

# **Children of Guinea. Voodoo, The 1793 Haitian Revolution and After**

John Connor

2003

# Contents

<b>Children of Guinea</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Haiti, Fulcrum of World Trade</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Slavery: Life, Death, Work and Resistance</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Bois-Caiman and After: the Haitian Revolution</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Independence, Land and 'Race'</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Beyond Haiti</b>	<b>36</b>

# Children of Guinea

Papa Legba ouvri baye-a pou mwen  
Pou mwen pase  
Le ma tounen, ma salyie lwa yo.

(Papa Legba, open the gate for me,  
So I can go through,  
When I return, I will honour the *lwa*.)

*Traditional Voodooist Incantation to Legba,  
Gatekeeper to the Spirit World<sup>1</sup>*

Who were the slaves of Haiti? Slaves traded from Africa were criminals, debtors or war captives, but first and foremost, they were peasants.<sup>2</sup> Wars in west Africa were made primarily against villages, not armies, and even those captured on the field of battle were typically peasants levied by their kings for war rather than professional soldiers, much as the the bulk of European armies in the Middle Ages were peasants levied by their overlords to military service as part of their feudal due.

Where did the slaves of Haiti come from? ‘Africa’ was first named by the Arabs (“Affriq”) — a name adopted later by Europeans who also saw it principally as a source of slaves — but for Africans themselves, there was no continent, only a patchwork of kingdoms. For west Africa’s inhabitants, there was only Dahomey, Whydah, Owe and the other petty empires of what is now Benin, their wars formented by English and French money and shoddy one-shot muskets to ensure a ready supply of slaves, up to 40,000 a year to Haiti alone.<sup>3</sup> It was the slave traders that taught their captives they were ‘African’ (as opposed to having distinct tribal identities) as the Middle Passage began and their continent slipped forever over the horizon, with the same condescension that they were baptised Christian on boarding with a splash of brine from a bucket and an injunction in an alien tongue not to eat dogs or rats.

In fact, slave owners were as indifferent to the spirituality of their property as they were to every other aspect of slave life other than that they worked hard and did not revolt. Article 2 of Louis XIV’s 1685 *Code Noir* may have insisted that “[a]ll the slaves in our islands will be baptized and instructed in the Catholic religion, apostolic and Roman”,<sup>4</sup> but if slaves made outward signs of obeisance whilst contining in their hearts to revere Fa, the Oyo lord of fate, Legba who might cheat him, the Yoroba’s snake deity Dambala or any of the other gods and animistic totems of lost Africa, what was that to the law? This, then, was voodoo, an Africa hidden in the hearts of slaves, remembered traditions that formed the core of their identity. Believing that on death

---

<sup>1</sup> Laennec Hurbon’s *Voodoo: Truth and Fantasy* (Thames & Hudson, 1995), p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> CLR James’ *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Allison & Busby, 1980 — first published 1938), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Thomas’ *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440–1870* (Papermac, 1997), pp. 356–359.

<sup>4</sup> Hurbon, *op cit*, p. 23.

they would return home to this promised land, slaves would throw themselves overboard when bought up on deck for air during the Middle Passage rather than go on to Haiti or, on arrival there, curse the dawn of each day of plantation labour they were deprived of Africa and praise each premature death as Africa's realisation.

# Haiti, Fulcrum of World Trade

Columbus came to Haiti ('Ayti' in the local Arawak language, meaning 'mountainous place') in 1492 and called it Hispaniola. The 1.3 million indigenous Arawak and Taino were worked to death by him through the forced mining of silver in under a decade, so the first slaves arrived from Africa in 1503 and by 1517, Charles V authorised the importation of 15,000 slaves.

During the next century, the star of Habsburg dynasty fell in the Europe-wide bloodletting of the Thirty Years War and the hyperinflation created by their glut of conquistador silver from the New World. In its place rose the sun king Louis XIV and France, who appointed Bertrand d'Ogeron first French governor of buccaneer-colonised western Hispaniola — Haiti, or Saint-Domingue as they called it — in 1665 and formally annexed the territory in 1697 with the Treaty of Ryswick.

We have seen already the liberality of this absolute monarch's *Code Noir*, which put (unenforceable) limits on the violence with which masters could chastise their property (eg. beatings of over 100 blows were supposed to be referred to the tender mercies of a magistrate) and even allowed manumission to any slave marrying her White master. What this also did was racialise slavery, disguising its originally purely economic basis. Before the *Code Noir*, poor Whites as well as Blacks served as slaves in the plantations, though these engages were more like indentured servants, bound to slavery for only 36 months before being granted freedom.<sup>1</sup> Those that survived went on to become the overseers, hairdressers and suchlike middle-man parasites of the colony, the *petit blancs* beneath the propertied landowners that ruled San Domingue, the *grande blanc* plantocracy.

With time and the burgeoning prosperity of the colony, the grey (or rather *jaune*) area between Black and White was elaborated to a degree bizarre outside *apartheid* South Africa. 128 different degrees of difference between 'pure Blacks' and 'pure Whites' were recognised, each prejudiced against those even a degree more 'racially impure', but those possessing even one degree of Blackness not qualifying for the legal and social privileges of the White master class because of supposed loyalty to their slave mothers. In his *Black Jacobins*, CLR James tells the story of one such individual, Monsieur Chapuzet de Guerin, who fought for decades to blot out the 128<sup>th</sup> "St Kitts Negro" blood supposedly circulating within him, eventually doing so by proving it was Carib (a people long dead and so not covered by the colony's discriminatory race laws) as no Black slaves were on St Kitts at the time in question.<sup>2</sup>

A particular refinement of this racial discrimination that was to blight the country's politics for centuries to come was the legal creation of an intermediate 'race', the mulattos or *jeunes*<sup>3</sup>, who through thrift, abstemiousness and other bourgeois virtues came to own their own plantations and keep their own slaves, particularly in the south and east of San Domingue. Their success threatened the exclusivity of the White plantocracy and excited the jealousy of *petit blancs*, lead-

---

<sup>1</sup> Laennec Hurbon's *Voodoo: Truth and Fantasy* (Thames & Hudson, 1995), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> CLR James' *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Allison & Busby, 1980 — first published 1938), p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> French for 'yellow', though apparently not meant in any more derogatory sense than 'Black' or 'White'.

ing to the savagely draconian laws of 1758 and after to ‘put them in their place’.<sup>4</sup> It was legal for any White to take anything from a mulatto he thought better quality than he owned himself – be it a piece of furniture, a horse or the coat off his back – and if that mulatto was outraged enough as to raise a hand to stop this, then the law also provided for his hand to be literally struck off. These measures were depressingly typical of a first resort to ‘race’ as a weapon of class conflict in Haiti, even in post-colonial times.

But what of the wealth of Haiti, so jealously guarded by the colony’s racial laws? HWP Hartford has described it as “nearly a Jack-and-the-beanstalk land, throw some seeds over your shoulder and tomorrow there were crops.”<sup>5</sup> Cotton and indigo, both important cash crops, grew naturally. Coffee, cocoa and tobacco were of world class quality and tobacco leaves grew larger on Haiti than in any other region of the Americas. Haiti was the agricultural axis of France’s triangular trade, much as Jamaica was Britain’s. Haiti’s plantocracy were amongst the wealthiest people on the planet at that time – equivalent to today’s oil tycoons – and one of the most sought-after appointments at the French court was governor of San Domingue, much as viceroy of India was later amongst the British. In 1767 alone, the colony exported 123 million tons of sugar, a million tons of indigo, two million of cotton, and much more besides.<sup>6</sup>

As well as the income to be made from marketing beverages de rigueur to the rising metropolitan French bourgeoisie, the port of Nantes existed almost exclusively for the shipping of slaves, some 30,000 a year, and the manufacture of shoddy glass beads and indigo-dyed cotton *indiennes* to trade for them along the Slave Coast. The other four key slave trading ports were Rouen, La Rochelle, Saint-Malo and Bordeaux, the latter also shipping wine as a trade commodity.<sup>7</sup> In all, 2–6 million Frenchmen earned their living directly or indirectly from the slave trade, perhaps a fifth of the country’s entire working population. The king, who granted these trading charters and took a cut from every transaction (the Exclusive, much resented by colonists), was also much enriched by it.

---

<sup>4</sup> James, *op cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> HWP Hartford’s *History of Haiti* at [hartford-hwp.com / archives / 43a / 107.html](http://hartford-hwp.com/archives/43a/107.html), ‘Haiti’s Golden Days?’, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> James, *op cit.*, p.45.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Thomas’ *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440–1870* (Papermac, 1997), pp. 250–253.

# Slavery: Life, Death, Work and Resistance

Half a million slaves laboured on Haiti, a land owned by 30,000 Whites and as many mulattos. They out-numbered the Whites more than ten to one overall, and over 100 to one on the plantations.

Aside from being treated as mere property and beasts of burden, the life of the slaves was extremely harsh. As it was considered cheaper to buy in new slaves from Africa than to keep up numbers through what was called ‘natural increase’, it was normal to work slaves to death, usually in under ten years. Aside from a short siesta under the midday sun and Sundays when they were allowed to attend to their own vegetable patches, slaves were expected to work all the time they weren’t sleeping, from before dawn to after dusk. They were fed half the calories they needed to sustain hard, protracted field labour (hence Sundays off for the veg garden) and any daring to nibble sugar cane to supplement their diet had tin-plate muzzles strapped across their faces to prevent them from doing so again. It was generally agreed that the worst aspect of sugar harvesting was mill work, the cane being rushed to have its sweet sap crushed from it between rollers. If a slave happened to get a limb caught in these rollers through excessive haste or exhaustion, it was simply hacked off with a machete and the wound cauterised with a torch rather than production being slowed. When sleeping, slaves were crowded together in hovels, dying quickly and in huge numbers whenever epidemics spread amongst them or their crops. When sick or injured, the slave owner felt no obligation to support the ‘useless’ slave and when dead, they were unceremoniously dumped in the nearest ditch or on the nearest waste ground available.

Slaves endured such conditions when the alternative was the whip – typically a leathery stretched bull’s pizzle or knotted cord – or whatever savage punishments the slave-owner could devise. Indulged in every whim from childhood and believing “the king is too far and God too high” to stay their hands, these flowers of French civilisation practised every brutality, from recreational rape through to burying disobedient slaves in ant hills or packing their arses with gunpowder and exploding them like sentient fireworks. Such punishments were not sadistic exceptions, they were so much the rule that they acquired their own shorthand names in the colonialists’ argot (eg. ‘blasting a Black’s arse’). Execution was so common that professionals went from plantation to plantation, each toting their own price list – so much for the cropping of ears, so much more for a burning, and so on. Like Machievelli, the owning class evidently felt it better to be feared than loved, for all the paternalistic tales of plantation life they told outsiders.

As “resistance is the natural human reaction to dehumanization”,<sup>1</sup> so the slaves insisted on working as slowly and stupidly as possible. It was impossible to issue them with more complex agricultural equipment than hoes – traditional African implements – as they would either break it or pretend not to know what to do with it. When a slave was asked why he was beating his master’s mule, he replied “When I do not work, I am beaten. When he does not work, I beat him

---

<sup>1</sup> Fredy Perlman’s *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan: An Essay* (Black & Red, 1983), p. 184.

— he is my Negro.”<sup>2</sup> This sort of resistance may have laid the groundwork for racist stereotypes of Black people as stupid or lazy (surely accolades, in context), but don’t we all do it, even when paid for the privilege of profiting some boss? Slave resistance went rather further though. Suicide was common, not so much because life was intolerable but to cheat the master of the slave’s value, both as labour and as commodity. For the same reason, slaves fresh off the boat were often offered poison, and infanticide was also a common clandestine protest. This latter was not restricted to slaves. A third of all White babies succumbed to “jaw-sickness”, an affliction affecting only them and transmitted by slave midwives.<sup>3</sup> Aside from revenge, the motive was often economic. If more than one of the owner’s sons survived to inherit, an estate would be broken up and slave families with it.

Rather than staying on to sabotage the plantation, some chose to resist by running away from it. The *Code Noir* specified flogging and branding as a first punishment for this, and further branding and the cutting of the escapee’s hamstrings for any second attempt (no provision was made for subsequent offences, it was assumed lamed slaves were unable to escape). Frequently, the escapee was additionally humiliated by being forced to kneel before the nearest chapel, publically asking forgiveness for “insubordination to the situation which God has placed him”, a ritual that no doubt increased slave reverence for the merciful Christian deity of their masters. Runaway slaves were tracked by professionals, often free Blacks with bloodhounds trained to kill. At any show of resistance from the runaway, they were allowed to.

Some runaways didn’t run far, hovering around the edges of their plantation so their families could feed them, whereas others hid alone in the forgotten places of Haiti leading a hand-to-mouth existence until recaptured by the slave-hunters. Not all did, though. From as early as 1681, when San Domingue was still a Spanish possession, there were warnings of Maroonage, when runaways banded together to form their own outlaw communities. This was a problem that rapidly got out of hand. Between 1764 and 1793, the newspapers reported 48,000 runaways as Maroons (from the Portuguese *cimarron*, meaning; ‘wild’).<sup>4</sup> The Maroons lived in self-sufficient, palisaded communities in the mountains above Cap Francis, Cul-de-Sac and southern Cayes. One community survived 85 years until the French granted them *de facto* independence whereas elsewhere it was impossible for Whites to wander the hills day or night, even in groups. Attempts were made to subdue the Maroons with armed expeditions of mulatto *marcehaussee*, but they were going up against masters of guerilla warfare with nothing to lose, so these expeditions typically failed bloodily.

Life in the Maroon compounds was much like that in any African village, although given their former masters’ foremost desire was to painfully exterminate them, concerns about security were naturally overriding. The former peasants returned to their peasant ways and a chief ruled, typically tyrannically.<sup>5</sup> Those fleeing to Maroon communities had to be initiated by ordeal, their slave brands being removed by scarification or the application of corrosive sap from native plants. They were then taught the community’s secret handshakes and passwords. It should be said here that those that failed to escape to Maroon communities under their own steam — for

---

<sup>2</sup> CLR James’ *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Allison & Busby, 1980 — first published 1938), p.15.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>4</sup> Wade Davis’s *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (Collins, 1986), p. 194.

<sup>5</sup> Eli Sagan’s *At the Dawn of Tyranny: The Origins of Individualism, Political Oppression and the State* (Vintage, 1986), Part I, shows this was typical African social organisation, given a peasant economy.



example, if captured during a raid on a plantation — were treated as slaves, with death the punishment for any threatening the community's security (eg. by trying to escape it). Sadly this, too, was typically African. After all, almost no slaves arrived in Haiti that were not first captured from one African kingdom by another. Their fate would almost certainly have been either execution or farm work for their captors if they had not been sold on to Europeans. Continuing enslavement was considered the penalty for their lack of courage. Significantly, Maroon identity was not determined by tribe, but by ritual initiation onto the secret society of the Maroons. Secret societies were also key in cutting across clan and occasionally tribal affiliations in west Africa,<sup>6</sup> so here voodoo was key in providing the medium by which this cultural amalgamation was made possible. As voodoo is strictly hierarchical, this also served to reinforce the power of the chief, who was hougan (priest) and to whom those he initiated owed absolute loyalty. Another significant factor in maintaining the Africanness of Maroon communities — particularly their spiritual orientation — was that many runaways were bossales (newcomers), fled to them straight from the boat rather than from plantations, apparently as many as a fifth by 1788. As Wade Davis notes in his fascinating popular ethno-botanical account of Haitian voodoo, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*<sup>7</sup>

[T]hese fresh arrivals from Africa, ignorant of the ways of the colony, were the ones invariably to flee to the hills. Thus a good many of the recruits to the Maroon communities were the individuals least socialized into the regime of the whites. Into their new homes, then, they brought not the burdens of slavery but the ways of Africa.

As the Maroons often found themselves in a war for survival against Haiti's rulers, their resistance often segued into something more militant than mere survivalism, taking the war to the enemy. Even the Blacks that hadn't fled their plantation felt it worth losing sleep to ceremonially drum and chant at night<sup>8</sup>

Eh! Eh! Bomba! Heu! Heu!

Canga, bafio te!

Canga, moune de le!

Canga, do ki la!

Canga, li

(We swear to destroy the whites and all that they possess; let us die rather than fail to keep this vow.)

