

Haitian inspiration: On the bicentenary of Haiti's independence



First published in [Radical Philosophy](#), and hacked by [Abahlali baseMjondolo](#), this short essay explores the power and meaning of the Haitian Revolution for us now.

Two hundred years ago this month (January 2004), the French colony of Saint-Domingue on the island of Hispaniola became the independent nation of Haiti. Few transformations in world history have been more momentous, few required more sacrifice or promised more hope. And few have been more thoroughly forgotten by those who would have us believe that this history has since come to a desirable end with the eclipse of struggles for socialism, national liberation and meaningful independence in the developing world.

Of the three great revolutions that began in the final decades of the eighteenth century – American, French and Haitian – only the third forced the unconditional application of the principle that inspired each one: affirmation of the natural, inalienable rights of all human beings. Only in Haiti was the declaration of human freedom universally consistent. Only in Haiti was this declaration sustained at all costs, in direct opposition to the social order and economic logic of the day. Only in Haiti were the consequences of this declaration – the end of slavery, of colonialism, of racial inequality – upheld in terms that directly embraced the

world as a whole. And of these three revolutions, it is Haiti's that has the most to teach those seeking to uphold these consequences in the world today.

Recognized as a French territory from the late seventeenth century, by the 1780s Saint-Domingue had become far and away the most profitable colony in the world, the jewel in the French imperial crown and the basis for much of the new prosperity of its growing commercial bourgeoisie. 'On the eve of the American Revolution', Paul Farmer notes, 'Saint-Domingue – roughly the size of the modern state of Maryland – generated more revenue than all thirteen North American colonies combined'; on the eve of the French Revolution it had become the world's single largest producer of coffee and the source for around 75 per cent of its sugar.¹ This exceptional productivity was the result of an exceptionally cruel plantation economy, one built on the labour of slaves who were worked to death so quickly that even rapid expansion of the slave trade over these same years was unable to keep up with demand. Mortality levels were such that during the 1780s the colony absorbed around 40,000 new slaves a year. By 1789, Eric Williams suggests, this 'pearl of the Caribbean' had become, for the vast majority of its inhabitants, 'the worst hell on earth'.²

Rapid growth put significant strains on the colony's social structure. Coercive power was divided between three increasingly antagonistic groups – the white plantation-owning elite, the representatives of French imperial power on the island, and an ever more prosperous but politically powerless group of mulattos and former slaves. With the outbreak of the French Revolution tensions between these factions of the colonial ruling class broke out in open conflict, and when a massive slave rebellion began in August 1791 the regime was unable to cope. Sent to restore order, the French commissioner Sonthonax was soon confronted by a rebellion of the white planters seeking greater independence from republican France and withdrawal of the civic rights recently granted to the island's mulattos. Sonthonax only managed to suppress this rebellion by offering permanent freedom to the slave armies who still controlled the countryside, in exchange for their support. Over the next few years, the army of emancipated slaves led by Toussaint L'Ouverture slowly gained control of the colony. In a series of brilliant military campaigns, Toussaint defeated the planters, the Spanish, the British and his own rivals among the black and mulatto armies. By the turn of the century he had become the effective ruler of Saint-Domingue. Unwilling to break with France itself, however, Toussaint allowed himself to be taken prisoner by the expeditionary force that Napoleon sent in 1801 to restore colonial slavery. Napoleon's troops were successful in Guadeloupe but failed in Saint-Domingue. Toussaint's army reassembled under Jean-Jacques Dessalines and by the time the war of independence was over Napoleon, like Pitt before him, had lost 50,000 troops. The last of the French were expelled in November 1803.

Apart from the extraordinary impact of the historical sequence itself, why should anyone with an interest in radical philosophy take an interest, today, in the making of Haitian independence? Haiti is invariably described as the 'poorest country in the Western hemisphere'. It routinely features as an object lesson in failed economic development and unfinished 'modernization', as deprived of the benefits associated with representative democracy, modern civil society and stable foreign investment. Almost as regularly, it is presented as the referent of explicitly racist hogwash about Voodoo or AIDS. Why take an interest in the revolution which led to the creation of such a country? Here are some of the more obvious reasons.

