially the grands blancs supported the slave rebellion and that Toussaint was their tool. It is much more likely that Toussaint went to see what was going on in the slave camps to inform himself as well as Bayon de Libertas. Indeed, Toussaint may well have started as a courier rather than as a freedom fighter. His first position in the slave army was that of 'General Doctor' and for a long time he was not in a position of military command at all. He did not take up such a position until 1793, when he for the first time signed as

Toussaint L'Ouverture, General of the armies of the King, for the Public Good. He would later drop the apostrophe.

In the course of events he became more convinced of the leading role he was going to play in the uprising. His experience as a general manager of a large Estate as well as his age made him fit to play a leading role in a movement where management skills were scarce. Even more scarce were the blacks that were used to deal with whites more or less on equal footing. Let us not forget that the military commander in chief, Jean Francois, was a maroon without much education; that Biassou, to whom Toussaint initially was a secretary, had belonged to a religious group Fathers of Charity while the third leader, Jeannot, had been a slave and was not educated either. None of them had the experience in dealing with the grands blancs that Toussaint had. This longstanding experience in socializing with white folks, with administrative skills and his princely background gave Toussaint a competitive edge over any other black leaders.

Here the similarities with Barack Obama's election in 2008 as the first black president of the USA jump to the fore. Although the differences in circumstances are overwhelming there are some similarities that cannot be missed. First, Barack Obama was, like Toussaint, a second generation African American. Like the father of Toussaint, Barack's father had migrated to America as a young man coming from a high class African family. Secondly both fathers were very well received in the New World, given the circumstances. They both were, in the words of Wendy Parkinson, 'Guided Africans'. Toussaint's father was freed instantly and provided a plot of land and five slaves at the Estate of Breda, while the father of Barack was one of the first African migrants to study at Harvard University.

Secondly, both Toussaint and Barack were exceptional in that they were raised in a 'white' environment. Toussaint spent, of course, most of his youth with black folks, but he was soon given responsibilities that brought him close to the white planter society and made him a loyal friend to his master Bayon de Libertas and his wife. His membership of the Masonic lodge and the fact that he was a supposedly a devout Catholic must have made him familiar with the white elite in Le Cap. In turn, Barack Obama, was elected as the first black editor of the Harvard Law Review. We know from other sources that Toussaint was a friend of Charles-Humbert-Marie de Vincent, a French engineer posted to Saint Domingue almost without interruption from 1786 to 1800.¹¹

Toussaint's prominence steadily grew among revolutionary leaders until he became the movement's undisputed leader. His famous Declaration of Camp Turel on August 29 1793 serves as proof that his ideas would serve as a template for a future independent Saint Domingue. One could compare it with the speech of Barack Obama on March 18 2008 in Philadelphia where Obama stated that the 1787 US constitution was stained by the nation's original sin of slavery. Yet the freedom Toussaint declared for all citizens was not to be as absolute as one would assume. Once Toussaint Louverture was in full power he installed a system of forced labour that tied the former slaves to their plantation. They needed special permits to travel. And even though the use of the whip was forbidden, many plantation owners started to use the stick as a replacement. When Toussaint had liberated the slaves in the Spanish part of Santo Domingo, he warned that the freed slaves should

¹¹ http://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Charles-Humbert-Marie_de_Vincent

not stop working. ‘I have never considered that liberty means license and that when they are free they have a right to live in idleness...in fact they should, and it is my wish, that they work harder in the new Estate than they did before.’¹² And in 1801 he declared in Cap Haitien: ‘Idleness is the source of all disorders, and if it is allowed with one individual I shall hold the military commanders responsible, persuaded that those who tolerate the lazy and vagabonds are secret enemies of the government.’¹³

In fact, he installed a military state to preserve absolute freedom for all citizens.¹⁴ A great deal of the success of Toussaint to restore the economy of the Northern part of Saint Domingue between 1796 and 1801 was certainly due to this harsh policies towards the freed slaves that paid off handsomely. His economic policy was not to split up the large Estates into small holder plots but to continue their operation, preferably under the rule of the old owners, or, if these did not dare to return, under the rule of the generals of his army that were given a plantation in return for their services.