In 1671, Padre Jean killed his master and recruited twenty other Africans to strangle every White on the island. Unsurprisingly, given the small numbers and in-ye-face nature of this first revolt, it was quickly and easily suppressed.

Half a century later the much smarter and stealthier runaway Francois Makandal bought island-wide terror to the plantocracy.<sup>9</sup> Originally Mandingue, when Makandal lost an arm to the sugar mill, he claimed to have had a vision of the great cities of Guinea, magnificent in comparison to Haiti's diminutive capital Port-au-Prince, described by one European as "a Tartar camp",

---

<sup>6</sup> Davis, *op cit.*, p. 195.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>8</sup> James, *op cit.*, 18. As a rather doctrinaire Marxist, James seems excessively embarrassed by voodoo and disparages it as an "African cult" (*ibid.*, p.18). His reasons why I will return to later.

<sup>9</sup> Davis, *op cit.*, pp. 189–200.

its streets running with filth and its Christian churches with corruption. Immediately after his maiming, Makandal affected the role of prophet and built a considerable following in northern Limbe. By 1740, Makandal had fled to the Maroons and used their secret networks to build a force of thousands across Haiti, infiltrating every home and plantation and bringing poison to each, adapted from west African lore to local circumstances. Dependent on their servants, the plantocracy was helpless as one day their livestock died, the next their domestic animals, finally themselves and their families. 6,000 were killed before Makandal was through. The Whites' powerlessness only increased their brutality. Laws were passed prohibiting slave preparation of any medicine except snakebite treatments, and all suspected poisoners were mercilessly tortured and burned. When — despite the strictest security, including the poisoning of any thought traitors — Makandal was finally betrayed and caught in 1757,<sup>10</sup> the attempt to burn him in the streets of Haiti's second city, Cap-Francois, went awry. Though only one-armed, he fought free of his shackles and leapt from the flames. Rich Whites that had come to gloat fled in terror. Though soldiers said they recaptured the prophet and had thrown him back into the flames bound to a plank, the Blacks could not give up their symbol of liberation and so claimed Makandal had magically transformed himself into a fly and so escaped even that. Tropical Haiti abounds with flies, each a reminder of Makandal and ironically, they — or at least their cousins, the mosquitoes, as carriers of yellow fever — did have as big role to play in subsequent struggle for freedom. In his honour, even to this day, talismans, poisons and even an entire voodoo society bear Makandal's name.

Makandal's revolt may have laid an island-wise network of secret communication between the Maroon communities and into the towns and plantations, but it was as nothing compared to what the voodooists were to achieve from the Bois-Caiman ceremony of 14<sup>th</sup> August 1791.

---

<sup>10</sup> Laennec Hurbon's *Voodoo: Truth and Fantasy* (Thames & Hudson, 1995), p. 40.

## Bois-Caiman and After: the Haitian Revolution

The roots of the Haitian revolution are in the French revolution, as the French revolution's are in Haiti. The huge profits of the slave trade gave the French bourgeoisie economic power and the confidence to challenge a bungling and rapacious feudal taxation system under Louis XVI. It's unsurprising then that Enlightenment icons like Voltaire, who best articulated this liberal discontent, had slave ships unironically named after him.<sup>1</sup> It's also unsurprising that it was Club Massiac,<sup>2</sup> representing the colonial interest amongst the Third Estate, that gave them the mettle to take the Tennis Court Oath refusing to disperse without Louis XVI accepting bourgeois demands. It was the monarch's stalling on this that precipitated the starving, street-level mob's storming of the Bastille on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1789, the start of the French revolution proper.

News of events in France emboldened the *petit blancs* in Haiti, the Patriots of St. Marc declaring for the revolution. The plantocracy, which had previously executed mulattos petitioning for an end to discrimination against them, then adopted them as fellow estate-holders and their natural allies in order to drive the Patriots into the sea. This alliance of class against race provoked much resentful grumbling amongst *petit blancs*, who disregarded warnings not to speak of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" before slaves.

The slaves, meanwhile, had already formed their own analysis, that "the white slaves in France had risen, and killed their masters, and were now enjoying the fruits of the earth."<sup>3</sup> Sensing freedom, runaway coachman and hougan Boukman Dutty chose to follow their example, using his underground communication network between Maroon bands and plantation slaves to gather delegates in the Bois-Caiman on 17<sup>th</sup> August. A young mulatto priestess Cecile Fatiman led this rite by singing songs of Africa invoking Ogoun, god of fire, iron and war, and sacrificing a black pig. After all present had drunk its blood to bind themselves together in revolt, Boukman addressed them<sup>4</sup>

The god of the white people demands of them crimes; our god asks for good deeds.  
But this god who is so good demands vengeance! He will direct our hands; he will aid us. Cast away the image of the god of the whites, who thirsts for our tears, and listen to the voice of liberty that speaks in all of our hearts.

Word went back to the plantations and a week later, on 25<sup>th</sup> August, came the Night of Fire. Across the whole North Plain, 50,000 rose and, with them, an inferno. 200 sugar plantations burned and with them six times as many coffee plantations, a quarter of all those on the island. The flames lit the night's sky and could be seen as far away as the Bahamas. For three weeks afterwards, smoke and burning cane straw obscured the tropical sun and choked the sea with

---

<sup>1</sup> Hugh Thomas' *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440-1870* (Papermac, 1997), p. 463.

<sup>2</sup> CLR James' *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Allison & Busby, 1980 – first published 1938), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> Laennec Hurbon's *Voodoo: Truth and Fantasy* (Thames & Hudson, 1995), p. 45.

ash. On each plantation, slaves killed their own masters, those best treated — such as those of Gallifet — paradoxically showing them least mercy. As CLR James rightly put it<sup>5</sup>

For two centuries the higher civilisation had shown them that power was used for wreaking your will on those whom you controlled. Now that they held power they did as they had been taught.

Thousands of plantocrats were strangled or battered to death that first night. Each atrocity was repayed in kind. Grenada-born Henri Christophe had a carpenter sawed to death between his own boards. With the war cry of “Vengeance! Vengeance!”, Jean Jacques Dessalines carried a White child impaled on a pike before him as a battle standard. As clear-sighted as the Luddites a generation later, the insurgent slaves had no interest in preserving any part of the system that was enslaving them and so destroyed without restraint.

The squabbling between republican *petit blancs* and the alliance of grand blancs and mulattos meant the slave revolt continued unchecked for the next three months, at one point even threatening the major port of Le Cap. However, confined by the fortresses of Cordon of the West, the North Plain burned flat and with Boukman killed in an ambush, the insurgents began to starve. Lesser Maroon leaders like Jean-Francois and Georges Biassou secretly agreed to sell them out in exchange for amnesty for the leadership. The freshly reunited and arrogant plantocracy wouldn’t even accept that, so they then fled to the Spanish half of the island, Jean-Francois taking with him as secretary someone still calling himself Toussainte Breda — named after the plantation that educated him and which he defended until its destruction became inevitable — but later better known as L’Ouverture as a consequence of his military prowess.

On 18<sup>th</sup> September 1792, commissioner Sonthonax arrived at half-ruined Le Cap from Paris with news of the execution of Louis XVI two months before. As in the English Civil War, the killing of the king was a consequence of the will of the people in the streets, rather than the aspirant bourgeois ruling class, who feared the precedent the literal and symbolic decapitation of the State might set. By this stage, the street-level sans culottes despised the ‘aristocrats of the skin’ (racists, particularly the White plantocracy) as much as the ‘aristocrats of the blood’ (the nobility) and ‘aristocrats of religion’ (the clergy). Robespierre himself had effectively told the French Assembly “Perish the colonies rather than our principles”, meaning the Rights of Man for all men, including those the plantocracy thought better classified as mere property and so (for liberals) sacrosanct. Sonthonax was actually of the Right, associated with Club Massiac, but of a character inclined to fulfil his commission way in excess of either the expectations or desires of those that gave it to him. Sent to enforce mulatto rights, Sonthonax faced rebellion both from his nominal allies, scarlet cockade-wearing Patriots, and Royalist-commanded troops shipped in with him from France. Faced with destruction at their hands by October, Sonthonax freely distributed arms to the labourers and proclaimed the end of slavery:<sup>6</sup>

If you wish to keep your liberty use your arms on the day that the white authorities ask you for them, because any such request is the infallible sign and precursor of the return to slavery.

---

<sup>5</sup> James, *op cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 337. With typical hero-worship, James claims Toussainte first armed the people in (slow) response to the 1802 French invasion whilst directly quoting Sonthonax doing it a decade earlier!

Whilst Sonthonx succeeded in further devastating Le Cap, he failed to win over rebels fighting from exile in Spanish San Domingue, who knew only the Assembly in Paris rather than its appointed commissioner had the power to end slavery.

The anti-revolutionary Spanish commander, the marquis d'Hermona, had told the self-liberated slaves that had fled into his territory that only a king could free slaves, conveniently enough for him as the French had just executed theirs. Despite this, the Spanish army was of necessity an incredible mixture of dissent and even saw royalist Whites under the command of voodooist Marroons like Biassou, whose tent was covered in amulets and whose Romaine de Prophetesse band carried cow tail charms into battle which they believed protected them from musket balls. A contemporary French account describes a raid on one of their camps:<sup>7</sup>

[I]n the ground along the route [were] large perches on which a variety of dead birds had been affixed ... On the road at intervals there were cut up birds surrounded by stones, and also a dozen broken eggs surrounded by large circles. What was our surprise to see black males leaping about and more than 200 women dancing and singing in all security ... The voodoo priestess had not fled ... she spoke no creole ... Both the men and the women said that there could be no human power over her ... she was of the Voodoo cult.

Necessarily, Maroon tactics of deadfall booby traps, poison and frenzied, mobbing ambush to the blare of the conch at bends in the road predominated, but this was not for Toussainte L'Ouverture. Like Fairfax and Cromwell during the English Civil War, faced with early defeat, he set about creating a small, well-armed disciplined military force, much as his English revolutionary forebears created the New Model Army. The muskets, powder and European drill came from officers of Spain, but the troops' loyalty was to Toussainte and Toussainte alone. Like his kindly masters on the Breda plantation, Toussainte's religious inclinations were European too, his Catholicism being no mask for voodoo, a faith he disparaged as enthusiastically as "backwards" as his hagiographer CLR James was to do a century later.

It was as much a result of this training as his military and diplomatic skills that Toussainte found this war the making of him. He gained much territory, recruits and thus power by going directly against d'Hermona's orders and announcing emancipation as he advanced into French San Domingue, something he couldn't have got away with if he hadn't been surrounded by troops loyal to him. Curiously, L'Ouverture claimed his African father was a "native chieftain"<sup>8</sup> – consistent with the marquis' injunction, was Toussainte liberating slaves as a king during his advance? History records no answer either way, though when the French Assembly backed Sonthonax's proclamation ending slavery without debate in May 1793, Toussainte immediately abandoned the Spanish cause for France's, taking his 5,000 troops and his lieutenants Dessalines and Christophe with him. In doing so, he left his Maroon rivals – all under Spanish command and dependant on them militarily – way behind. Sonthonax also needed Toussainte, having alienated even the mulattos he was sent to liberate by his decree emancipating their human 'property'.

As a result of Club Massiac plotting, Sonthonax was recalled to Paris to face trial, replaced as commissioner by Leveaux as governor. He had his work cut out for him as the British landed from Jamaica at Jeremie on 19<sup>th</sup> September 1794, their commander Dundas describing his invasion of

---

<sup>7</sup> Wade Davis's *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (Collins, 1986), p. 203.

<sup>8</sup> James, *op cit.*, p. 17.

the finest colony in the world in familiar, hypocritical imperialist language as “not a war for riches or local aggrandizement, but a war for security.”<sup>9</sup> With allegiances of property overriding those of patriotism, the plantocracy welcomed the British and their policy of reintroducing slavery. By 4<sup>th</sup> February 1795, George III’s birthday, they took Port-au-Prince, sealing their control of the western seaboard and the south. After refusing their bribes, Leveaux was forced to flee to the west. Only here and around the southern seaport, the Mole St. Nicholas, did resistance continue. The Mole was held by the mulatto Andre Rigaud, a compitent administrator and veteran not only of the war in the west but also under French command during the American War of Independence. A militant for his caste, Rigaud would allow no Black or White command over any mulatto in his army and ruthlessly executed anyone taking bribes from the British, who wanted to reintroduce legal discriminations against mulattos as well as slavery.

As far as the British were concerned, Haitian liberty threatened slavery in their own colonies, particularly Jamaica where Maroons had already forced them to accept their autonomy. However, their pro-slavery policy proved a complete liability in pacifying the West and soon the war bogged down into a stalemate where the rainy season, with its mosquitoes and their yellow fever, took its toll by the thousands. Come 20<sup>th</sup> March 1796, mulattos less principled than Rigaud and jealous of Toussainte’s pre-eminence attempted to break this stalemate with a coup d’etat. After showing provocative contempt for his decrees, Le Cap’s administrator Valatte seized governor Leveaux and pronounced himself Haiti’s ruler. Rather than see the country turned over to the British, Toussainte had Dessalines march on the city and expel Valatte. This proved to be a bit of a counter-coup because no sooner where the victory celebrations over than Toussainte suggested Leveaux was exhausted by his experience and should return to France.

He was replaced by commissioners headed by Sonthonax who landed at Le Cap on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1796. Sonthonax had been acquitted for his handling of the colony following the fall of Robespierre, but his handling of the investigation of Valatte’s coup showed characteristically disastrous zeal and tactlessness. To discover whether Rigaud had any hand in it, he sent him a delegation including one general Desfourneaux, a man who had previously tried to assassinate Rigaud and who seduced his fiancée on arrival in Les Cayes. Perhaps this was a deliberate provocation, as Sonthonax had also been briefed to end discrimination in the colony (by as well as against mulattos) and bring Rigaud under his command. Instead, rumour was spread that the French wanted to reintroduce slavery, leading the massacre of republican White and Rigaud’s break with France. Thereafter, French proclamations were dragged through the streets of Les Cayes at the tail of an ass.

On 17<sup>th</sup> August 1797, shortly after being appointed governor and commander-in-chief on Sonthonax’s recommendation, Toussainte expelled him with the same warm praise that he had sent Leveaux packing. The people were dumbfounded — Sonthonax was a virtual saint to them, having forbidden beating on plantations,<sup>10</sup> issued anti-slavery proclamations in creole and encouraged Black literacy to break their administrative dependence on White or mulatto clerks, amongst other things — but Toussainte claimed that he had suggested they “kill all the whites and make ourselves independent”.<sup>11</sup> If he had suggested such a thing, the commissioner was well in advance of Toussainte’s own analysis and more akin to that of the people. Sonthonax had been in

---

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 174–175.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 189.

Paris to see the end of the Terror — where the ‘aristocracy of the blood’ met the same fate courtesy of Madame Guillotine that he advocated for the British-supporting ‘aristocracy of the skin’ on Haiti — and CLR James suggests that independence was the country’s only guarantee against the reimposition of slavery from France now the mercantile Right had resumed control of the Directory.<sup>12</sup> For reasons that will be discussed below, a break with France was inconceivable for Toussainte. He even had his adopted son Moïse executed for advocating the same thing just prior to the French invasion four years later. It would be ungenerous to suggest Sonthonax was also removed as an obstacle to Toussainte’s Lenin-like ambition to accumulate all power to himself, but not unlikely.

By January 1798, the British under general Maitland finally admitted defeat and negotiated their departure via the Mole St. Nicholas. The British military historian Sir Jeffery Fortesque concluded:<sup>13</sup>

After long and careful study, I have come to the conclusion that the West Indian campaigns, both to windward and to leeward, which were the essence of Pitt’s military policy, cost England in Army and Navy little fewer than one hundred thousand men, about one-half of them dead, the remainder permanently unfitted for service... England’s soldiers had been sacrificed, her treasure squandered, her influence in Europe weakened, her arm for six fateful years fettered and paralysed.