1. If the French Revolution stands as the great political event of modern times, the Haitian revolution must figure as the single most decisive sequence of this event. The French colonies were the one place in which the 'universal' principles of liberty and equality affirmed by 1789 were truly tested: they were that exceptional place in which these principles

might fail to apply. No question served to clarify political differences within the Revolutionary Assemblies as sharply as the colonial question, and, as Florence Gauthier has shown, no question played a more important role in the reactionary transition from the Jacobin prescription of natural rights to the Thermidorian affirmation of social rights – the prescriptions of order, property and prosperity. The Haitian revolution continued, moreover, where the French Revolution left off: just before Napoleon tried to restore slavery in the western half of Hispaniola, Toussaint abolished it in the eastern half. And in so far as our political present retains an essentially Thermidorian configuration, the logic used by the French colonial lobby to justify the preservation of slavery says something about the logic at issue in today's global division of labour as well. Pierre Victor Malouet, speaking on behalf of the planters in the Assembly's 1791 debate, knew that the universal declaration of human rights was incompatible with the existence of colonies, and so urged his patriotic countrymen to preserve the exceptional status of their colonies. 'It's not a matter of pondering whether the institution of slavery can be defended in terms of principle and right', said Malouet; 'no man endowed with sense and morality would profess such a doctrine. It's a matter, instead, of knowing whether it is possible to change this institution in our colonies, without a terrifying accumulation of crimes and calamities.'³ The basic principle persists to this day. The rules that apply to 'us' cannot reasonably be made to apply to 'them' without jeopardizing the stability of our investments, without risking global recession, terror or worse.

2. The achievement of Haitian independence reminds us that politics need not always proceed as 'the art of the possible'. Haitian independence brought to an end one of the most profoundly improbable sequences in all of world history. Contemporary observers were uniformly astounded. As Robin Blackburn observes, Toussaint's forces broke the chain of colonial slavery at 'what had been, in 1789, its strongest link'.⁴ They overcame the most crushing form of ideological prejudice ever faced by a resistance movement and defeated in turn the armies of the most powerful imperialist nations on earth. Their example further provided perhaps the single greatest inspiration for subsequent African and Latin American liberation movements: Haiti provided crucial support to (a notably ungrateful) Simón Bolívar in his struggle against Spain, and in the first decades of the nineteenth century helped motivate rebellions against slavery in Cuba, Jamaica, Brazil and the USA, just as it would later inspire those working for an end to colonialism in Africa.

3. The Haitian revolution is a particularly dramatic example of the way in which historical 'necessity' emerges only retrospectively. Those who refrain from action until the full strategic import of the moment becomes clear will never act. With hindsight, it is obvious that in the circumstances of the late eighteenth century only the achievement of national independence could ever guarantee the lasting abolition of slavery in Haiti. Nevertheless, it took Dessalines ten years to reach this conclusion, and it is one that Toussaint himself was apparently never willing to accept. Toussaint's eventual determination to placate the French, to preserve the essential structure of the plantation economy, to accommodate the white planters, cost him much of his popular support in the final campaign against France: the man who did most to achieve liberation of the slaves was unable to do what was required to preserve this achievement. Similarly, although the slave uprising that sparked the whole sequence was carefully planned and thoroughly prepared by the structural conditions of the plantation economy itself, its full consequences remained obscure long after the event. None of the leaders involved in the uprising deliberately set out to achieve the abolition of slavery. Pursuit of abolition was virtually imposed upon them by the planters' refusal to accept anything other than the quasi-suicidal surrender of their armies. The actual decision to abolish slavery was then forced on a reluctant Sonthonax as a result of intractable divisions among the Saint-Domingue elite.

4. Although the process was contingent and unpredictable, the achievement of Haitian freedom and independence was forced through direct action, without mediation of ‘recognition’, ‘negotiation’ or ‘communication’. Enlightened arguments against slavery were hardly uncommon in the eighteenth century. Montesquieu poured scorn on its racial and religious ‘justifications’, the *Encyclopédie* labelled the colonial slave trade a crime against humanity, Rousseau identified slavery with a denial of humanity pure and simple. The mostly Girondin *Société des Amis des Noirs* supported a ‘carefully prepared freedom for the slaves’ within a reformed colonial system. There’s a world of difference, however, between the assertion of such fine principles and active solidarity with an actual slave uprising. Brissot, founder of the *Société*, called for the repression of the slaves’ uprising as soon as it began. As C.L.R. James points out, impassioned moral outbursts about the evils of exploitation ‘neither then nor now have carried weight’, for when the basis of their authority is in question those in power yield only to irresistible pressure.⁵ The moderates who worked to improve conditions in Saint-Domingue through official legislative channels achieved virtually nothing during three years of indecisive wrangling, and the Jacobins’ eventual acceptance of an end to slavery came a full two and a half years after the 1791 revolt. Unlike the slaves, who lacked any official representation, the island’s mulattos were weakened as much by their futile efforts to solicit recognition from France as they were by their reckless determination to pursue their claims in isolation, without black support. (As for Tocqueville, the darling of those reactionary historians of the French Revolution who have recently gone to some trouble to erase the question of slavery and the colonies from this history altogether⁶ – for all his well-known aversion to slavery, he was to echo the colonial lobby almost to the letter when in the 1830s and 1840s he came to advocate the ‘total domination’ of Algeria through ‘devastation of the country’ and the enforcement of apartheid-style forms of social control.) Among the French philosophes, only Diderot and Raynal, after Mercier, were willing to tell the nations of Europe, in words that may have inspired Toussaint himself, that ‘your slaves are not in need of your generosity or of your councils, in order to break the sacrilegious yoke which oppresses them. . . . A courageous chief only is wanted [who] will come forth and raise the sacred standard of liberty.’