Toussaint Louverture, once in full power of the colony did not have the slightest intention to change its economic modus operandi, nor to fundamentally alter the economic relations with France, except for his policy of free trade – especially with the USA – that was practically forced upon him by the attitude of Napoleon, who never accepted Toussaint as the governor of Saint Domingue nor the abolition of slavery that had been proclaimed in 1773 and ratified in 1794. Napoleon wanted to capture Toussaint, reinstall slavery on the island and subsequently reinstall French authority in Louisiana. He reached only the first of these goals to the

¹² Wenda Parkinson, ‘This gilded African’ p.141

¹³ Victor Schoelcher, *Vie de Toussaint Louverture*. Paris: Paul Ollendorf. (1889) 1992, p. 423

¹⁴ Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Haiti: State Against Nation*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990. p.43

detriment of the other two. By capturing and murdering Toussaint, Napoleon lost both Saint Domingue and Louisiana, as he was forced to admit at the end of his life.

On the 20th of May, 1801, Bonaparte published a decree which placed the French colonies in the state in which they were before the year 1789, and which, authorizing the slave-trade, abrogated all laws to the contrary. Soon, however, did he find that in an evil hour he had overstepped the limits of prudence; and therefore he put forth another decree which hypocritically excepted Saint Domingo and Guadeloupe, ‘because these islands are free, not only by right, but in fact, whilst the other colonies are actually in slavery, and it would be dangerous to put an end to that state of things.’¹⁵

Yet half a year later Napoleon sent general Leclerc – his brother in law – off to Saint Domingue to overthrow Toussaint and reestablish slavery. Leclerc arrived in the port of Le Cap with an army of some 10.000 soldiers. Soon two of Toussaint’s generals betrayed him and joined the French, Toussaint retired to his plantation called Ennery.

Leclerc set a trap for Toussaint by asking him to meet general Brunet to continue peace talks. Toussaint was captured by deceit and general Leclerc sent him off to France to die in a dungeon. Upon entering the ship Toussaint said to the officer who held him in custody: ‘By overthrowing me you have

¹⁵ Beard, J. R. (John Rely) (1863). *Toussaint L'Ouverture: A Biography and Autobiography*. Chapel Hill, NC: Academic Affairs Library, UNC-CH. Online Publication

cut down in Saint Domingue only the trunk of the tree of liberty. It will spring up from its roots, for they are many and they are deep.’¹⁶

On board of the ship named *Le Heros*, he wrote the following letter on behalf of his wife Suzanne:

CITIZEN FIRST CONSUL: I will not conceal my faults from you. I have committed some. What man is exempt? I am quite ready to avow them. After the word of honor of the Captain-General [General Leclerc] who represents the French Government, after a proclamation addressed to the colony, in which he promised to throw the veil of oblivion over the events which had taken place in Saint Domingo, I, as you did on the 18th Brumaire, withdrew into the bosom of my family. Scarcely had a month passed away, when evil-disposed persons, by means of intrigues, effected my ruin with the General-in-chief, by filling his mind with distrust against me. I received a letter from him which ordered me to act in conjunction with General Brunet. I obeyed. Accompanied by two persons, I went to Gonaïves, where I was arrested. They sent me on board the frigate Creole, I know not for what reason, without any other clothes than those I had on. The next day my house was exposed to pillage; my wife and my children were arrested; they had nothing, not even the means to cover themselves.

Citizen First Consul: A mother fifty years of age may deserve the indulgence and the kindness of a generous and liberal nation. She has no account to render. I alone ought to be responsible for my conduct to the Government I

¹⁶ Wenda Parkinson, *This gilded African*, p.189

have served. I have too high an idea of the greatness and the justice of the First Magistrate of the French people, to doubt a moment of its impartiality. I indulge the feeling that the balance in its hands will not incline to one side more than to another. I claim its generosity.

*Salutations and respect,
Toussaint Louverture ¹⁷*

And in his prison cell at Fort Joux he wrote in his memoirs:

Gen. Leclerc's authority was undisputed; did he fear me as a rival? I can but compare him to the Roman Senate, pursuing Hannibal to the very depths of his retreat.