Ironically, then, the insurgent slaves of Haiti may have been the unintentional saviours of the French revolution. Still, the British had the last laugh. Dedicated to reviving Haiti’s economy, Toussainte needed to export cash crops to America and to import guns. Even then masters of the sea in the Caribbean, the British threatened to blockade Haiti’s ports, preventing this trade, unless they were allowed to use the ports themselves. Toussainte was reluctant to do this as Britain was then at war with France. By agreeing to British terms, Toussainte earned the animosity of Rigaud, precipitating a civil war between northern Blacks and southern mulattos<sup>14</sup> that made Toussainte even more militarily dependant on the British. Dessalines’ intemperate massacre of hundreds of Rigaud’s officers at the end of the war made for a heritage of bitterness between Blacks and mulattos. Furthermore, Toussainte’s expulsion of Sonthonax’s replacement as France’s agent, general Hedouville, sowed seeds for Napoleon’s 1802 invasion. Mindful of the post-war situation, it was Hedouville that poisoned relations between Toussainte and Rigaud and latter pressed for French invasion.

Rigaud’s defeat and Hedouville’s expulsion removed Toussainte’s last obstacle to absolute power, as reflected in his July 1800 Constitution, which he published without consultation with fellow Black generals Christophe and Dessalines or even his adopted son Moïse (whose fate we already know). The Constitution was not a declaration of independence, but it made any French official a mere guest of Toussainte rather than having a permanent place in Haiti’s power structure. It was not a declaration of independence as Toussainte wanted to retain French trade links and, as consul, France also formed a basis of his legitimacy over and above the pure military

---

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 213–214.

<sup>14</sup> Although personal racial prejudice by both Rigaud and Toussainte have been strongly denied — not least as a significant portion of Toussainte’s officers were mulatto themselves — the basis of Rigaud’s power was mulatto solidarity and, rightly or wrongly, the war was seen in these terms on the ground by its participants.

force of the Army. Still, this and the annexation of Spanish San Domingue gave Napoleon ample excuse to invade.

There were strange parallels between Napoleon and Toussainte. Both came from lowly, provincial origins with claims to distant, minor nobility. Both were opportunistic power seekers that rose through organisational and military genius. As noted above, Napoleon probably indirectly owed Toussainte much, yet he chose to war on someone he could have more easily simply done business with. CLR James suggests this was down to Napoleon's racism, his early career advancement being stalled by the mulatto general Dumas,<sup>15</sup> whereas others have suggested it was ex-colonist (and ex-Royalist) Josephine that incited him. More relevantly, San Domingue was still Frances's richest colony and after Napoleon's coup, it was the mercantile bourgeoisie rather than 1792 *san culottes* enraged at 'aristocracy of the skin' that held sway. Napoleon had the latter cowed with his secret police and grapeshot.

Napoleon's invasion plan considered of three phases:

- Telling Haiti's leaders whatever they wanted to hear whilst his army was landed without their opposition
- Once the army had safely landed, capturing the leadership by offering them the honour of a trip to France and deporting them forcibly as 'outlaws' if they refused
- Once the leadership had been neutralised, general disarmament of the population and the demotion of all Black officers (or, as the First Consul himself so unattractively put it, "rip[ping] the epaulettes off the shoulders of every nigger").

And afterwards, the reintroduction of the Napoleonic version of the *ancienne régime*, slavery, mulatto discrimination and all. Even Napoleon's brother-in-law general Leclerc and others of the French high command did not know his ultimate aim and none of the 12,000 men gathered in the harbours of France in December 1801 awaiting their voyage to Haiti thought what was to come was anything short of another revolutionary 'war of liberation'. The British were only too happy to let the invasion fleet proceed unharassed, knowing from their own bitter experience that Haiti was the graveyard of armies.

Alerted by Napoleon's failure to acknowledge letters from his own consul, Toussaunte arranged to eavesdrop on Leclerc's blandishments to Christophe when the general began disembarking his army at Le Cap on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1802. Two days later, Christophe took action, mobilising the garrison from nearby Fort Libertie to torch Le Cap and flee into the mountains. 100 million francs-worth of damage were done and of 2,000 homes in the port, only 59 remained standing after this start to Christophe's scorched earth policy. This action certainly hurt the French war effort badly, as Leclerc noted in his dispatches:<sup>16</sup>

I am here without food or money. The burning of Le Cap and the districts through which the rebels have retired deprives me of all resources of this kind. It is necessary that the Government send me provisions, money, troops. That is the only means of ensuring the preservation of San Domingo.

---

<sup>15</sup> James, *op cit.*, pp. 269–270.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 304. Leclerc concludes by complaining about the merchants of Le Cap being "most Jewish", as if an accusation. Anti-semitism was one prejudice Napoleon did not share with his brother-in-law.



This was a good start, but because Toussainte had staked so much on France and alienated so many with his policy of reviving the plantations, the general population of Haiti were confused and he only roused them too late. Half of Toussainte's generals joined their 'allies', the French, and even Toussainte's own brother Paul was tricked into surrendering his garrison to them without a shot fired. Whilst Toussainte dithered, Dessalines (who, unlike Toussaunte, had been viciously whipped as a slave and consequently had no love for Frenchmen) immediately marched his troops from St. Marc, burning towns and plantations en route to Le Cap to cut off French lines of supply. Frustrated in this, Dessalines made a stand against the bulk of the French army at the fortress of Crete-a-Pierriot, 20-24<sup>th</sup> March 1802. Outnumbered ten-to-one and assailed by artillery under the command of the mulatto general Petion, willing and able to "pound the fortress and the redoubts to dust", Dessalines ran up a red flag at each corner of the fortress indicating no quarter was to be given or received. He told his troops:<sup>17</sup>

[T]ake courage, and you will see that when the French are few we shall harass them, we shall beat them, we shall burn the harvests and retire to the mountains. They will not be able to guard the country and they will have to leave. Then I shall make you independent. There will be no more whites among you.

Dessalines had spoken the words that had Sonthonax dismissed and Moise shot. He bestrode the ramparts of Crete-a-Pierriot with a bullet hole through his hat and bare to his waist to show the whip scars of his former enslavement. When the artillery made further defence of the fortress impossible, he cut his way out leaving 400 defenders dead to 4,000 French. A shocked Leclerc begged his officers to conceal the extent of their losses from Napoleon.

Despite this, resistance crumbled. Toussainte sent Christophe to negotiate with Leclerc only to have him defect, taking a third of the Haitian army with him. Toussainte continued to negotiate with Leclerc through Christophe and then came to Le Cap himself to sue for peace by April 1802. His terms were that his army remain intact (so no epaulettes torn from shoulders), but as he'd seen his mulatto rival Rigaud forced onto a French ship and bundled off to Madagascar at the start of the war of independence, so Toussainte was shanghied himself on 7<sup>th</sup> June 1802, believing Leclerc was exceeding his orders and Napoleon would understand if only he could put his case in person. Toussainte died of neglect a year later in the mountain prison of Fort-de-Jour, spending his last days writing pathetic appeals to the First Consul, unable to believe Napoleon himself was the one responsible for his deprivations.

In the year it took Toussainte to die, Leclerc's army was destroyed by yellow fever and the guerrilla tactics of Maroon bands under the likes of Derance, Samedi Smith,<sup>18</sup> Jean Panier and others. So many died that it was impossible to give them individual burials – they were merely heaped in pits. Leclerc, who thought his troubles were over with the deportation of Toussainte now complained "Where there was one Toussainte, now there are a thousand". His own army exhausted, Leclerc turned to Dessalines and Christophe to put down the Maroon bands. Rather than exploiting his weakness, they readily complied. Christophe kept channels of communication open with the very Maroons his troops were hunting, so enfeebled was the French cause, and regularly begged Leclerc to evacuate him to France. Dessalines – with his talk of "independence"

---

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 314–315.

<sup>18</sup> A voodooist name if ever there was one! Baron Samedi was a deity of death worshipped at crossroads and was latter assumed as a politically opportune persona by Jean Claude Duvalier.

at Crete-a-Pierriot — may have been biding his time and eliminating rivals for power on his Maroon hunts, but there was no doubt which master he served when he was doing this either. As the historian Lacroix observed:<sup>19</sup>

[I]n the new insurrection of San Domingo, as in all insurrections which attack constituted authority, it was not the avowed chiefs who gave the signals for revolt but obscure creatures for the greater part personal enemies of the coloured generals.

It is also worth noting that there was an element of religious warfare in all this. It was voodooist Maroons that kept the independence struggle alive whilst the Black generals, professing Christianity, served the counter-revolution.

The counter-revolution dealt itself blow after blow. Over-confident from Leclerc's exaggerated reports, general Richepanse had slavery voted back in May 1802. The old plantocracy began returning under the slogan "no slavery, no colony" and if that did not convince the people their liberty was threatened, escapees fleeing the Cockarde slave ship in Le Cap harbour come July 1802 certainly did. Horrified by the unveiling of Napoleon's hidden intentions, Leclerc wrote frankly to his brother-in-law at last.<sup>20</sup>

My letter will surprise you, Citizen Consul, after those I have written to you. But what general could calculate on a mortality of four-fifths of his army and the uselessness of the remainder, who has been left without funds as I have, in a country where purchases are made only for their weight in gold and where with money I might have rid of much discontent? Could I have expected, in these circumstances, the law relating to the slave-trade and above all the decrees of General Richepanse re-establishing slavery and forbidding the men of colour from signing themselves as citizens?

Despite this, Christophe and Dessalines continued to support him. When desperation and shortage of troops led Leclerc to decide on a war to the death, massacring every Black without distinction — in effect, a course of genocide — Christophe and Dessalines were his willing agents. Only days before Leclerc himself succumbed to yellow fever on 18<sup>th</sup> October 1802, Christophe and Dessalines were still actively supporting him. They only jumped ship to the resistance when they had no other option left if they were to retain their armies and their power — and only then because their mulatto rival Rigaud had done so first.

Leclerc was succeeded by Rochambeau, who arrived on Haiti just as the fever season was receding with 10,000 reinforcements. He was bent on continuing Leclerc's policy of genocide: "A point no less essential for the success of our army is the total destruction of the black and Mulatto generals, officers and soldiers."<sup>21</sup> At this point, all that had any option were under arms, all were soldiers irrespective of age or gender. Rochambeau and the returned plantocracy's intent was to kill each and every one tainted with liberty and restock the island in entiris from Africa. To this end, Rochambeau drowned so many captives in Port-Republicain<sup>22</sup> harbour that locals refused to eat fish from it and the town's commander refused to accept delivery of a further 10,000 shot used

---

<sup>19</sup> James, *op cit.*, p. 338.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 343–344.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 357.

<sup>22</sup> The French revolutionary name for Port-au-Prince.

to weight down those next to be drowned. Rochambeau banished him for it and then imported 1,500 bloodhounds, whose arrival was greeted by the cream of colonial society at a fete held in the amphitheatre of a former Jesuit colony. Like the slaveholding predecessors they so admired, the Romans, they proceeded to hold a circus where Black captives were literally thrown to the dogs. When the animals failed to do their duty, the French commander<sup>23</sup>

jumped into the arena and with a stroke of his sword cut open the belly of the black. At the sight and scent of the blood the dogs threw themselves on the black and devoured him in a twinkling, while the applause ran round the arena and the band played.

French ladies in all their finery then kissed the dogs and licked the bloody saliva from their lips.

Such terror tactics were borne of desperation and failed. Each French atrocity was met in kind – in one celebrated incident, Dessalines responded to the burial alive of 500 labourers by hanging an identical number of French officers from every available tree – and the absence of any expectation of mercy only strengthened resolve. The wife of Maroon chieftain Chevalier told him “how sweet it is to die for liberty” and her daughters “Be glad you will not be the mothers of slaves” when they hesitated at the foot of the gallows before placing the noose around her own neck.<sup>24</sup> Death, moreover, represented a return to Africa. Rochambeau’s troops proved no more immune to fever than Laveau’s, they experienced the same hunger as the island burned from end to end, and they too realised they were fighting for a most unjust cause. On hearing the Blacks singing the Marseillaise and the Ca Ira, Polish troops fresh from their own subjugation by Napoleon in the name of liberty defected. Nor were they the only ones.

Come 16<sup>th</sup> November 1803, Haitian armies under Dessalines converged on Le Cap and a week later drove Rochambeau into the sea. Of 60,000 that sailed from France during the war of independence, not one escaped death or capture by the British navy blockade. Of all defeats Napoleon suffered before the invasion of Russia, this was his greatest, though almost totally excluded from orthodox histories of the era. Napoleon admitted as much himself in final exile on St. Helena.<sup>25</sup> The victors also suffered grievously, with agriculture reduced to ashes, and half the island’s 30,000 mulattos and more than a third of its 500,000 Black inhabitants dead. Despite this, it was also the most successful slave revolt in history, the first victorious modern anti-colonial war.

The French loss of Haiti had two other consequences of worldwide significance.

The first was that the frustration of Napoleon’s imperial ambitions in the Caribbean led him to sell of the huge tract of land between the Mississippi delta and the Canadian border discovered the previous century by the duke of Lasalle in order to finance his military adventures in Europe. The November 1803 Louisiana Purchase allowed US expansion, first into Texas and then the West, a key step towards its becoming a 20<sup>th</sup> century superpower. It also led to war with the British, who had their own Caribbean ambitions. These, too, were frustrated at the 1814 battle of Chalmette on the swampy southern outskirts of New Orleans, where a ragtag collection of city militia, pirates under Pete Retief and a local native American band defeated the British expeditionary force, confirming the city as an American holding.

---

<sup>23</sup> James, *op cit.*, p. 360.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 361–362.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 373.

The second consequence was Pitt's decision to abolish the slave trade, a measure approved by Parliament on 1<sup>st</sup> May, 1807. This has often been represented as a victory of liberal conscience over hard economics, but CLR James argues convincingly that it was in fact a strategic attack on France's remaining Caribbean colonies such as Martinique and Guadeloupe, largely supplied with slaves by British merchants who were, in effect, trading with the enemy.<sup>26</sup> Britain had achieved global naval dominance following Nelson's victory over French and Spanish fleets at Trafalgar in 1805 and used slavery as a pretext to reinforce this dominance by searching ships of other nations — acting as a 'world policeman', in effect.<sup>27</sup> It's noteworthy that Britain didn't abolish slavery itself until 1833, so as not to disadvantage their own plantocrats in Jamaica, who relied on 'natural increase' in the interim. Thereafter, their interests were sidelined by the metropolitan industrialist victors of the great Reform debate.

---

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 51–54.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas, *op cit.*, p. 573.

# Independence, Land and ‘Race’

When Dessaline’s intoxicated mulatto underling Boisrond-Tonnerrer read the declaration of independence on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1803, he felt moved to complain<sup>1</sup>

This doesn’t say what we really feel. For our declaration of independence, we should have the skin of a blanc for parchment, his skull for inkwell, his blood for ink, and a bayonet for pen!

Dessalines signed anyway, becoming the first ruler of independent Haiti,<sup>2</sup> later its self-styled emperor (a parody of Napoleon’s own imperial pretensions) and ironically a voodoo lwa.

In fulfilment of the pledge he made at Crete-a-Pierriot, Dessalines then tore the white strip from the French flag at Archaie to create a new Haitian one, then tore the Whites from the island, issuing orders for their general massacre in January 1805. By fatally once again putting property before principle, thousands of the old plantocracy had remained after independence, those that did not fleeing to France or New Orleans.<sup>3</sup> By the end of March, only the Polish mutineers, reclassified as ‘Black’ in the political rather than phenotypical sense, survived and Dessalines issued a further proclamation banning any foreigner from owning any land or business in Haiti. Blackness became a precondition for citizenship of Haiti, proudly the Caribbean’s first Black state.

Often dismissed as a “barbarian” because of his proclamation of January 1805, Dessalines’ prohibition on foreign ownership – and even today in Haiti, ‘blanc’ as often means ‘foreigner’ as ‘White’ – showed considerably more foresight than Toussaint’s policies and even those of the majority of 20<sup>th</sup> century national liberationists.<sup>4</sup> Before the term was even coined, he appreci-

---

<sup>1</sup> HWP Hartford’s History of Haiti at hartford-hwp.com / archives / 43a / 106.html, Part 2, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Although ‘Haiti’ and ‘San Domingue’ have been used casually and interchangeably to mean what was first called western Hispaniola throughout this piece, it was formally called ‘Haiti’ only on independence, a break with the colonial past and a tribute to the island’s original Awawak inhabitants.