5. The Haitian revolution is a powerful illustration of the way in which any actively universal prescription is simultaneously an exceptional and divisive reevaluation of a hitherto unrepresentable or ‘untouchable’ aspect of its situation. Every truly universal principle, as Alain Badiou suggests, ‘appears at first as the decision of an undecidable or the valorization of something without value’ and its consequent application will ensure that the group or capacity that has so far been ‘minimally existent’ in the situation comes to acquire a maximal intensity.⁷ On the eve of 1791, what virtually all the participants in the debate over slavery accepted, including the future slave leaders themselves, was the impossibility of an independent nation peopled by free citizens of African descent. The achievement of this independence must stand as one of the most categorical blows against racism that has ever been struck. Rarely has race been so clearly understood for what it is – in no sense a source of conflict or difference, but merely an empty signifier harnessed to an economy of plunder and exploitation. Early Haitian writers understood perfectly well the point made more recently by Wallerstein and Balibar, among others, that theories of racial inequality were concocted by white colonists so as to legitimate slavery and the pursuit of European interests. The first constitution of Haiti (1805) broke abruptly with the whole question of race by identifying all Haitians, regardless of the colour of their skin, as black – a characterization that included, among others, a substantial number of German and Polish troops who had joined in the fight against Napoleon. David Nicholls demonstrates that throughout the nineteenth century, though they showed little interest in the contemporary state of African culture per se, ‘Haitian writers, mulatto and black, conservative and Marxist, were practically unanimous in

portraying Haiti as a symbol of African regeneration and of racial equality. Mulatto intellectuals from the elite, who in appearance could well have been taken for Europeans, proudly regarded themselves as Africans, as members of the black race.’⁸ And, as Nicholls goes on to show, nothing has undercut Haitian independence in the post-revolutionary period more than the resurgence of colour prejudice and the re-differentiation of Haitians in terms of either coloured or black.

6. Haiti’s revolution is a reminder that such divisive universality can only be sustained by a revolutionary subject. Haitian independence was the conclusion of the only successful slave uprising that has ever taken place. It isn’t difficult to list the various conjunctural reasons for this success, including the large numbers and concentration of slaves in the colony, the economic and cultural factors which tied them together, the brutality with which most of them were treated, the relative freedom of movement enjoyed by the slaves’ ‘managerial’ elite, the intensity of economic and political divisions among the ruling class, rivalries among the imperialist powers, the inspiration provided by the revolutions in America and France, the quality of Toussaint’s leadership, and so on. One factor above all, however, accounts for the outcome of what became one of the first modern instances of total war: the people’s determination to resist a return to slavery under any circumstances. This is the great constant of the entire revolutionary sequence, and it is this that lends an overall direction to the otherwise convoluted series of its leaders’ tactical manoeuvrings. As Carolyn Fick has established, when Dessalines, Christophe and the other black generals finally broke with the French in 1802, it was the constancy of their troops that enabled their eventual decision. ‘The masses had resisted the French from the very beginning, in spite of, and not because of, their leadership. They had shouldered the whole burden and paid the price of resistance all along, and it was they who had now made possible the political and military reintegration of the leaders in the collective struggle.’⁹ Haiti’s revolutionaries thereby refused today’s logic of ‘democratic intervention’ *avant la lettre*. The recent introduction of democracy to Iraq is only the latest of a long sequence of international attempts to impose self-serving political arrangements upon a people whose participation in the process is only tolerable if it remains utterly passive and obedient; the people of Haiti, by contrast, were determined to remain the subjects rather than the objects of their own liberation. And by doing so, they likewise challenged that category of absolute passivity, that quasi-human ‘remainder’ revived, in a certain sense, by Giorgio Agamben’s recent work on bare life and the *Muselmänner*. Whereas ‘before the revolution many a slave had to be whipped before he could be got to move from where he sat’, James notes, these same ‘subhumans’ then went on to fight ‘one of the greatest revolutionary battles in history’.¹⁰