Upon the arrival of the squadron in the colony, they took advantage of my absence to seize a part of my correspondence, which was at Port-Républicain; another portion, which was in one of my houses, has also been seized since my arrest. Why have they not sent me with this correspondence to give an account of my movements? They have taken forcible possession of my papers in order to charge me with crimes which I have never committed; but I have nothing to fear; this correspondence is sufficient to justify me. They have sent me to France destitute of everything; they have seized my property and my papers, and have spread atrocious calumnies concerning me. Is it not like cutting off a man's legs and telling him to walk? Is it not

¹⁷

http://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Toussaint_Louverture_letter_to_Napol%C3%A9on_from_ onboard_the_Hero

*like cutting out a man's tongue and telling him to talk? Is it not burying a man alive?*¹⁸

Marxist authors have always stressed the autonomous character of the struggle of the slaves, and rightly so. Rather than assuming that the slaves were led by other groups they stress the strength of 'the masses'. C.L.R. James writes in the foreword to his *Black Jacobins* '(...) my West Indian experience and my study of Marxism had made me see what eluded many previous writers, that it was the slaves who had made the revolution.'¹⁹

But James goes further than that: in his work the slave revolt is conceived as basically a project of modernization. Not only are the slaves motivated by the ideals of the Enlightenment, but implicitly they are oriented towards social and economic progress.

Again, C.L.R. James is the classic example. His *Black Jacobins* are modeled after these ideas: of course the ex-slaves also acted out of revenge, but if one takes this aspect into consideration, their reaction was remarkably moderate. Such is the picture sketched of Toussaint Louverture. A determined leader, but one who was always willing to forgive the traitors in his own camp for the sake of unity and to compromise with the old masters for the sake of economic progress. And even if he sometimes was merciless, he certainly abhorred cruelty. Did he not reproach Dessalines after his punitive and

¹⁸http://thelouvertureproject.org/index.php?title=Memoir_of_Toussaint_Louverture%2C_Written_by_Himself#Toussaint.27s_capture

¹⁹ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*. pp. VI

bloody expedition against the Mulattoes. ‘I told you to prune the tree not to root it’.²⁰

Also, so it seems, the class position of the slaves is adapted to the Marxian schemes: in his 1980 foreword James states: ‘Hitherto, I and the persons with whom I was politically associated had laid great emphasis on the fact that the slaves, gathered in hundreds at the time in the sugar factories of the north plain, had owed much of their success to the fact that they had been disciplined, united and organized by the very mechanism of factory production.’²¹

Accordingly, their revolt showed similarities with the proletarian revolution. In the same vein James tends to value positively the policy of Toussaint to force the freed slaves back to their plantation. The downside of Toussaint’s economy policy is downplayed by James. They were paid now but still had but a limited freedom of movement; the whip was abolished, but it was replaced by the stick. There is a lot of continuity in economic policy –which was certainly forced upon him by the circumstances as Mats Lundahl has shown. Notwithstanding James is able to write in his 1964 ‘Black Sansculottes’ article:

‘Toussaint and his lieutenants, inspired by freedom, the concepts of the French revolution and their long experience of a colonial regime, accomplished what leaders of struggles for national independence are rarely able to do. They did not take over the former colonial regime. They constructed, from the ground up, a new government based upon their own consciousness of their needs. Toussaint however, recognized the

²⁰ Idem, p.

²¹ Ibidem

backwardness his government had inherited, and strove to make a working arrangement with the French government (by this time Bonaparte) whereby independent Haitians would have the benefit of French culture and French capital. In pursuit of this ideal, Toussaint tapped the newly created energies of his own followers. He made strenuous efforts to convince Napoleon that former slave-owners were not only welcome, but would be treated with dignity in the new regime. It was not to be. Toussaint was deported and imprisoned, and the independence was won by his barbaric lieutenant, Dessalines, under the slogan 'Eternal hatred to France'. For this divorce from Western civilization Haiti has paid dearly.²²

James juxtaposes Westernization and Africanization, but does so in an ambiguous way. It is in fact quite wrong to maintain that Toussaint did not take over the former colonial regime. It is also wrong to suggest that he inherited backwardness. Saint Domingue was far from backward at the eve of the revolution. Since the booming economy was based on slavery, the number of slaves increased spectacularly; from 250.000 to 500.000 in less than fifteen years before 1791. By then the number of slaves in a territory smaller than Holland equaled that of the United States. This economic expansion was based on the most modern technologies, especially in the refinery process of the sugar mills.²³ How on earth can one possibly describe such an economy as backward?