<sup>3</sup> New Orleans was so attractive because until Napoleon sold it to the US government in late-1803, Louisiana remained a French possession. There, the emigres continued all the colonial codswallop of classifying others as quadroons, octoroons and so forth, and maintaining their strange insistence that their mistresses must all be mulatto.

Nor did they escape voodoo, with huge rites being held on the southern shores of Lake Pontchartrane and a mortuary chapel for yellow fever victims at the town limits even informally being dedicated to St. Expedite (Legba). At time of writing [2003], occasional offerings of cigars or flowers still get left in front of the chapel’s votive statuette.

Although slave resistance was largely cultural (rather than military, as on Haiti), the plantocracy had to contend with Marie Leveau, who started her career as a hairdresser in mulatto homes and then used the gossip she overheard there to cast herself as a voodoo prophetess, wreaking havoc and accumulating considerable influence by sabotaging upper class relationships. Her tomb in charming but chaotic New Orleans Cemetery #1 also still attracts invocatory offerings of pennies and flowers, though probably more from tourists rather than devout voodooists.

With increased formal Black education during Reconstruction, voodoo’s influence in Louisiana receded, but has still left its mark in New Orleans in the form of the spectacular ‘updown’ and ‘downtown’ Mardi Gras costumes of Black carnival clowns, the funerary rites of the marching bands, and occasional resort to mojo bags (good luck charms) by gamblers.

<sup>4</sup> CLR James’ *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Allison & Busby, 1980)

ated the dangers of neo-colonialism, that by allowing foreign control of the Haitian economy he would open up the way to a new, economic servitude and possible re-establishment of the old regime of the plantocracy on its coat tails. Despite the racialised tone of Dessalines' politics — a terminology inherited from colonialism — he was actually typical of Haitians in believing in racial equality, politically defined blancs being excluded only because they denied this fact of Nature in an attempt to gain political and economic ascendancy. In fact, Dessalines needed racial equality to stay in power, the mulattos being classified as “anciens libres” along with the small numbers of pre-1791 free Blacks, and the majority of others designated as “nouveaux libres”. As Thomas Madiou observed<sup>5</sup>

He conceived the generous and salutary idea, after the deportation of Toussaint L'Ouverture, of reuniting the two castes whose interests were the same, and of opposing them in a single body, to their oppressors; this was the constant and persistent theme of his whole life.

Perhaps Dessalines argued his case too well because ultimately economic considerations won out over his rhetoric of racial unity and led to his assassination at Pont Rouge, on the road to Port-au-Prince, in October 1806. Black generals jealous of his constitutional monopoly of power were jointly responsible with mulatto merchants angered at his 10% import tax and an export tax on their principal post-colonial export, coffee, imposed the preceding month.

Despite this, Christophe played the race card by blaming the mulattos and bought off the Black generals by ennobling them as he crowned himself King Henry I. This gesture divided Haiti, Petion being elected president of a seceded mulatto-ruled South in March 1807. Fourteen years of civil war ensued, not only between the northern Kingdom and southern Republic, but between Petion and Rigaud, who returned from Madagascar in 1810 to form a breakaway southern state with the aid of Maroons. This turmoil ended only with Christophe's suicide and reunification under mulatto Jean-Pierre Boyer in 1820.

Where were the people during this protracted quarrel amongst property-owners? As a former overseer of livestock from when he was at Breda, Toussainte's opinion was that they should be back on the plantation. He prided himself that under his administration, two-thirds of the plantations had been restored to production, despite the abundant evidence of the Night of Fire that the people wanted nothing more to do with them. Everywhere he went, Toussainte exhorted the labourers “Work is necessary, ... it is a virtue, it is for the general good of the state”<sup>6</sup> and those disinclined to agree were confined to their plantations anyway and thrashed with cocomacaque sticks — Sonthonax having prohibited whips — if they proved insufficiently ‘virtuous’ (productive). His system of *fermage* allowed for state control of the plantations, with 25% of profits from the crop going to the plantations' managers and 25% divided up amongst the workers.<sup>7</sup> Despite these payments, many labourers found this forced labour system virtually indistinguishable from slavery (in fact, it was a kind of serfdom, already seen as a Medieval relic everywhere in Europe except in absolutist Russia), especially when Toussainte parcelled out management of the plantations to emigre plantocrats as an inducement to them to return and to his own generals as

---

— first published 1938), p. 393.

<sup>5</sup> David Nicholls' *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> James, *op cit.*, pp. 155–156.

<sup>7</sup> Hartford, *op cit.*, p. 2.

an inducement to their loyalty to him. Dessalines himself owned thirty plantations when he was serving under Toussainte,<sup>8</sup> so it's not unreasonable to see Toussainte's motive in prohibiting non-passported movement off plantations as stemming from the same motive as the old plantocracy's – to prevent the defection of labourers to the Maroons – and Dessalines' campaign against the Maroons under Leclerc being little more than a defence of his own property and privilege.

It is easy to divine simple motives of profit- and power-seeking in Toussainte's agricultural policy, and this would also explain why he wanted the emigres back and to retain links with France – to show he was the man to do business with and thus assured power, and to provide a market for Haiti's cash crops to bring profit to the plantations, further reinforcing his position. What was “for the general good of the state” was certainly also for the particular good of Toussainte and his cronies. However, it's not that simple. Toussainte's enthusiasm for all things European went beyond this. In a strange mirroring of the colonial mentality (“wogs can't run their own country, it's gone to hell since we left 'em to it”, etc), Toussainte wanted the emigres back because he didn't think his fellow Blacks could run their own plantations and, certainly, the vast majority wouldn't have worked them if they hadn't been forced to. He even cultivated the old colonial cash crops at the expense of indigenous staples that could have reduced dependence on European mercantile bourgeoisie supplying them. He had the labourers chant the slogan “I do not want to be any Coast Negro” – a reference to those ‘straight off the boat’ who, as we have seen, had most affinity for Africa and Maroonage – and persecuted voodoo.<sup>9</sup> CLR James is quite explicit about Toussainte's motivations and describes some of his methods:<sup>10</sup>

Toussaint knew the backwardness of the labourers; he made them work, but he wanted them civilised and advanced in culture. He established such schools as he could. A sincere Catholic and believer in the softening effects of religion on manners, he encouraged the practice of the Catholic religion, and wrote to an old friend of the Blacks, the Abbe Gregoire, for advice. He favoured legitimate children and soldiers who were married and forbade his officials and commandants to have concubines in the houses of their wives, a legacy of the old disreputable white society. He was anxious to see the blacks acquire the social deportment of the better class whites with their Versailles manners.

The whole point of “Versailles manners”, as Norbert Elias makes endlessly clear in his classic *The Civilizing Process*,<sup>11</sup> is to tame society through propagating a code of polite individual behaviour and thus make the whole more easily governed by its ruler, this domesticating process starting with the ruler's own courtiers. Similarly, one only needs a nodding acquaintance with the excesses of modern missionaries to know the sort of religious education programme Toussainte instituted, all about inculcating passive obedience in the masses and destroying the influence of Maroon voodoo by counterposing it to institutionally-backed Christian myth, exactly the Church's role under the ancienne regime of colonial days.

Whilst seeking to destroy African culture amongst the Black labourers, Toussainte held salon-style soirees to celebrate French culture amongst the new ruling class, where the favoured ‘small

---

<sup>8</sup> James, *op cit.*, p. 186.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>11</sup> Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization* (Blackwell,

circle' were principally White and the women attending were called "madame" instead of "citizen".<sup>12</sup> Admiring the upright military bearing of a French officer, Toussainte expressed his wish that "[m]y sons will be like that"<sup>13</sup> and then packed them off to Napoleon's France, where the elder, Isaac, was so indoctrinated he wanted to return to the French during Leclerc's 1802 betrayal. That Toussainte himself was to do pretty much the same thing only months later — unable to believe Leclerc's perfidy had Napoleon's blessing or "that the French ruling class would be so depraved, so lost to all sense of decency, as to try to restore slavery"<sup>14</sup> — just goes to show exactly how greatly and how fatally he had bought into the myth of French civilisation.

The people — for whom French civilisation meant only the whip, the brand and a premature death through exhaustion and abuse — were not so easily fooled. A Marxist of the 1930s, CLR James had the same preference for Progress in the form of a harsh programme of economic development that centralises power as Toussainte and so could claim, without trace of irony, that "between Toussaint and his people there was no fundamental difference of outlook or aim."<sup>15</sup> In fact, they had been promised the land as early as 27<sup>th</sup> August 1793 in Polveral's proclamation at Le Cap, not in the abstract 'nationalised' sense of Toussainte, but as small plots to be worked by individuals principally for their own personal benefit.<sup>16</sup> In this, Polveral was more alive to traditional peasant aspirations than Toussainte, unsurprisingly as the peasantry was a motor of the French Revolution outside Paris. Key to Robespierre's rise to power was his commitment to abolishing feudal dues, which fell most heavily on the peasantry. Denied land by Toussainte, the labourers did what they always had under the old plantocracy, abandoned the plantation for Maroonage, a return to the traditional African peasant economy as transplanted to the Caribbean. When the French invaded in 1802, they fought for their lives and their land, not for some future state of 'Haiti' or any other treacherous manifestation of 'higher civilisation'.

An American entrepreneur that visiing Haiti shortly after the revolution, James Franklin, observed the consequences of this flight from the plantations:<sup>17</sup>

Hayti abounds with these small proprietors..., their patches of land, with their huts upon them, are generally situate in the mountains, in the recesses, or on the most elevated parts, or spots, as the poet has described, "the most inaccessible by shepherds trod". They are therefore lost for the purposes of agriculture.

By "agriculture", Franklin means the big plantations, of course. From him, we learn that even coffee, once the colony's second largest export, was typically gathered by subsistence farmers as a concession to the cash economy from trees planted many years ago and now gone almost wild. It was possibly as a measure both to increase his grassroots popularity and to bring such runaways back where they could be found, taxed and subjected to the other exactions of government that Dessalines proposed limited land redistribution towards the end of his reign:<sup>18</sup>

---

1982 — originally published 1939).

<sup>12</sup> James, *op cit.*, pp. 246–247.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p.246.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 282.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholls, *op cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 38.



The sons of colonists have taken advantage of my poor blacks; the properties which we have conquered by the spilling of our blood belong to us all; I intend that they be divided with equity.

Dessalines never said what this “equity” meant in practice, but it was enough that the “sons of colonists” were necessarily mulattos coming into the estates of their emigre fathers and those likely to benefit from their break up were nouveaux libre “sons of Africa” for this promise of land distribution to supply the underlying cause for his 1806 assassination.

Following this disappointment of the popular desire for land, Hartford writes very acutely about how<sup>19</sup>

two countries emerged, and I’m not referring to the Kingdom of Christophe and the Republic of Petion. Rather, there was the real country of Haiti, the constitutional government in force, which, while not having international recognition, was the de facto government of Haiti, and controlled the coastal towns and major markets of the countryside. Then there was the borderless Haiti at large. A largely anarchic world of peasants who had retreated as far away from the Haitian government and lived a life beyond the pale of formal law, commerce, and the western concept of development and so-called progress.

They traded their right to live under government and the possibility of participation in it, for the freedom, to avoid its worst abuses. In exchange they lived their lives of pre-industrial simplicity, but, until the turn of the twentieth century, not lives of misery.

Apparently, when trade was needed with the formal economy, it was the women that went to market, so that the men couldn’t be conscripted to whichever of their nominal rulers’ petty wars were ongoing at the time.

Hartford’s vision of rural Haitian life during the 19<sup>th</sup> century is impressive and appealing, particularly to anarchists, but I would respectfully disagree with his contention that it was a society free of governance. As we have already seen, Maroon bands were actually autocracies on an African model, and there seems little to doubt that after the revolution, things were not much the same. As always, this was justified in terms of communal self-defence:<sup>20</sup>

[T]he role of the Maroons was transformed from fighting the French to resisting a new threat to the people — an emerging urban economic and political elite distinguished not by the color of their skin but by the plans they harbored for both the land and labor of the peasants.

A great deal of Haitian politics from this stage has been about trying to capture the support of this ‘shadow society’ parallel to that of formal power structures. Towards the end of their war, both Christophe and Petion began parcelling off the plantations into pocket handkerchief plots, over 10,000 in Petion’s case.<sup>21</sup> Just as Christophe’s policy was a promise delayed ten years in its

---

<sup>19</sup> HWP Hartford’s *History of Haiti* at [hartford-hwp.com/archives/43a/107.html](http://hartford-hwp.com/archives/43a/107.html), ‘Haiti’s Golden Days?’, pp.2–3.

<sup>20</sup> Wade Davis’s *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (Collins, 1986), p.212.

<sup>21</sup> Nicholls, *op cit.*, p. 54.

fulfilment and then likely only because he was spurred on to it by Petion's own gesture in that direction, Petion's land redistribution policy was almost accidental. His treasury exhausted, he chose to pay his army in land instead – and with the proceeds of land sales to the peasantry.

This move into subsistence was only accelerated by Petion's successor Boyer who – staring down the barrels of 14 French warships in Port-au-Prince harbour – agreed to compensate the remnants of the plantocracy 150 million francs in exchange for formal recognition of Haitian sovereignty (and, incidentally, his right to rule) on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1825.<sup>22</sup> Like a modern Third World country, Haiti found itself saddled with a national debt so vast that it couldn't even pay the 26 million francs annual interest, not least because many escaped austerity measures in the form of grossly increased taxation by disappearing into the interior to join subsistence farmers already sheltering there. They felt it unjust to pay their former owners again for a freedom already bought in blood. Boyer tried to prevent this exodus by passing the 1826 Rural Code, confining labourers to their estates, but its failure in fact saved Haiti from worse French intervention than the imposition of preferentially reduced customs duties. In terms of its formal export economy, Haiti – once “the finest colony in the world” – was by then just too poor to loot.

Boyer had not been magnanimous in his victory over the Black north either. There were particular concerns that the most influential official posts were going mulattoes exclusively. One of the major Black landowners remaining in the South, Louis Erinne Lysius Felicitie Salomon, articulated this dissent through an ideology of noirism, emphasising Black contributions to Haitian history and denigrating that of mulattos. Noirism was not a racist ideology in the sense of arguing some sort of biologically defined racial superiority. As with Dessalines – a figure idolised by the noirists – it was just felt that one ethnic group, the mulattos, were denying the basic equality of humanity by accruing undue political and economic power exclusively to themselves. In 1844, he teamed up with three Black generals in Les Cayes and was arrested, accused of wishing to “annihilate the coloured [mulatto] population”. Salomon, in turn, raised the peasantry by charging Boyer with desiring to eliminate largely Black small landowners through his introduction of the Rural Code, something that did veer towards a disguising of class interests – Salomon's advancement at their expense – with the rhetoric of caste solidarity. Both sides threatened to appeal to foreign powers for support.

The insurgent peasants under Jean-Jacques Acaau, Zamor and Jean Claude were an eruption of ‘shadow power’ into the squabbles of the ruling class. The overt demands of these piquets – named after the wooden pikes they armed themselves with<sup>23</sup> – were respectfully moderate, such as the release of Salomon and the ending of martial law, but their insurgents' real aim was to turn the caste war into a class war. Acaau intended to redistribute the lands of the rich, regardless of colour, and said “all poor mulattos should be considered as blacks, and ... all rich blacks should be

---

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> The pike was almost as iconic a weapon of rebels of the period as the AK47 is today. At the same time piquets fought the class war in Haiti, physical force Chartists clubbed together in England to buy pikes both as a mark of their militancy and to defend themselves from the likes of the mounted yeomanry responsible for the 1819 Peterloo massacre.

Exhibit ‘A’ on the South's propaganda exercise against Kansas-based abolitionist guerilla John Brown following his 1859 execution for the failed raid on Harper's Ferry arsenal was a wagon full of pikes which they said he intended to arm insurgent slaves. They drove it from town to town, exhibiting it much as the Bush regime now exhibits World Trade Centre rubble and to exactly the same political end.

Incidentally, ‘*piquet*’ is unrelated to ‘picket’, the latter meaning ‘sentry’.

considered as mulattoes... [W]e call all men our brothers without distinction”.<sup>24</sup> A combination of this southern rising and Boyer’s failed military expedition into Spanish San Domnigue bought an end to his rule.