7. In stark contrast to today’s democratic consensus, Haitian history from Toussaint and Dessalines to Préval and Aristide features the consistent articulation of popular political mobilization and authoritarian leadership. Needless to say, the fortunes of the former have often suffered from the excesses of the latter. It is no less obvious, however, that arguments in favour of ‘democratic reform’ and a judicious ‘separation of powers’ have very largely been made by members of Haiti’s tiny propertied elite, along with their international sponsors. Precisely these kinds of argument have served to paralyse Aristide’s presidency from the moment he first took office. The basic pattern was already set with the reaction to Dessalines’ own brief rule: in his several years as (an undeniably bloodthirsty and autocratic) emperor, Dessalines introduced taxes on trade that were unpopular with the elite, took steps to dissolve prejudice between coloureds and blacks, and began to move towards a more equitable distribution of land. ‘Negroes and mulattos’, he announced, ‘we have ll fought against the whites; the properties which we have conquered by the spilling of our blood belong to us all; I intend that they be divided with equity.’¹¹ Soon afterwards, in October

1806, the mulatto elite had Dessalines assassinated, and were subsequently careful to protect their commercial privileges by imposing strict limits on presidential power. Dessalines' true successor, as James implies, is Fidel Castro. On the other hand, repeated attempts (begun by Toussaint himself) to restore the old plantation economy by authoritarian means foundered on the resolve of the emancipated slaves never to return to their former life. The main goal of most participants in the war of independence was direct control over their own livelihood and land. Haiti's first constitution was careful to block foreign ownership of Haitian property, and by the 1820s many of Haiti's ex-slaves had succeeded in becoming peasant proprietors. The ongoing effort to retain at least some degree of economic autonomy is one of several factors that help explain the exceptionally aggressive economic policies subsequently imposed on the island, first by American occupation (1915–34) and later by the IMF-brokered structural adjustment plans which have effectively continued that occupation by other means. Much of the power of James's celebrated account of the Haitian revolution stems from the fact that it is oriented squarely towards what were, for him, the ongoing struggles for African liberation and global socialism. Today, things may not seem quite so clear-cut. Today's variants on slavery are somewhat less stark than those of 1788, and their justification usually involves arguments more subtle than reference to the colour of one's skin. Some things haven't changed, however. Haiti's revolution proceeded in direct opposition to the great colonial powers of the day, and when after Thermidor even revolutionary France returned to the colonial fold, Haiti alone carried on the struggle to affirm the rights of universal humanity against the predatory imperatives of property. Aristide's greatest crime in the eyes of the 'international community' was surely to have continued this struggle. Thermidorians of every age have tried to present an orderly, pacified picture of historical change as the consolidation of property, prosperity and security. Haiti's revolution testifies to the power of another conception of history and the possibility of a different political future.

Notes

1. Paul Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti*, Common Courage Press, Monroe ME, 1994, p. 63.
2. Eric Williams, *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean 1492–1969*, André Deutsch, London, 1970, p. 245. The standard account of the Haitian revolution remains, with good reason, C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, Penguin, London, 2001; originally published 1938.
3. Florence Gauthier, *Triomphe et mort du droit naturel en Révolution 1789–1795–1802*, PUF, Paris, 2000, pp. 174–7.
4. Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 258.
5. James, *The Black Jacobins*, p. 19.
6. Saint-Domingue isn't even mentioned in Simon Schama's bestselling *Citizens* (Knopf, 1989) or Keith Baker's *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990), while François Furet and Mona Ozouf were unable to find room in their 1,100-page *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1989) for an entry on Toussaint L'Ouverture; the entry on 'Slavery' in their index refers only to America's revolution, not Haiti's.
7. Alain Badiou, 'Huit Thèses sur l'universel', in Jelica Sumic, ed., *Universel, singulier, sujet*, Kimé, Paris, 2000, pp. 14–15; Badiou, *La Commune de Paris: Une déclaration politique sur la politique*, Les Conférences du Rouge-Gorge, Paris, 2003, pp. 27–8.
8. Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1996, p. 5. As Nicholls points out, the term *blanc* in Haitian creole connotes a foreigner of any colour, and can be applied to black Haitians themselves if they look and sound like people from France.
9. Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*,

University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1990, p. 228.

10. James, 'Revolution and the Negro' (1939), in Scott McLemee and Paul Le Blanc, eds, *C.L.R. James and Revolutionary Marxism: Selected Writings of C.L.R. James 1939–1949*, Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands NJ, 1994, p. 79.

11. Dessalines, quoted in Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier*, p. 38. I am grateful to Bob Corbett for his trenchant response to an earlier version of this article.