The problem with the concept of backwardness lies in its ambivalence: on the one hand it refers to technological development; in Marxist terms it refers to the productive forces. On the other hand, and at the same time, it refers to

²² Idem, p. 160 **1984?**

²³ Knight, Franklin, W., 1978, *The Carribean. The genesis of a fragmented nationalism*. Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 237-239.

the relations of production. In the first meaning of the term there was no backwardness at all in the colonial economy. When James writes about the backwardness, he clearly refers to the slave economy. ‘Toussaint knew’, he writes, ‘the backwardness of the labourers; he made them work, but he wanted to see them civilized and advanced in culture. He established such schools as he could.’²⁴

James is right here, if there was a backward segment in that society it were the slaves, who were in majority African born. ‘The great slave revolution’ writes Genovese, ‘was carried out by a slave population most of which, in the words of the rebel leaders “do not know two words of French.”’²⁵

Here we stumble upon a question which has haunted the historiographers of the Haitian revolution. Did the slave revolt succeed because the slaves were acquainted with and inspired by the ideals of the French revolution or was it just the opposite? Did they succeed because their leaders had read Julius Caesar’s *Commentaries* and Raynal’s *Histoire des Deux Indes*, or was, on the contrary, the rebellion successful because of the fact that the slaves had been able to keep parts of their African culture, and parts of the communication networks which went with it. Was it not true that the uprising in Limbé had been lead by a Voodoo priest? Does not James himself give an ample account of the secret religious meetings which preceded the rebellion? Wasn’t the bravery of the rebels directly related to their religious belief that their souls would go back to Africa if they died during combat? Contemporaries were well aware of the revolutionary dangers of African culture. Thus Baron de Wimpffen writes: ‘les negres ne

²⁴ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, pp 246.

²⁵ Genovese, Eugene D. *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World*. New York: Vintage, 1981, pp. 19

sont généralement ni dissimulés ni faux, ni perfides. On trouve quelquefois parmi eux un fripon qui aura été en Afrique ou médecin, ou prêtre, ou sorcier, et c'est alors un homme très dangereux.'²⁶ All this is well acknowledged, and most people today consider the Voodoo culture in Haiti as an African religion.²⁷

Yet, the figure of Toussaint Louverture is completely westernized. Wasn't Toussaint, contrary to his fellow slaves a devoted catholic, and did he not send his sons to France to be educated in Paris? Toussaint was, according to James 'despite his Catholicism, a typical representative of the French revolution.'²⁸ All this, of course, fits well into the discourse of modernization which is characteristic of so much marxist and 'marxisant' writings. The Dutch historian Jacques Presser found it 'a pleasant surprise to learn that a negro chieftain considers Plutarchus, Epictetus and Raynal as his favorite literature.'²⁹

Toussaint did indeed know how to please the Europeans, precisely because he knew them so well. This is clearly illustrated in his response to the request of a white woman to be the godfather of her child: 'The French Revolution has enlightened Europeans, we are loved and wept over by them, but the white colonists are enemies of the blacks.... You wish your husband to get a post. Well, I give him the employment he demands. Let him be honest and let him remember that I cannot accept your offer to be godfather to your son. You may have to bear the reproaches of the colonists and perhaps one day that of your son.'³⁰

²⁶ See A. Lavine, *Saint Domingue à la veille de la Révolution*, Paris 1911.

²⁷ Laguerre, Michel, S., 1989, *Voodoo and politics in Haiti*. Macmillan, Basingstoke etc.

²⁸ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, p. 256

²⁹ Presser, J., (1946) 1974, *Napoleon, Histoire en Légende*, Elsevier, Amsterdam/Brussel

³⁰ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, pp. 260-261

But it is hard to believe that he lost the African cultural heritage of his fathers. And when he joined the slave-army as a physician is it not likely that he practiced the African medical tradition rather than the European one? According to Michel Laguerre ‘he was a medicine man, and he used magic in his treatments. His openness toward Christianity was partially a clever political tactic’.³¹ It seems hardly fair to blame Dessalines as the savage African for the cruelty committed during the struggle for independence, as opposed to the Westernized, humane, and educated Toussaint. However, this Manichean historiography is very common. Thus, the Westernization of Dessalines is ridiculed: This is done, for example, when Dessalines proclaims himself Emperor of Haiti. James writes about Dessalines: ‘He made his solemn entry into Le Cap, in a six-horse carriage brought for him by the English agent, Ogden, on board the Samson. Thus the negro monarch entered into his inheritance, tailored and valeted by English and American capitalists, supported on the one side by the King of England and on the other by the President of United States.’³²