Their end achieved, the Black elite settled their differences with their mulatto equivalents by appointing general Faustin Soulouque as a mutually agreed president, whilst exiling the piquets and executing their most prominent leader by this stage, Pierre Noir. Salomon demonstrated that noirism weren’t going to be inconvenienced by Dessalines’ economic nationalism when he took his cut as Soulouque’s finance minister, an appointment most appreciated by blancs, “particularly the members of the old commercial houses, who were witnesses to his administrative capacity and benefitted largely from it.”<sup>25</sup> Concerned he would be seen as a front man for the rich generally and rich mulattos particularly (the *politique de doublure*, mulatto rule through a Black puppet), Soulouque made popularist gestures like declaring himself Faustin I in the manner of Dessalines in 1849 and also – much more importantly as far as the people were concerned – tolerating voodoo.

The racist European and American press jumped on this, portraying Soulouque as a buffoon for having the same pretensions as European monarchs and churning out ‘missionaries in cooking pots’-level propaganda against Haiti. Wider forces were, of course, in play – the US was within years of its Civil War and Europe was already starting to probe Africa with missionaries and traders with an eye to extending empire there. In both cases, it was in their interests to claim Black people were incapable of running their own lives as a mandate for their own rule, and Haiti had to be discredited as a counter-example to this. Predictably, they enlisted Science to their cause, founder anthropologist Arthur de Gobineau claiming Black people were racially “incapable of civilization” and Haitians were “as depraved, brutal and savage as in Dahomey or among the Fellatahs”. Unsurprisingly, the international Anthropology Society counted governor Eyre of Jamaica, a man who had argued the abolition of slavery “had done the Negro race much injury by their absurd and unwarrantable attempts to prevent Africa from exporting her worthless or surplus population”, amongst its honoured members. Following the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and its appropriation by TH Huxley for imperialism and *laissez faire* economics, ex-British ambassador to Haiti Sir Spenser St John maintained, from his experience of the Black state, that<sup>26</sup>

I now agree with those who deny that the negro could ever originate a civilisation, and that with the best of education he remains an inferior type of man ... incapable of the art of government.

Noirism was as much a reaction to this sort of self-serving imperialist ideology as it was to the ascendancy of the mulattos under Boyer, the two even being related inasmuch as trader mulattos were generally more inclined to challenge Dessalines’ 1804 prohibitions on foreign ownership. Against arguments of Black racial inferiority, Haitian writers like Etienne Firmin used the example of ancient Egypt, a Black civilisation (racially indistinguishable from Ethiopia) when the ancestors of the esteemed British and French students of anthropology cited above were scampering around the bracken painted in woad, later to be enslaved by Rome. However, as David

---

<sup>24</sup> Nicholls, *op cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 128

Nicholls rightly pointed out in his ground-breaking analysis of race questions in Haiti, From Dessalines to Duvalier:<sup>27</sup>

[T]heir purpose was basically to persuade European readers that Haiti was a 'civilised' country and that black people are capable of civilisation according to European criteria. These writers rarely challenged the superiority of European culture and they maintained the role of African elements in the heritage of the Haitian people.

European assumptions about the 'backwardness' of Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were shared by Haitian writers, even the need for them to assume a sort of 'White man's burden' to civilise Africa. Christophe supported British missionary expeditions into the interior<sup>28</sup> and immigration from Africa and America were also encouraged in the belief that their experience of the higher culture of Haiti would assist in its "sacred mission to rehabilitate the whole black race".<sup>29</sup> The British found this latter exercise particularly interesting, as they were already using Liberia as a self-governing 'homeland' and "cradle of civilisation" for freed slaves regardless of their culture or country of origin (returning them to Africa to prevent their competition with free White labour), and Haiti might have served them likewise.<sup>30</sup>

For all their attempts to conceal it, the weakness in this argument was the widespread persistence of the "African cult" of voodoo in Haiti, so when mulatto general Geffrard ousted Soulouque in 1860 following the latter's failed campaign against Spanish San Domingo, a concordat was signed with the Vatican making Catholicism the official religion of Haiti.<sup>31</sup> This measure was aimed as much at the Black smallholding peasantry as at improving Haiti's image in European eyes, opening the way to a more efficient export trade. It was successful to the extent that the last Maroon band was suppressed in 1860, but as a consequence voodoo went underground, sufficing peasant society like an 'invisible government'<sup>32</sup> and laying the groundwork of resentment that Salomon used to surpland Geffrard's fractious mulatto successors as president in 1879.

His overt motive, again, was mulattoes getting preference for office and, as with the Piquets Uprising in 1844, Salomon was not beneath raising the peasantry to seize power, in this instance the mercenary cacos (including even some mulattoes), who waged a protracted guerilla war in the North. It is noteworthy that they typically came from the relatively privileged habitant middle class, rather than the dirt-poor landless peasantry of the piquets, and so had no particular revolutionary demands.<sup>33</sup> They were rewarded by Salomon's considerable sale of State lands in February 1883. Sixty years later, Duvalier was to call on this classe intermediaire in his rise to power. By this stage, caste politics in Haiti had institutionalised to the extent that the Black elite was calling itself the National Party, with the backing of the Army and a populist rural orientation, and the mulatto elite called themselves the Liberal Party, with a commitment to foreign trade liberalisation and an elitist, technocratic "government by the most competent"<sup>34</sup> thanks to

---

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 127. Rather more credibly, his mulatto rival Petion harboured Simon Bolivar before his expedition to liberate the slaves of South America, an 'interference in foreign affairs' Christophe condemned.

<sup>30</sup> Hugh Thomas' *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440-1870* (Papermac, 1997), p. 575.

<sup>31</sup> Laennec Hurbon's *Voodoo: Truth and Fantasy* (Thames & Hudson, 1995), pp. 53-54.

<sup>32</sup> Davis., *op cit.*, p. 212.

<sup>33</sup> Nicholls, *op cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 119.

their ideologue, Edmond Paul. The leader of one of the losing factions of the in-fighting that cost the mulattoes power, Boyer Bazalais, landed an army from Jamaica at Miragoane in March 1883 in order to reverse Salomon's land redistribution, but instead died as the city was besieged.

The ultra-nationals – also calling themselves piquets doctrinaires – then pressed their advantage. Throughout the 1880s, Parisian-educated son of a Protestant tailor and noirist revisionist historian Louis Joseph Janvier led the anti-clerical campaign, an attempt to reverse or minimise the effect of Geffrard's 1860 concordat with the Vatican on Haitian national life. Janvier was a freemason – ironically, as the leading petit blancs of the colonial period also were – and clearly not a voodooist:<sup>35</sup>

From a political point of view, Catholicism is the negation of patriotism; from a religious point of view, it is fetishism because it is respectable.

Evidently, he felt utterly unembarrassed to use 'divided loyalty' arguments against Catholicism discredited as sectarian in Europe at least half a century before. The Church – with its "petits Bretons" priests – was suffering the consequences of its domesticating role under slavery, being seen as both anti-Black and foreign-controlled. The anti-clericals' ultimate end was an Erastian-type church, totally subordinated to the state, but their campaign's main effect was to give voodoo a much-needed breathing space.

Whilst Janvier was jealously guarding Haiti against 'Popish plot', his hero Salomon was on old form undermining national economic independence, precisely what he always accused the mulattoes of. His opening the way for the MacDonald contract – the sale of land for an American railway on Haiti – also opened the way for the 1915 US invasion.

In 1888, Salomon was bought down by a mulatto Northern alliance under Firmin hostile to increased foreign trade links generally and his Banque Nationale particularly and from then on in until the US invasion, the 'ding dong' politics of Haiti continued, one would-be president accusing the other of being a "mannikin in the hands of the mulattoes", only to be called a "pope of voodooism" in his turn, and so on. Meanwhile, there had been real changes in demography and land ownership in rural areas, identified by Hartford as:<sup>36</sup>

- increasing population
- decreasing land plot sizes (mainly from selling off ancestral land, or having it expropriated, and by dividing it among all sons rather than giving it to the oldest son)
- increasing share-cropper status of the peasant as they lost their land (again, either from sale or expropriation)
- decreasing land fertility due to poor farming methods.

To a large extent, the peasantry were victims of their own success, but their population growth meant that nowhere remained in Haiti where it was practical for them to retreat away from government intrusion. Furthermore, as some accumulated land to become middle-classed, others lost it to become proletarianised, working either for them or in coastal towns on cash crop exports.

---

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>36</sup> Hartford, *op cit.*, 'Haiti's Golden Days?', p. 2.

To that extent, Haiti was driven towards the foreign trade links that compromised its sovereignty despite itself.

It was the increasing number of German traders in Haiti that provided an initial pretext for American imperial interest, although it had been slowly digesting the Caribbean ever since the collapse of Spain's empire worldwide in 1898. According to the US State Department, Germans controlled 80% of the trade in Haiti. Actual US interests included realising the MacDonald contract and the establishment of a naval base at Mole St. Nicolas to compliment one they'd already established at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The 27<sup>th</sup> July 1915 lynching of president Vilbrun Guillaume Sam whilst he sought sanctuary in the French embassy gave the Americans the final excuse they needed to portray Haitians as savages, incapable of self-government, and to send in the Marines to 'restore order' by installing their puppet, Louis Borno. Whilst Sam's lynching was indeed savage – the crowd literally tore him limb from limb and paraded his remains through the streets on poles, one participant carrying away the ex-president's thumb in his mouth exclaiming "Voici ma pipe, m'ap fumin"<sup>37</sup> – the imperialists drew on half a century of racist stereotyping of the Black state and of Africa (including claims that Haitian voodooists practiced human sacrifice and ate "goats without horns", babies), and seemed genuinely offended at the scale of subsistence in Haiti, which they saw as an obstacle to investment. US financial advisor on Haiti Arthur Millspaugh argued the occupation was "a unique laboratory for social, economic, political and administrative paternalism".<sup>38</sup> Come America's 1917 entry into World War One, such aspirations received a boost with the expropriation of all German property in Haiti.

Paternalistic aspirations were not easily realised. Attempts to concentrate land ownership were denounced as "the legalised assassination of the Haitian rural proletariat". Introduction of the corvée forced labour road-building system led to the last cacos rebellion by Charlemagne Peralte and Benoit Batraville in 1918. After driving out the local gendarmerie, Peralte established a provisional government in the north which took the Marines to put down. Fighting only ceased when both leaders of the revolt were killed by May 1920. Whilst Peralte was a sincere and devout Catholic, Batraville was found in possession of what the US press described as a "voodoo book",<sup>39</sup> his catechism of revolution.

Although this effectively marked an end to armed resistance, political and cultural resistance only intensified, Jean Price Mars' Union Patriotique being founded in 1921 to end expropriation of the peasants, martial law and the US occupation. The mulatto elite, many of whom originally welcomes the US invasion as shifting the balance of power in their favour, were shocked to discover they were just "niggers speaking French" as far as the Americans were concerned. The invaders' oafish indifference to the French high culture which mulattoes also felt marked them out as socially superior – as illustrated by their taxing of pianos and not gramophones, and prioritisation of technical over classical education – only increased their resentment. Confronted with American racism, mulattoes emphasised their Haitian nationality rather than their caste, whilst Blacks under Price Mars began elaborating the noirist position of Firmin and his contemporaries through an ethnographic movement exploring African remnants in Haitian peasant folklore.

---

<sup>37</sup> Nicholls, *op cit.*, p. 146.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 297. Although the 'Revolutionary Prayer to our Saviour Jesus' explicitly names no voodoo lwa, it was intended to be made following an animal sacrifice and much of the rest of the 'Voodoo Book' deals with charms and other traditional Haitian magical practices.

Price Mars published his findings in *Ainsi parla l'oncle* ("This is What Uncle Said", from the Creole that Price Mars argued should be Haiti's first language), which firmly argued Haiti's culture was African, not French, and so had no good reason to try to emulate Europe in any other way, including its religion. As such, Price Mars was recognised as the father of *negritude*, although as CLR James fairly comments "The Haitians did not know it as *Negritude*. To them, it seemed purely Haitian".<sup>40</sup> Ideas of *negritude* were diffused through Haitian exiles in Paris and Leon Damas of Cayenne, Aime Cesaire on Martinique and Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal. They profoundly influenced the great Marcus Garvey on Jamaica,<sup>41</sup> whose belief in a Black deity laid the basis for both the Rastafarian and Black Muslim movements and whose newspaper, *Negro World*, was required reading by Jomo Kenyatta, a founder figure in the movement for African decolonisation. It's incidentally worth noting here that voodoo's influence preceded *negritude*'s in terms of promoting Black liberation, inasmuch as the glossolalia (speaking in tongues) of the Pentacostal churches derives directly from the 'horse and rider' possession by the lwas central to voodoo worship, and it was these churches that provided both the infrastructure for later Black organisation for their civil rights and some of their most eloquent spokesmen. The poetry of one of the Parisian exiles, the mulatto Carl Brouard, demonstrates the mood of the new *negritude* is vastly at odds with the tacit alignment with European values of the *noirism* that preceded it:<sup>42</sup>

Drum  
when you sound  
my soul screams towards Africa.  
Sometimes  
I dream of an immense jungle  
bathed in moon-light  
with hirsute, sweating figures,  
sometimes  
of a filthy hut  
where I drink blood out of human skulls.

Clearly, there is no claim being made here that Blacks were civilised before Whites (as, in fact, they probably were), a claim Brouard would probably have rejected as European-identified and a perpetuation of the colonial mentality. Unlike the more cautious Price Mars — who only had it in him to eventually give the majority Haitian faith a distant nod of ethnographic approval — Brouard actively practiced voodoo (probably with more authenticity than modern wiccans practice witchcraft), but he gives the impression of someone trying too hard, embracing European imperialist stereotypes of Africa in a fervent attempt to reject imperialist Europe. In rejecting Western civilisation, Brouard was a primitivist, but an embarrassing one. His privileged background, dodgy ethnography and embrace of authority typified the next phase in the ideological development of *negritude*.

The US withdrew in 1933, leaving Haiti in the hands of their investors and a new president, Stenio Vincent, who promoted their interests through a burgeoning middle class, Black as well as mulatto. In part, the occupation had been ideologically sustained by the stigmatisation of voodoo,

---

<sup>40</sup> James, *op cit.*, p. 394.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 396–397.

<sup>42</sup> Nicholls, *op cit.*, p. 161.

with lurid journalistic accounts of non-existent ‘voodoo dolls’ (actually a European witchcraft tradition – pins – with appropriately coloured threads attached – are stuck into figurines in voodoo to heal through sympathetic magic rather than to harm) and cannibalistic ‘Congo Bean Stew’ recipes. In this political climate, the griot movement was formed by Brouard and promulgated in Haiti by the ‘three D’s, Louis Duaquoi, Lorimer Denis and Francois Duvalier. The Griots were named for the traditional poets, story-tellers and magicians of Africa and they supported the contention of the racist Arthur de Gobineau that some races were biologically superior to others – except they argued that it was Black race that had superior physical and spiritual strength. Just as Norman Cohn noted in his study of the bogus ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion’, Warrant for Genocide, that the rationalist Napoleonic invasion of Germany led to a backlash of folkloric nationalism that created the Nazis, so the US invasion of Haiti created the ultimate extension of Price Mars’ ethnographic movement, the Griots. They were unequivocal in affirming anti-rational, authoritarian political principles, claiming them as traditionally African. They desired dictatorship,<sup>43</sup>

reason and will allied to force in the service of the nation... Authority is a sacred thing. Let us establish the mystique of authority. Force remains a beautiful thing, to be respected even when it crushes us.

If these sentiments sound familiar – and not particularly African – it’s because of Griot affinity for Italian fascism which, strangely, was seen as a counterpoint to British and French imperialism prior to the invasion of Ethiopia.<sup>44</sup> Even faced with the invasion of the one nation that had stayed free of European domination during the scramble for Africa and with whom Haiti had had good diplomatic relations since the Nord presidency in 1904, the Griots chose to side with Ethiopia only because it was Black rather than because they opposed fascist imperialism.<sup>45</sup> Given the role of the Black generalissimo as an avenue of advancement and in representing Black interests (though actually usually principally their own), the appeal of an indigenous fascism to the Griots is understandable, if still inexcusable.