All this is true, but the phrasing is not innocent in a Marxist text. Moreover, the problem is that the same could be said about Toussaint. In the case of Toussaint, however, the wording of James is quite different. Talking about the fiscal policy implemented by Toussaint, he writes: ‘He lowered the tax on fixed property from 20 to 10 per cent, and on the advice of Stevens, the United States Consul, abolished it altogether soon afterwards.’³³ And this writing of James shows signs of approval.

³¹ Laguerre, Michel, S., 1989, *Voodoo and politics in Haiti*. Macmillan, Basingstoke etc., pp. 65

³² C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, pp. 370

³³ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, pp. 245

Towards an explanation of Haiti's failure

In the discourse of modernization another problem arises when it becomes apparent that the Haitian economy will not recover from the revolution to reach its pre-revolutionary levels of productivity. For the pro-slavery writers this is no problem at all: it corroborates their contention that the blacks are unable to govern themselves. For the progressive and Marxist writers, however, the problem is very serious indeed. And it is striking how much the discussion resembles that about the Soviet Union a century later. Of course one can point to the devastating effect of the War of Independence, in which many of the population were killed or had fled. Also one may point to the isolation of the black republic, which suffered from a trade boycott by the colonial powers. It was not until 1825 that France recognized Haitian independence and they only did so under the condition that Haiti would pay 150 million francs as indemnities for the losses suffered by France during the War of Independence. Poor as a rat Haiti remained in debt until the end of the 19th century.

All this explains a large part of the failure to recover economically, but it cannot be the whole story. An internal factor must be added to the list of causes of the Haitian disaster. It is often assumed that the splitting up of the plantations caused the economic decline of the Black Republic. Toussaint Louverture had opted for a system of *fermage*, which implied the continuation of the plantation system, with the former slaves as forced labourers.

As Lundahl argues³⁴, the system was forced upon Toussaint, because of the need to extract the surplus which was needed for his army. The transaction costs to collect the surplus were lower for the old plantation system. Furthermore, sugar was the backbone of the export economy. Distributing the land in smaller plots would carry with it the danger that economic activity would be redirected towards local markets. Also, the maintenance of the plantation system made it possible to distribute the large Estates among the leaders of the slave army. And finally, the work on the plantation could easily be militarized.

It is generally acknowledged that this system worked economically well under Toussaint, who was able to revitalize the economy between 1796 and 1802 to such an extent that exports reached two thirds of the 1789 level. His successor, however, did not succeed in continuing the economic miracle, mainly, so it seems, due to the downturn in world market prices for sugar after 1800. Added to that was the commercial boycott in which after 1805 even the USA was forced to participate.

At the same time, the massacre of the remaining colonists left many plantations ownerless, and these were nationalized under Dessalines. Not a small amount of profits in this state sector was added to the private wealth of Dessalines. Against this policy the Mullatoes rebelled, partly with the argument that the confiscated properties had belonged to their fathers. And against this claim Dessalines argued: 'Before we took up arms against Leclerc, the men of color [mullatoes, mf] did not receive any inheritance at all from their fathers. How come, then, that after we have chased away all the planters, their children claim their properties; the black whose fathers are

³⁴ Lundahl, Mats, 1985, Defense and distribution: Agricultural policy in Haiti during the reign of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, 1804-1806 in: *The Scandinavian Economic History Review*, vol 32, no 2, pp. 77-103

in Africa , should they receive none? (...) be careful, negroes and mullatoes, we have all fought against the whites; the properties that we have conquered by spilling our blood belong to all of us; I intend that they be shared with equity'.³⁵

Dessalines was murdered by the mulattoes in 1806. In the North of Haiti he was succeeded by Christophe who pursued the same economic policy, but in the south Alexander Pétion took over. Pétion, who was a mulatto and had fought in the American War of Independence, distributed the state owned land among his soldiers, thereby triggering off a process of land distribution leading to an average size of the farms of a few acres. It is generally assumed that this policy eventually would lead the country's economy to the brink of disaster. But again, all this is very difficult to attribute to lack of modernizing policies. In fact Condorcet, when writing in favour of the abolition of slavery, had suggested that the division of the large Estates would stimulate a more efficient use of the soil. It seems that neither modernization nor Africanization can properly explain what has happened to the first Black Republic.