With the rise of former Haitian ambassador to the US, Elie Lescot, to the presidency in 1941, the Griots found themselves confronted by a blatant programme of mulatrification (the systematic appointment of mulattos to high office) and a foreign Catholic clergy directed by the fascist regime of marshall Petain launching a new anti-superstition campaign against voodoo which involved auto de fe of ritual objects and 100,000 swearing an oath denouncing hougans as “slave[s] of Satan” and the lwas as “representations of the evil one”.<sup>46</sup> Even in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, this was recognised as somewhat culturally insensitive and noirists exploited resentment against it to the hilt. Even Marxists like Jacques Roumain spoke out against it, recognising it as an elitist attack on the Black, rural masses, allied to expropriation of their lands for foreign capital. Ultimately with the end of World War Two, a broad alliance including even the French surrealist Andre Breton saw an end to the Lescot regime through mass strike action in 1946.

---

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>44</sup> Mussolini was clearly imperialist himself, aspiring to re-create the Roman empire! It’s incidentally noteworthy that under French domination, nationalists in Syria and Iraq adopted Italian fascism as their ideological model for the Ba’ath Party.

<sup>45</sup> Nicholls, *op cit.*, p. 179–180.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, p. 182.



The fissioning of this alliance set the stage for the 1957 election and the Duvalier dictatorship. Whilst serving as a minister under Lescot's successor, president Dumarsais Estime, Duvalier continued to trash the Church as foreign-controlled, pressed for the incorporation of folkloric material into school curricula, and built support amongst the Black middle class and the rural peasantry. With his ethnographic training and track record of opposition to the anti-superstition campaign, Duvalier was able to appeal directly to voodoo houngans and through them, to the 'invisible government' of the countryside.<sup>47</sup> When the chaos of military coups that followed the 1950 fall of the Estime government settled down, Duvalier was able to get three times the vote won for the presidency by his mulatto rivals, Clement Jumelle and the Catholic-backed Louis Dejoie.

The backing of the Kebreau junta that called the election didn't do Duvalier's cause any harm either, but knowing that the army's support could be fickle, Duvalier then used voodoo to cement his power. He not only explicitly rehabilitated the faith and appointed a priest sympathetic to voodoo Pere Jean-Baptiste Georges as secretary of state for education,<sup>48</sup> he also changed the Haitian flag back to the red and black of Christophe's kingdom (incidentally voodoo colours), and incorporated other voodoo symbolism directly into the iconography of the Haitian state. Beyond symbolism, Duvalier organised a paramilitary force, first simply called cagouards ('hooded ones') and then tonton macoutes (after the wicked uncle of Haitian folklore that carries away naughty children), to check and then break the power of the Army. The tonton macoutes weren't just an instrument of dictatorial terror — they were also an avenue of advancement, a route by which Duvalier could confer direct personal favour. Even more than that, they were his way into the Bizango societies, as much counterpoint and controller of them as of the Army:<sup>49</sup>

The leaders of the secret societies almost inevitably became powerful members of the Ton Tom Macoute, and if the latter was not actually recruited from the Bizango, the membership of the two organizations overlapped to a significant degree. In the end, one might almost ask whether or not Francois Duvalier himself did not become the symbolic or effective head of the secret societies.

How Duvalier made this claim to leadership was extraordinary for a 20<sup>th</sup> century statesman: he claimed to be the personification of the lwa Baron Samedi, adopting his dress style (dark glasses and suit, narrow tie, etc) and attributing magical and divine powers to himself, and he also claimed to be guided by the spirits of Padre Jean, Mackandal and Boukman. *houngans* that disagreed with Duvalier's auto-apotheosis were quickly replaced and, in fact, he oversaw the appointment of every voodoo chef de section on Haiti. As well as replacing foreign clergy with unclerge indigene, Duvalier replaced their prayerbooks with his Breviaire d'une revolution and their prayers with those exalting him. For example, the new Lord's Prayer began:<sup>50</sup>

Our Doc, who art in the National Palace for life,  
hallowed be thy name  
by generations present and future,  
thy will be done

---

<sup>47</sup> Davis, *op cit.*, p. 256.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>50</sup> Nicholls, *op cit.*, p. 233.

in Port-au-Prince and in the provinces...

Duvalier encouraged a mystical identification not only between him and his land, Haiti (much as the Medieval absolutist kings of Europe did), but also between him and Christ, official portraits carrying the traditionally Catholic refrain “Ecce homo” that they attributed to their own particular vegetative man-god incarnation. The completion of large-scale civil projects like the dam at Peligre were attributed to Duvalier’s divine power rather than engineering skill in official propaganda.

As with the rule of Soulouque a century before, the racist European and north American press seized on this propaganda for home audience consumption and attempted to ridicule and discredit the Black state internationally through it with fabricated and sensationalistic tales of ‘Papa Doc’ communing with the severed heads of his enemies or meditating in the bath dressed in a white top hat. Rather than take offence or attempt to repudiate these stories, Duvalier only used them to reinforce his occult reputation with his power base, the voodooist peasant masses of the Haitian countryside.

Although Duvalier’s early Griot ideology acted as a template for his rule, it would be wrong to attribute excessive coherence to it. As Duvalier himself conceded: “My government wasn’t what I had intended”.<sup>51</sup> His main concern was simply with retaining power, using the macoutes to drive his election rivals, the Jumelle brothers, into exile and then to violently depoliticise the Army. During Duvalier’s protracted illness in May-June 1999, the macoutes’ commander Clement Barbot effectively ran Haiti and planned Papa Doc’s assassination during the 1960 Carnival, demonstrating that each concentration of power outside the direct personal control of a dictator comes to threaten him. As it was, Duvalier recovered and had Barbot arrested and ultimately assassinated. With an ‘all things to all people’ stance typical of fascism, Duvalier tried to hold the support both of the Marxists that first supported his revolution and of the US embassy, hence his June 1960 ‘Cri de Jacmel’, where he threatened to move towards a non-aligned diplomatic position if the US didn’t increase development aid to Haiti and stop complaining about the excesses of the macoutes. Duvalier didn’t hold back from self-serving noirist historical revisionism, nor from using the celebration of Haiti’s history as pure spectacle to divert the masses from his blatant looting of the economy, as can be gauged from the tone of the civic ceremonies recorded by Nicholls:

The unveiling of the impressive monument to the *marron inconnu* was for Duvalier the realisation of a dream; it represented the pioneering role played by Haiti in the assertion of black dignity. “We constitute for the negro-African masses of the universe”, he declared, “the highest exponent or a kind of common denominator of all national and racial consciousness”. At the opening ceremony Paul Blanchet portrayed Duvalier as himself continuing the work of the *marron*. In the homage paid to Martin Luther King after his assassination in 1968 Duvalier pointed to the fact that Haiti was the first black republic in the world, and he decreed four days of official mourning; one of the street’s capitals was renamed Avenue Martin Luther King. Haile Selassie’s visit to Haiti in April 1966 has also provided the opportunity for a reaffirmation of Haiti’s claim to joint leadership of the African race, and indeed the third world.

---

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 235.

Against all expectations of a regime based on personal rule, Duvalier's control continued after his death in April 1971, where he was succeeded by his 19-year old son Jean-Claude, better known as 'Baby Doc'. The stationing of US gunboats around Haiti's coast to prevent the return of dissenting exiles had much to do with it and, in return, Jean-Claude Duvalier did much to upgrade the infrastructure of his country and turn it into a US coffee patch.

This was not to last. An outbreak of swine fever wiped out US-imported pigs Duvalier had been pushing on the peasantry instead of hardy local breeds, and with it most of their savings. Duvalier's power base — neglected anyway with excessive investment in the cities and little or nothing in the countryside — was alienated, triggering the 7<sup>th</sup> February 1986 *dechoukaj* ('up-rooting'), the mob destruction of all symbols of Duvalier's authority, including the lynching of macoutes and those *houngans* that had worked magic for the regime. These disorders persisted for three months until Duvalier fled the country (again under US protection) and every sect of backwoods Protestant missionary descended on Haiti like lice, seeing it as a golden opportunity to "confound Satan and Catholicism" by propagating the slogan "*an'n dechoke gangan*" ('destroy the *houngan*').<sup>52</sup>

Despite this, voodoo was tolerated and, after a period of military rule, the Catholic liberation theologian Jean-Bernard Aristide was elected president in 1990. Recognising its significance for the masses and seeking national reconciliation, Aristide encouraged the wearing of the red kerchief emblematic of voodoo (and once Duvalier-) affiliation and restaged the Bois-Caiman ceremony on its centenary, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1991. Despite these popularist measures, the military expelled him in under a year (by 29<sup>th</sup> September 1991) and it took Bush Snr.'s Marine-backed invasion, Operation Restore Democracy, to reinstall him three years later.<sup>53</sup> Despite the usual self-serving claims claims this was to 'defend human rights', this rather ill-fated foreign adventure is more usually held to have been an early post-Cold War experiment in imposing the New World Order and creating a more stable investment climate for US coffee corporations, pretty much the same rationale as the 1917 US occupation...

---

<sup>52</sup> Hurbon, *op cit.*, p. 122.

<sup>53</sup> Bob Shacochis's *The Immaculate Invasion* (Bloomsbury, 1999) provides a colourful if irritatingly journalistic and analysis-free account of the 1991–1994 US occupation and Aristide *interregnum*.

# Beyond Haiti

We are Neg Guinee, the people of Africa<sup>1</sup>

*Password to Voodooist Ceremony*

For anyone that thinks history is like walking, just putting one step in front of the other – ‘ware Haiti, for it is full of swamps. Haitian history is even more highly politicised – and racialised – than usual, with criticism of a national leader of a century ago immediately assumed to be criticism of the nation’s current leader also. In part, this is the heritage of noirism – with its insistence on elevating former Black leaders – but mulatto reactions to this have been equally partisan. Alfred Viau, who was to turn against Duvalier as an incidental candidate in the 1956 election, argued there were<sup>2</sup>

two tendencies at work in Haitian history: *l’ouverturisme*, which stood for the union of black and white against mulatto, “to the detriment even of the sovereignty and independence of the country”; and *petio-dessalinisme*, representing the union of black and mulatto Haitians against the whites, with the aim of complete independence of the country.

What’s wrong with this picture? Apart from the omission of any valatteo-colonialistism, where mulattos and Whites ally against the Blacks to their own overall disadvantage, the whole history of Haiti is seen in terms of the policies of its leaders rather than the experiences of the common people, the peasantry – and it wouldn’t be unfair to suggest that the race of those leaders also features prominently in Viau’s schema.

So is an objective history possible? Probably not, and I certainly haven’t attempted one. It’s surely enough to lay cards on the table and for readers to use their own judgement. I make no pretence to be anything other than an amateur with limited sources and resources, and hope to provoke better analyses than my own! In this, I am only following CLR James’ example, where he prefaces his *Black Jacobins*:<sup>3</sup>

I was tired of reading and hearing about Africans being persecuted and oppressed in Africa, in the Middle Passage, in the USA and all over the Caribbean. I made up my mind that I would write a book in which Africans or people of African descent instead of constantly being the object of other peoples’ exploitation and ferocity would themselves be taking action on a grand scale and shaping other people to their own needs.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wade Davis’ *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (Collins, 1986), p. 244.

<sup>2</sup> David Nicholls’ *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> CLR James’ *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Allison & Busby, 1994)

I'm inclined to agree that a constant barrage of victimistic propaganda empowers no-one but liberals and in a 1980 Foreword he also triumphantly notes how his account of the role of the mulattos in the Haitian revolution aided anti-*apartheid* activists in South Africa to form an effective analysis of how best to co-operate politically with those classified as Coloureds there.

What I found exceptionally irritating about James' analysis was that his solution to the problem of victimism is to create a role model, Toussaint L'Ouverture as untutored child of the Enlightenment and revolutionary hero in the mould of Lenin. This might have been a riposte to the rising Griot movement in Haiti – which James, as a good Marxist wedded to Progress and internationalism, could only abhor – but he clearly attributes heroic revolutionary deeds to Toussaint that had already been achieved earlier elsewhere by others (Sonthonax's arming of the people is a case in point) and fails to distinguish between the interests of Toussaint as ruler and the masses he ruled. Of course, such cults of personality look archaic, even sinister, from a post-1990 perspective and I'd argue it's impossible to understand the subsequent history of Haiti if you don't understand why the people hated Toussaint for trying to return them to the plantations, something James' adoration of centralised, state-controlled economic development didn't equip him to do (“Five Year planning, comrades?”).

But what of my own interests, rather than those of James as my principle source? Like most movements for social transformation, anarchists are fond of flagellating themselves for having insufficient minority representation:<sup>4</sup> “where are the workers?”, “where are the women?”, “we only have one token Black – does that make us racists?” (granting Bob Black's dictum: ‘those that act most guilty about such issues usually have good reason to be’ – probably). It's been simple common sense to me that minorities don't rush to join revolutionary movements for the same reason the overwhelming majority of people don't, because reformism provides sufficient palliatives to make their lives tolerable enough to make revolutionary solutions too much extra effort to be bothered with.

And, of course, there's the way these movements work too. Formally or informally, they are usually highly authoritarian and the last thing people want in seeking for their liberation is a revolutionary organisation that they're going to need to liberate themselves from too, complete with a new boss (usually too useless and uncharismatic to boss people about in the big, wide world outside the goldfish bowl of his – and it usually is ‘his’ – little sect) imposing ‘correct thought’ and formal or informal organisational discipline. This situation is doubly hard when the boss doesn't understand the interests of the minorities seeking a revolutionary solution through him, and crassly tries to have them mouthe a nonsensical ‘party line’ (typically with their concerns featuring only as some sort of ‘bolt-on extra’) instead of compromising his authority by treating them as equals and trying to find out what the real issues are through a mutual, learning dialogue.

Despite what I've said immediately above, I'm suspicious of simply ‘asking the people’, because as I've also said above, the majority are satisfied with reformist solutions to their life-situations – until they're implemented and found wanting.<sup>5</sup> Then, at best, another layer of the onion of oppression is unpeeled, but it'll take a lot more peeling and a lot of tears to get to the bottom of

---

– first published 1938), p. v.

<sup>4</sup> “minority representation”- yes, I totally hate this term too, given that globally workers, women and Black people are all majorities, and that in my opinion no one has a right to represent anyone but themselves, and even then at dread injury to their Being and a higher unity with ‘others’. I'm just using the language disguised liberals in the movement can relate to, the better to upset and lampoon them later.

<sup>5</sup> A hilarious illustration of this ‘ask the people’ approach gone awry came up in Nottingham a few years back,

it all. And — to murder the metaphor — you might just end up going round and round in circles instead, as evidenced by the endless contradictory social science fads imposed on minorities one year to the next. Entertaining and lucrative though they are to the liberals dreaming them up, running courses on them, and implementing them in classic Orwellian ‘double think’ fashion, they just serve to preserve the system of oppression in classic Red Queen fashion (“running so fast just to stand still”) rather than fundamentally challenging it. The liberal — particularly Leftist-liberal — propensity for accusing those with even minor divergences of opinion from their grant-securing canon of being ‘racists’ when they are clearly only career- and ideological competitors is so transparent that it’s more comic than tragic, though certainly also ugly, contemptible and pathetic. My view was that if you wanted to find out what made Black people revolutionaries, you needed to look at Black revolutionaries and the Black revolutions they made and, I suppose, that also made them.

Inevitably one ends up picking and choosing according to one’s own previous political predilections — in my case, Green — but one thing that would surprise those that think all you need to do is to post the word ‘racism’ endlessly or wave placards portraying icons of the latest Black victim of police violence to get the Black masses flocking in eager for revolutionary enlightenment is that the most authentic revolutionary Black groups, like the MOVE Organization in Philadelphia or the Earth People of Jamaica, actually don’t put a great deal of emphasis on racism. They are not ‘colour-blind’ (as many of the more old school Leftist groups are, curiously including Haiti’s small Communist Party) but do see racism as part of a totality of oppression and it is that totality that needs to be challenged to sweep racism away. Seen from a political perspective, this should be uncontroversial — if racism is a social control mechanism, then this should bring all other social control mechanisms into question for revolutionaries, and the type of society that needs social control at all. Similarly, historically, racism as a specific means of defining the ‘Other’ is relatively recent — if not as recent as the 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialist anthropology discussed in this essay, certainly not much more than half a millennium old.<sup>6</sup>

However, we’re talking about relatively small, marginalised groups here — inevitably, given the ascendancy of reformism — and this is what led me to look at Haiti, at how a Black revolution was made and at what happened next. I confess to finding the material pretty difficult to deal with, given the deep and often absurd racial animosities created by the colonial legacy, the genocidal violence (not that there’s anything wrong with offing our oppressors, of course), and the Haitian cult of authority, both generalissimo and *houngan*.

The issues certainly weren’t all ‘black and white’ — whilst Haitians understand their national history in terms of race, as we have seen above, this history is replete with contradictions. The *politique de doublure* inevitably had mulattos endorsing Black rulers and their Black rivals condemning them. Each ruling party would pretend there was no caste prejudice in Haiti as those they were excluding from power would charge it — but, with rare exceptions like the Griots,

---

where the people’s revolutionary demand for them to mediate was the removal of dog shit from the city streets. The group concerned then earnestly set about this heroic labour, even establishing a liaison committee with dog-owners “so they didn’t feel excluded”!

<sup>6</sup> Probably the first instance of racism as it is currently understood was the Spanish inquisitor Torquemada defining *conversos* as Jews “by blood” to justify their persecution in the 1490s. The early colonial extension of this formulation is explored in a lot more detail in my essay ‘Prelude to the New World’ in *The Rise of the West* (Green Anarchist Books, 2001). By way of contrast, the Medieval defined ‘Otherness’ in relation to religious affiliations (‘Christendom’, ‘Islam’, etc) and ancient Rome was an empire indifferent to race, defining the ‘Other’ in relation to Roman citizenship.

because this violated principles of racial equality rather than in order to assert their own. Although the noirist hero Dessalines' policy was to create an external enemy, the blancs as agents of slavery, his shift in terminology from mulattos and Blacks to *ancienne libres* and *nouveaux libres* demonstrated an economic understanding of the conflicts in Haiti. It was colonialism that fitted people to particular power niches according to colour, so it's understandable politics was articulated in those terms. And, most importantly, appeals to caste over class have again and again been shown to be consciously cynical, as Salomon's sell-out of the piquets most effectively illustrated – which suggests a way beyond this colonial heritage.

The question of authority is in a way both more troubling and more illuminating. Franz Fanon argued that wars of national independence restore self-respect to the formerly colonised, a sort of expiation through blood, but also noted:<sup>7</sup>

the danger of national independence obtained by war – and unfortunately this is the only means of obtaining it with dignity – is that the heroes of this war necessarily become, after the victory, the effective representatives of power, having in their hands the military force which is the instrument of coercion at the same time as being the means of defence.

Moreover, with particular reference to the Haitian experience, Nicholls adds that such a revolution also “provides no insurance against the development of a personality cult, and in the case of Haiti it was the basis upon which such hero worship was built”.<sup>8</sup> I suspect that Toussaintes campaign from Spanish San Domingo also illustrates a couple of other bases for Haitian autocracy. Firstly, by forming a disciplined core of troops using European drill, Toussainte helped release an organisational virus (the Europeans themselves being its progenitors, of course) where military discipline through a chain of command replaced the much less formalised and more charisma-orientated patterns of authority that existing in the Maroon bands previously resisting colonialism. His troops were expected to function as cogs in the military machine, their every action set by pattern book regulation and performed in unison by force of instilled habit, each accepting orders without question. Thus Toussainte's adoption of European military organisation was as much a political as a military tool for achieving power. This only serves to emphasise what CLR James had to say on the subject, Toussainte<sup>9</sup>

left even his generals in the dark. A naturally silent and reserved man, he had been formed by military discipline. He gave orders and expected them to be obeyed. No one ever knew what he was doing.

There is no way such a leadership style would have been accepted in Maroon bands, where people expected to know the why of what they were doing in order to retain trust in their leader (this also allowed for more individual initiative and flexibility, a prerequisite in guerrilla warfare).<sup>10</sup> People joined Toussainte because his troops had been trained to fight the colonists – and

---

<sup>7</sup> Nicholls, *op cit.*, p. 251.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>9</sup> James, *op cit.*, p. 287.

<sup>10</sup> I appreciate this transition from charismatic to bureaucratic authority through the medium of *regimented social organisation* has a Foucaudian tone (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Penguin translation, 1977) noting that the first mass organisations were armies, in fact), and make no apologies for this. Toussainte's interference in

later British invaders — head-to-head using their own tactics. That, and a very traditional west African regard for kingship and its prerogatives. It's already been argued that Toussaint may have laid claim to the persona of a king to authorise him to free slaves during his advance into Haiti. Whether this was the case or not, kingship was part of the folk culture of the ex-African slaves and Toussaint certainly laid claim to noble lineage and was playing the role of a king, whether he explicitly declared himself as such or not. Dessalines and Christophe's subsequent assumption of kingly roles — much ridiculed in Europe, a subcontinent itself still hardly through with monarchy — were simply trying to bolster their authority in the most obvious and popular way.

However, just as class interests peep from behind the race question, so they do from behind this question of authority. The leader's interest is not necessarily that of the led, even if they share a common caste, and this is most dramatically the case in Haiti. I've mentioned Hartford's 'two nations' analysis of Haiti above — that of the ruling elites and of the tending-to-subsistence peasantry — a separation Nicholls re-emphasises when discussing the Duvalier regime:<sup>11</sup>

The fact that his government did almost nothing to improve the lot of the average Haitian was irrelevant to his claims to legitimacy. No government in the history of Haiti had done anything significant to improve the lot of the masses and this was not the criterion by which a regime was judged. At least Duvalier usually refrained from interfering with the life of the peasant, and this is all they could hope for from a government.

As you'll see, I profoundly disagree with Nicholl's assessment that Duvalier had a 'hands-off' attitude to the peasantry<sup>12</sup>, but at this stage I'm just arguing that the peasantry were more keen their rulers didn't interfere in their lives than their rulers were not to interfere in them. We've seen already that throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Haitian peasantry rejected the plantations and did their best to retreat as far as they could from government taxes, wars and conscription, preferring simple lives of subsistence.

Where — apart from the simple common sense of harm avoidance — did the peasantry choose this lifestyle over that their leaders so generously offered them? It is the inheritance of Africa, as preserved through the Maroons, the 'wild ones' that burst the bonds of slavery, and through its cultural survival in voodoo. With some adaptations to local circumstance — for example, the use of secret society initiation to eliminate tensions potentially caused by the ethnic mix created by the African diaspora — the Maroons were recreating west Africa in the mountain fastnesses of Haiti. This was the rock on which their resistance rested — and still does. Having inherited the culture of their former colonial masters, the mulatto elite's penchant for anti-voodoo leagues can clearly be seen as an attempt to bring the disengaged (would it be too satiric to say 'socially excluded'?) peasantry back into the formal economy and their control. The Black elite was in a slightly more ambiguous position viz a viz the masses, asserting their caste credentials to tar their mulatto rivals as 'blanc-identified', but their aim was the same. To a good degree, the unofficial

---

his officers' private morality is also a classic illustration of this transition to even greater societal control, and one reason it is so unpopular with the masses.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholls, *op cit.*, p. 247.

<sup>12</sup> This trick is being continued through Aristide, though I suspect the rhetoric of liberation theology is quickly transforming into that of social democracy, welfare provisions under state control, thus forcing participation in state



history of Haiti has been the elites' attempts to assimilate the peasantry and subordinate their culture, first through anti-blanc rhetoric whilst confining them to the plantations, then through limited land reforms, and finally (Soulouque being a bit of an unappreciated pioneer) through the appropriation of voodoo. How did Duvalier achieve this? Through voodoo, Duvalier may have superficially been appealing to the peasantry as a whole – and many of them bought this lie – but was in fact only appealing to the habitants, richer peasants that had done well out of cash cropping and their poorer neighbours being forced into landlessness by population pressures, etc. And what do you know, but there was a direct overlap between this classe intermédiaire and the *houngans*, those holding privileged positions in rural life in the economic sphere also doing so in the esoteric sphere, much as with European freemasonry?<sup>13</sup> This is frankly hardly surprising, as voodoo initiations – especially through all the offices of the hounfort (lodge) to the rank of *houngan* – are extremely expensive, the feasting and ritual paraphernalia associated with each initiation typically amounting to six months wages for the average peasant. Additional to this, the model of authority supplied by the *houngan* even amongst the Maroons was then taken up as that of the national leader, a *houngan* writ large, especially in Duvalier's case.

How, then, does all this provide us with an appropriately revolutionary model of liberation, particularly Black liberation? Firstly, I want to explore what the peasantry were rejecting – in addition to the obvious – and why this was so intolerable to their rulers.

In rejecting plantation labour – whether under old masters or new – the peasantry weren't just rejecting the slave heritage those masters imposed on them but, more fundamentally, sheer physical effort.<sup>14</sup> Once ground in the interior had been broken, we're talking about a likely halving of their day in terms of the amount of work required to meet subsistence needs. As we've seen above, after the war of liberation, coffee production went even a stage further, the crop simply being gathered from coffee bushes run wild in an almost forager-type way. Toussainte may have exhorted the labourers that “work is necessary ... it is a virtue”,<sup>15</sup> but their sons would never grow up to be like those fine French officers Toussainte so admired – nor did they wish them to, having had their fill of Frenchmen, their bloodhounds and other ‘blessings’ of the self-styled ‘higher culture’. In rejecting large-scale production for export and their own proletarianisation to this end, the labourers also made it impossible for Haiti – once the “finest colony in the world” – to take its place in the world economy. In fact, they'd have preferred to burn Haiti end to end rather than submit to this, as the Night of Fire spectacularly demonstrated. This is no bad thing, inasmuch as it was just a producer of primary resources and a net importer of food, so this would have inevitably been a subordinate position profiting mainly middle-who/men, but the bottom line is that the logic of the lives of the masses won out over that of their rulers. In choosing to live lives

---

society and control of the broader population through it. If Haiti could ever afford a welfare state, of course...

<sup>13</sup> Nicholl, *op cit.*, p. 237 concurs here: “The people he [Duvalier] relied on in the country were often *houngans* or peasants from the intermediate class”.

<sup>14</sup> In his essay ‘Primitive Affluence: A Postscript to Sahlins’, in *Friendly Fire* (Autonomedia, 1992), p. 24, Bob Black cites the Hanunoo subsistence horticulturalists of the Philippines as devoting an average of only of “less than 2 hours and 45 minutes a day” to agricultural activities. No figure is given for typical daily working time with traditionally more intensive west African agriculture, though even six times this would be less than the hours expended on plantation labour – and for more immediate reward. Black does cite the Kpelle though, dry rice farmers in Liberia, whose work is governed by *lii-nee* (“joy”), the accompanying of all labour with communal music, dance and drinking of rice wine as a way of pleasurably integrating it with the rest of daily life (*ibid.*, p.31). Given voodoo ceremonial, this is also most likely the way Haiti's free peasants chose to tend their gardens following the revolution.

<sup>15</sup> James, *op cit.*, 155–156.

immediately and to their greatest convenience, they also chose to reject abstract Progress alongside what is now commonly described as economic development, restricting their leaders' power and opportunities for self-aggrandisement. In *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, Freud wrote that the pleasure principle had to be repressed for Civilisation to survive, even if that led to neurosis. Himself stridently bourgeois and a somewhat driven devotee of the Protestant work ethic / Jewish achievement ethic, Freud was largely talking about supplanting pleasure with production — precisely what was intolerable to the Haitian peasantry.

I think it's also helpful to explore the 'how' of this rejection. Subject to qualifiers below, it was total and it was armed, by a people armed of practical necessity, each to assure his or her own liberty and survival in the face of a campaign by former owners of literally genocidal ferocity. James sneered at the insurgents as "primitive" for destroying the means of production — by which he meant the plantations — and compared this to that of Medieval millenarian peasants in Europe. Indeed, and a comparison to their great credit, as such were far more radical and challenging to the existing order than modern, industrial revolts that leave the mechanics of subordination inherent in such production intact and a 'new guard' filling the old managerial class roles.<sup>16</sup> There was no need to stay their hand, to compromise with and / or assume the manner of their old masters, no need to preserve any part of their past oppression for some abstract 'higher stage' in future — they could live without all that and were the better off for it. And what stopped a return to such subordination for a very long time — certainly the better part of a century — was the peasantry's ability not only to live self-sufficiently outside the formal economy, but the means to prevent its encroachment by force of arms, just as the Maroons had previously done against the blanc plantocracy.

So much for what the peasantry were rejecting. What they affirmed, principally, was voodoo, but I want to argue this is more than just a cultural relic, an affirmation of some sort of 'Africaness' too easily dismissed as a colonial construct anyway (the original slaves were no Africans, but instead Dahomeyans, Whydah, Owe and so forth). In his novel anti-Occupation novel, *Gouverneurs de la rosee*, the Haitian Communist Party founder Jacques Roumain wrote "I have respect for your traditional customs but the blood of a cock or a goat cannot change the seasons."<sup>17</sup> Of course, this argument was as unscientific as the voodoo it challenged — until such sacrificial blood is withheld under controlled conditions, it is mere dogmatic assertion. As far as voodooists are concerned, their ritual practices have got results in a way those of dialectical materialism have singularly failed to do in Haiti — especially when it comes to sparking revolution. Far from being Marx's metaphorical 'opiate', voodoo has for centuries prevented the mass of people being co-opted by ruling class ideology — to the point that Duvalier was eventually forced to 'go through the back door' and co-opt them by co-opting voodoo itself — and has on many occasions driven them to the most inspired resistance. I am not dodging Roumain's point here, I am pointing out that voodoo's persistence despite objectivistic challenges to its truth-claims show such objections are irrelevant to voodoo's power and appeal as far as the oppressed are concerned.

What, then, is this appeal? It is not enough to say it is mere 'identity' because that doesn't explore the content of that identity, most importantly whether it is something specific and therefore

---

<sup>16</sup> John Zerzan's 'Who Killed Ned Ludd?' and 'Industrialism and Domestication' in *Elements of Refusal* (Paleo, 1999) explores the historical processes whereby organising the masses just made them more controllable ('disciplined') and less rebellious, not least because their leaders could not effectively criticise Authority whilst being models of authority themselves.

<sup>17</sup> Nicholls, *op cit.*, p. 173.

of local significance only or whether it has some more general or universal utility in facilitating revolution. As I see it, a sense of identity comes from a conjunction of its history and of daily practice.

The history we now know, a history African origins and myth, of genocidal exploitation, and of cultural, ritual and physical resistance to it. I have no particularly problems with this — a powerful enough story siding with the oppressed and not even exclusive of blancs provided they also side against oppression and accept a new, political identity as notional ‘children of Guinea’.

In terms of daily practice, there is a voodooist community that reinforces its values through close mutual association and mutual support (often the only such support available in rural areas), a reading of the world for significance through voodoo eyes (ie. worldview), and the enactment of voodoo ceremonial at the hounfort. It is this last that I want to focus on as a potential road out of the usual problems of cultures being self-contained and self-affirming rather than particularly liberating.<sup>18</sup> In these rituals, individuals strive using pretty standard techniques of intoxication, rhythmic music and dance, to become timeless, selfless receptacles for the lwas. Some will argue this is mere role-play, probably unaware of what people are capable of in these altered states. Regardless — and I am not much interested in arguing with rationalists here, a mere variant on the counter-revolutionary Marxist tradition — this ‘horse and rider’ process demonstrates the boundaries of selfdom and of a dull, externally-controlled reality are highly elastic and vulnerable. Why is this particularly significant? John Zerzan’s ‘origins’ essays<sup>19</sup> demonstrate that our lives are not only ruled by abstractions such as Time, number and language, but that these are a product of Civilisation, our enemy, which is relatively recent historically (at best 10% of human history, rather than an inevitable component of our humanity). As far as the ‘horses’ — and those sharing their experiences at the hounfort — are concerned, these mediations have been broken through for a glimpse of ‘Africa’, our free, unmediated heritage and a liberation from Civilised symbolic accretions that reaffirms the celebrants’ faith in their undesirability. To repeat myself, against these powerful and unifying experiences, dogmatic Communist quibbles about the efficacy of cock and goat blood must have seemed pretty thin stuff.