Toussaint Louverture in French historiography

Even though we have argued that the outbreak of a slave rebellion in itself was not instigated by the French Revolution, it is evident that the French and the Haitian Revolution are closely connected. Not only did the revolutionary momentum in Paris create a window of opportunity for the slaves to turn the rebellion into a revolution, the war between England and France also gave

³⁵ Idem, pp. 92

Toussaint the opportunity to effectively launch a war of liberation against the British troupes and to establish himself as the uncontested ruler of the island. Toussaint's strategy forced commissioner Sonthonax to abolish slavery in Saint Domingue without consent of the Assemblée Nationale in Paris and by doing so he undermined its authority.

Yet the French historians have been silent about the slave rebellion, silent about the war of liberation in Saint Domingue and silent about Toussaint Louverture. If they mention the slave rebellion at all it tends to be seen as an unfortunate side effect of the occurrences in Paris. In the famous *Histoire de la Révolution Française* (1847) Jules Michelet barely mentions the abolition of slavery in the colonies. About the slave rebellion he writes: 'One night 60.000 negroes revolt, it is a butchery with arson, the most terrible war of savages one has ever seen.'³⁶ Alphonse de Lamartine (*Histoire des Girondins*, 1847) and Louis Blanc (*Histoire de la Révolution Française*, 1847) write in the same vein. According to Michelet it must have been the *grands blancs* that instigated the rebellion, while Lamartine blames the Mulattoes. Yet, Lamartine writes in admiration about Toussaint Louverture: 'The genius of black independence grows in the person of a poor and old slave.'³⁷ As we have seen, Toussaint was around 45 at the outbreak of the slave rebellion and he was neither slave nor poor. Such a vision on Toussaint fitted well into the 19th century romantic historiography. Yet it is remarkable that both historians, who see the French revolution as a heroic act of 'le peuple', cannot image that the slaves revolted on its own.

Louis Blanc describes the revolt of Boukman but the description ends with his death. In the remaining ten volumes the French colonies count for 28

³⁶ Yves Bénot, *La Révolution française et la fin des colonies*. Editions la Découverte, Paris, 1988. p. 209

³⁷ A.M de Lamartine (1849) 1984, *Histoire des Girondins*, Wouters Frères, Brussel p.336

pages. The abolition of slavery is never mentioned. Most remarkable, because Louis Blanc has played an active role in the second abolition of slavery, in 1848.³⁸

Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote his magnificent ‘The Old Regime and the Revolution’ in the same period does not mention the colonies at all.³⁹ The same goes for the conservative historian Hippolyte Taine, who writes in his *Les origines de la France contemporaine* (1890) extensively about the cruelty and the anarchy in the revolutionary process in France. He would have found even more of his liking in the archives in Porte au Prince. Why doesn’t he seem to consider these as a relevant source?

It is not until Jean Jaurès’ *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution Française* that a French historian pays attention to the Haitian revolution. Jaures cites from the minutes of the Assemblée Nationale to describe the debates that took place in May 1791 on the civil rights of the Mulattoes. He mentions how one of their leaders, the Mulatto planter Julien Raimond, goes out of his way to argue that the emancipation of the Mulattoes is the best recipe to suppress the slave rebellion. He also mentions that Robespierre supports the argument of Raimond and he concludes: ‘What a sorry sight to see the Mulattoes betray the slaves and even offer to destroy them’.⁴⁰

³⁸ Louis Blanc, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, Paris 1847-1848

³⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *L’Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, Paris, 1856.

⁴⁰ Jaurès, Jean, 1922, *Histoire Socialiste de la Révolution Française*, Paris. Tome III, p. 239-282. See also : Julien Raimond, *Observations sur l’origine et les progrès du préjugé des colons blancs contre les hommes de couleur*. Paris: Belin, 1791.

Ives Bénot explains the lack of attention for the Haitian Revolution among the French historians of the 19th century by their tacit support for French colonial expansion. They don't want to illuminate the contradiction within the revolutionary ideology when it comes to colonial policy.

Jean Jaurès is indeed the first historian of the French Revolution who has the courage to do so. His internationalist perspective allowed him to do so.