Some would argue that whilst this insight may be useful and the orgiastic nature of voodoo rites certainly provide a counter-point that disinclines the majority of the oppressed associated with it from work, that the celebrants experiences are structured by the *houngan* or otherwise directed away from opportunities to make for meaningful social change:<sup>20</sup>

Early religion is wildly orgiastic, clearly reflecting the lost way of life for which people longed. But by separating this wild abandon into the realm of the spirit, which is in reality just a realm of abstract ideas with no concrete existence, religion made itself the handmaiden of civilized, domesticated culture. So it is no surprise that in time shamans evolved into priests who were functionaries of the State.

Whilst I will willingly concede that some are more receptive ‘horses’ than others, another key point is that it is not the *houngan* that typically enters these states — though s/he would not be a *houngan* if incapable of this — but the other celebrants, many of the congregation.

---

<sup>18</sup> See Feral Faun’s ‘The Anarchist Subculture’ in *Feral Revolution* (Elephant, 2000) for comprehensive critique.

<sup>19</sup> Zerzan, op. cit., chaps 2–5.

<sup>20</sup> Feral Faun’s ‘The Quest for the Spiritual’, op cit., p.65.

Additionally, we have accounts from the revolution of Maroon mobs armed only with clubs or even just their bare hands rushing disciplined European troops armed with muskets, bayonets and artillery at the blast of the conch. Despite their technological disadvantage, the Maroons proved “unstoppable” — even thrusting their arms down the muzzles of cannon, believing this would prevent them discharging — because of the visions of Africa before them, demonstrating that they can be evoked anywhere, even in battle, rather than being separated from daily life in the hounfort. In fact, the whole point of voodoo is the imminence of the lwas, their ‘here and now’ availability — even unwanted intrusion, on occasion! — to all celebrants.

But, yes, I would agree that the *houngans* do exert undue authority in voodoo and, more to the point, voodoo is structured in such a way that they can do that. Initiations have to be bought from the *houngan* and the knowledge needed to ‘make the grade’ can only be taught by him or her to the initiate. This insistence on absolute loyalty (which may be enforced by direct action or at least social ostracism) is much akin to that between guru and disciple, and is an inheritance of west African traditions where a similar rigidity prevails in moities and secret societies there, themselves a reflection of it’s peasant-orientated agricultural economies. I argue that it doesn’t have to be that way and it shouldn’t be that way if voodoo’s full liberatory potential is to be released.

The ‘weak’ alternative is simple competition between visionaries, each arguing for the potency of their vision and attracting followings according to how is best vindicated by subsequent events. Such competitions were common in native American shamanism and still are in Latin America (though we’re not talking Santarea here.) and a byproduct of this would be a leakage of higher initiation secrets to tempt the faithful, inevitably leading to further diversity of visionaries and a democratisation of such knowledge. However, the societies we’re talking about here are hunter / gatherer or horticulturists (slash ‘n’ burn gardeners), so I think this route wouldn’t make much of a dent in the more structured voodoo set up. It demands a lot of knowledge is accumulated before the process can start really rolling, that competition would be tolerated (though, to a certain extent, it is), and still implies a superiority of *houngan* over all lower-initiation celebrants.

However, the ‘strong’ alternative is that as the lwas speak through all celebrants and not just the *houngan*, then they all demand the ability to interpret and acquire other withheld *houngan* skills as a matter of right — each his or her own *houngan*, in effect. Many hunter / gatherer societies do not have spiritual specialists at all and, strange as this sounds, this approach is actually much more akin to other West African / West Indian traditions than the matter of competing shamans above. The ‘I’n’I’ of Rastafarianism, for example, is about the spiritual imminent in the personal with no formal higher level of institutionalised spiritual organisation. In this insistence on personal spiritual insight (and toleration of others diverse from their own), the Rastas of Jamaica are very much akin to those radicals of the Civil War period, the Ranters, and incidentally are also highly aware of and articulate concerning their own African heritage. There is even a mechanism that exists for this in voodoo (allowing for a bit of ‘back room’ arm-twisting when it comes to accessing ritual secrets) — possession not by lwa but by deceased *houngan*, claims Duvalier was big on, as we’ve seen.

I’ve placed great emphasis on breaking down the *houngan*’s political and spiritual authority as it is a model-in-miniature of political authority as a whole — as the Duvalier dynasty demonstrated — and besides at a village level, the *houngan*’s authority is real whereas the president’s is a distant abstraction. Given the Haitian history of resistance through withdrawal into the local, I see this bottom-up approach to dehierarchalising Haitian society as most likely rele-

vant and effective — first the ‘invisible government’ of Haiti, then the notional government in consequence. Would this destroy voodoo? I consider the collective knowledge, the history and experience of believers to be of more relevance to it and to its potential for human liberation than any authoritarian structure traditional to it. We are talking more a democratisation of voodoo than its destruction. Frankly, it is better such knowledge is communicated more freely, at least amongst those within this faith community. It would certainly proof it against the corruption and external political manipulation through leadership co-option that occurred under Duvalier that threatened voodoo’s integrity and very existence during the 1986 dechoukaj. In my view, it would actually strength voodoo on the “Where there was one Toussainte, now there are a thousand” principle, as well as deepening its insights.

Is spiritual insight enough to change a society? In isolation, obviously not, but after voodoo serving as a powerhouse for popular resistance in Haiti and such minor impacts of belief on European history as the Reformation, I think only a fool would dismiss it as simple hocus-pocus and thin air. And voodoo does not exist in isolation from either Haiti’s community — in fact, it is the heart of rural communities — nor its history, a generally proud (if sometimes horrifying) one of popular resistance from these self-same communities. The democratisation I’ve suggested above — and I hate the term — would only increase the conjunction between spiritual insight and social action — principally against hierarchy. The peasantry are constantly mindful of land issues. The insight and means now exist to allow population reductions to make subsistence a viable option again for the majority — permitting withdrawal from a grossly exploitative world economy and a return to the 19<sup>th</sup> century ‘golden age of the peasant’ on Haiti — and also a will to fight for land redistribution to meet immediate subsistence needs, with an emphasis on informal occupation rather than involving central government officials who will inevitably favour powerful export landowners, especially the US ones and will play political games (maybe even a revival of the incredibly idiotic mulatto v. Black stupidity that Aristide at least largely saw the back of) to keep them up as middle-wo/men regardless. Such land re/occupation movements are stock-on-trade in the Third World, and some — such as the Movement Sem Terra (MST) in Brazil — are highly effective too. Now as then, the costs of involvement in the external economy well outweigh the gains for the rural masses. And from the start, this is clearly a class issue that will disadvantage only exporting urban / coastal elites — something the latter may try to dress up in caste terms, but irrelevant if the rural masses do not have to seek their favour.

Does this model have wider revolutionary implications, particularly for Black people? I’m sure some of you are scoffing already: ‘Not that many hounforts in south London — or small-holdings going free either’. Obviously not, but you’re picking up on the wrong points of example — and some will do this deliberately to keep their typically White-run indocritinating, reformist anti-racist rackets ticking over regardless, which they’re welcome to for all the good they’ll do anyone.<sup>21</sup>

My first point is that pretty much every oppressed minority (including eventually even the oppressed majority — revolutionaries will get my drift) have got their own history and their own

---

<sup>21</sup> Writing this essay, I found the early Haitian leaders pushing White missionaries on Africa to ‘civilise’ it even after their own slave experiences at the hands of official Catholicism pretty incredible and disgraceful, for example, more than I found the Griots’ affiliations to fascist racial supremacism even.

Similarly, current western European culture seems geared around dehumanising Progress-positive ideologies that stemmed from the Enlightenment. Despite having long critiqued their deep perniciousness, I still catch myself using programming analogies when discussing my own thinking processes and those of others.

culture. Some of this derives simply from their own particularly experience of oppression, the way they've been classified as Other and resisted such treatment. But usually it's more than that. For a start, the culture has to start somewhere and unless it's taken such a hammering that these origins have been wholly obliterated by the dominant culture — and it happens, even down to elimination of folk memory, in which case pick it up where you can — and this will prove a rich resource in terms of unique insight and analogue with the current situation. I am certainly not saying people should be insular or chauvinist — we can learn from everyone — but I do think that as people start from their own unique culture, they should cherish and understand it because they — of all people — are also the ones best placed to criticise and improve on it (criticising other peoples' cultures is also acceptable, if you first understand what first prompts you to do so in your own culture and are sensitive to genuine, unjustifiable contradictions in that of others).

My second point concerns this matter of criticism. One needs review one's own culture to discover what in it has liberatory potential and what actually only furthers your oppression and that of others. On the positive side, there are probably immediatist or perhaps mystical traditions that talk about evoking the sort of imminence I was discussing above with 'horse and rider' in voodoo ritual. These need to be checked to see if strict hierarchies inhere in them (as with voodoo initiations) and whether these can be bypassed, whether their association with social militancy / resistance led to their corruption into cultish or otherwise authoritarian forms (or, equally bad, promotes quietism and extreme social disengagement — the latter hardly a path to selfless unity in real world terms), whether their repertoire of analogue has effective and powerful resonances with you or not. The point of trying to achieve this aphoric state through a tradition that has most relevance to you — and I'm not saying your culture of birth is destiny here, if this doesn't have the strongest resonances for you — to give you the strength of mind to take on a whole civilisation that is excluding you from all that. I am not advocating this sort of spiritual quest as a 'hobby high' so you can take a holiday from their 'reality' to pep yourself up and dive back in, keeping the bloody system going! I hope this proviso is enough to shoo off hippy recuperators. This is not hot air or for personal indulgence — it's about finding somewhere to see the system from where it most is not, where it will appear most intolerable from, and where you can develop your critique of it and your own positive values. The point is to build belief and strength of mind, as well as strength of arms — for the point when there is no turning back. On the negative side, there's going to be a lot in your culture that's alienating rubbish — as Fanon notes, the colonised also internalise the values of their oppressors — and you have to understand why this is, because you're going to have to argue this through with yourself and others close to you.

The third point — possibly simultaneous with the second as a collective project to stop insularity and egotism — is that when you are exploring the best and worst of your own (and other) cultural traditions, you want to start living it and (without proselytising, a sure sign you're sinking into uncritical dogmatism — believe me, people's own dissatisfaction will be the source of their affinity with you, not any clever or persistent arguments you may dream up) encouraging others close to you to do likewise. There's no need to trumpet this from the rooftops — as MOVE found out at Osage Avenue,<sup>22</sup> sometimes drawing too much attention to yourself can have fatal consequences. The dominant culture devalues yours and exists to ridicule, minimise and ultimately obliterate it. Like the slaves in Haiti, the point is to take nothing from it, especially such hostile judgements. Criticise your culture in your terms — especially if you're excluding peo-

---

<sup>22</sup> *20 Years on the Move* (MOVE Organization, 1996), pp. 40–45.

ple on grounds that just feel like plain prejudice to you or which you can't satisfactorily justify — but not that of the dominant culture, which is designed to steamroller over you. There's no point having a nice liberal 'dialogue' with it when the point of such is only to change your mind. Your culture, your liberatory interpretation of it, should be your rock, the emotional support of yourself and others close to you. As you'll see, in the end, that's all there is.

And so, my fourth point — although you may have withdrawn mentally from Civilisation already, a time will come for 'fight or flight', withdrawing your co-operation physically from the economy also, as Haiti's plantation slaves fled to the Maroons. In the titular south London situation above, there is almost no way of making a living without feeding the system somehow, even if it's supplying some untaxed, under-the-counter niche. The Earth People in Jamaica are lucky enough to have a communal, self-sufficient organic lifestyle, but there aren't that many Maroons out there and if you're planning on starting your own enclave, land is sparse and it costs. When asked, an associate of mine working with the Hadza, a hunter / gatherer tribe in central Africa, told them to "take nothing" offered by Civilisation, as this was a sure route to assimilation. As we generally are assimilated to the extent they have taken all means of living from us, only to sell it back to us, I'd say take the absolute minimum from them to survive, stealing it or otherwise obtaining it in a way that minimises their profit and your contact with them if at all possible, and try to figure out how to do without even that. Obviously search your own cultural history (and that of other oppressed groups, where relevant and useful) as to the best ways to 'fight or flight', how others survived before you and how that can be made relevant for today, but the bottom line is that this Civilisation is as much a prison, as much akin to a slave compound, as pre-revolutionary San Domingue. As far as they're concerned, you owe them a living and no-one's allowed to just leave voluntarily. If weak, you can stay in place building culturally and emulating the slaves' covert sabotage (at least upping the cost of your ongoing captivity), but if there are no other options, you should be building for your 'Night of Fire', crashing as much of the system as possible so it's impossible for them to hold or control you any longer. That's why I was saying to do your utmost to break any imposed dependency on a system you're going to have to destroy as the insurgent slaves of Haiti did, as completely and with as little compromise as possible. Any dependency will only stay your hand to that extent. However useless you've made yourself to them economically, they need you — you shouldn't need them. Your cultural contacts are natural allies, but the point of not isolating yourself from other oppressed groups, of also seeking to understand both the liberatory content and oppressive potential of their perspectives, is that they too are potential allies, equally keen to break free. On Haiti, the 'Night of Fire' was about destroying the plantations that both imprisoned the slaves and supplied the rationale for their masters to remain in the colony, using the traditional weapon of the oppressed, fire. Realistically, in a modern industrial economy characterised by a highly specialised division of labour, we are talking small numbers prepared to act unless there is a serious broader societal crisis — so clandestine, targeted attacks on the power, communications and transport infrastructure are most likely to precipitate such crisis. What would the military bomb in a war to paralyse a country? So you have your target list — though lacking B52s, you need to think of techniques available to all to take them out. Too many groups have been compromised chasing rare, specialist kit from compromised suppliers when something nearly as good was available for £1.99 from the local hardware store — where anyone else can get it too if they share your grievances. Lastly on this, never think you can't win. That's the first thing the dominant culture teaches you — powerlessness. Against all the odds, the barefoot slaves of Haiti typically

armed with only clubs and the promise of Africa won, seeing the back not of one but of two of the greatest powers of the Napoleonic era.

My last point — and one easily forgotten — is that when you get out, they're still not going to let you go. Most of the history of Haiti was attempts to drag it back into the world economy by hook or crook, even when it was grossly impoverished. If you sneaked out, they'll search for you. If you're weak, they'll drag you back. If not (unlikely, given you're up against nation-state sized opponents here!), they'll offer to trade with you or otherwise cut you into their power games as a disposable 'ally', anything to make you dependent on them. And, finally, there's the 'Hussite' gambit, whereby they concede they can't get in or compromise you, but surround you and hope things rot in there, that hierarchy and domination return, typically justified with reference to their external threat. Never forget the vision of autonomy and equality — and "take nothing". This game of pockets of freedom breaking through and then in weeks, years, decades even, being reabsorbed will go on until the end of history, the end of Time, but just as they may get us in the end, there is an example of free community to set and to enjoy in the meantime. As they're not in the habit of lopping off feet like the old slavers, you can start building for your next break for it as soon as they drag you back into Civilisation's belly, no doubt with more support each time due to the example you've set.

Unlike CLR James, I'm not concluding this essay with any grandiose claims. I doubt it will supply any analysis that will help dismantle the equivalent of *apartheid*, influence affairs of state in Haiti or even add anything to the dogmatic stew that is movement politics in UK. Despite the perhaps excessively imperative tone of my closing five points, I have written this simply to bring the inspiring and largely ignored story of the Haitian revolution to your attention and to clarify my own thinking on questions of 'race', culture and revolution. You may profoundly disagree with my account of Haiti's history or the conclusions I have drawn from it. As one that scorns authority, I welcome this — evidently you do too and have shown you are prepared to think for yourself. I welcome debate through the address concluding this pamphlet.



Anarchist library  
Anti-Copyright



John Connor  
Children of Guinea. Voodoo, The 1793 Haitian Revolution and After  
2003

Retrieved on January 1, 2005 from [www.greenanarchist.org](http://www.greenanarchist.org)

For John Moore (1956–2003)  
and for Mumia and the MOVE 9.

Green Anarchist Books,  
BCM 1715, London WC1N 3XX.

Published by Green Anarchist Books 2003

Anti-Copyright @ 2003.

[en.anarchistlibraries.net](http://en.anarchistlibraries.net)