This is not the case for the French Marxist historians of the 20th century, such as Albert Mathiez, Georges Lefebvres, Albert Soboul, Daniel Guérin. Their neglect is as obvious as that of their 19th century predecessors. Especially for Albert Soboul and Daniel Guérin who make the class struggle the core of their analysis, the Haitian Revolution is a non-event and Toussaint Louverture a non-person. This is not so much due to their support for French colonial expansion, but more so to their apologetic vision of Jacobinism.

But there is more to it. Most of the Marxian historians in France (and elsewhere) have copied the theoretical model of Georges Lefebvre, who distinguishes for collective actors on the stage of the French Revolution.⁴¹ The first is formed by the nobility whose antagonism with the king forces the latter to call for a meeting of the *Etats Généraux*. The event in turns causes a revolt of the French peasantry in the form of several anti-feudal *jacqueries*. These social upheavals precipitate a revolution of the bourgeoisie that leads a constitutional monarchy. In turn this revolution of the bourgeoisie stirs part of the working class that appears on the historic

⁴¹ Georges Lefebvre, 1939, *Quatre-Vingt-Neuf* translated in 1947 by R.R. Palmer The Coming of the French Revolution, Princeton University Press, Princeton. See also: Georges Lefebvre, *La Révolution Française*, Volume 1 (1951) and Volume 2 (1957). Translated into English in 1964.

stage as the sans-culottes. The sans-culotte force the bourgeoisie to abolish the monarchy and to create the French Republic (September 1792).

This constructed chain of events becomes a paradigmatic truth about the French Revolution. Thus, Albert Soboul writes in the *Encyclopedia Universalis*: ‘The French Revolution was anti-feudal and anti-aristocratic, subsequently bourgeois and capitalist and finally nationalist.’

In this left-right line of thought, the Jacobins form the radical left of the bourgeois revolutionaries, the Girondins form the moderate left, while the Feuillants sit on the right of the president of the of the National Assembly and form the moderate right. The old monarchists form the far right that are from 1792 not represented any longer.⁴² The revolutionary process drives in the direction of democracy and equality and ends up in the Jacobin terror that is a lamentable ending of a progressive movement. If the Jacobins made any mistakes at all it was that they did not follow the path of the sans-culotte leaders like Jean Marat and Pierre Roux.⁴³ The Girondins came under the influence of the commercial bourgeoisie and thus became the defenders of the propertied classes.

In this historical narrative that became dominant during the sixties and seventies, the colonial question is an awkward anomaly. Because in the debates on the colonies in the National Assembly it is not Robespierre or Saint-Just who take the most liberal and anti-colonial position, but the ‘moderate’ Mirabeau and Brissot. This is difficult to reconcile with the assumption that de Girondins act on behalf of the commercial and colonial interests. The Marxist assumption that ideology and interest fully coincide,

⁴² See H.F. Bienfait and W.E.A. van Beek, *Right and Left as political categories*

⁴³ Daniel Guérin, *La lutte de Classes sous la Première République : Bourgeois et « Bras nus »*(1793-1797). Paris, 1946.

falls short. In this sense, Jean Jaures finds it easier to discuss the colonial question because he does not assume that ideology follows economic interests in such a direct way. His theoretical position is for this very reason criticised by Marxist scholars.⁴⁴ Jaures never fully embraced the idea that the economy determines political discourse. According to Jaures men was capable to make moral judgements independent from their class position.

One would expect that the colonial question would attract more attention by the so-called revisionist historians of the French Revolution, such as Francois Furet.⁴⁵ Furet's institutionalist turn breaks with the Marxian scheme of class struggles; he focuses on processes of modernization and centralization, he is just as silent on the colonial issue. Thus silence seems to be characteristic of all mainstream French historians. They consider the birth of the French nation as the hallmark of modern history. The French Revolution is at the same time a national revolution and therefore has to take place in France. What happens elsewhere is in French nationalist necessarily of secondary importance.

⁴⁴ See Madeleine Reberieux, Jean Jaures et le marxisme. In : Dominique Grisoni (red.) Histoire du Marxisme Contemporain. Tome 3. Union Générale d'Éditions, 1977. p. 234/235

⁴⁵ Francois Furet, Penser la révolution française, Gallimard, Paris, 1978.