

The Black Jacobins: Teachers of Revolution

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“West Indians first became aware of themselves as a people in the Haitian Revolution. Whatever its ultimate fate, the Cuban Revolution marks the ultimate stage of a Caribbean quest for national identity.”

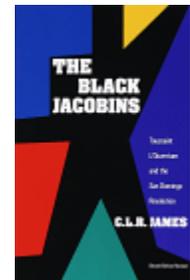
---C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, 1962 Appendix

The revolutionary upheaval that began to shake France in 1789 established political and ideological groupings among the various sectors and classes of French society. As a result, revolutionary clubs were set up by the representatives in the National Assembly, whose participants took on the names of one or another club, depending on their political orientation. The members of the right wing called themselves Girondins, while those in the extreme radical wing took the name Jacobins.



C.L.R. James, 1901-1989

When history is written from the centers of power, with the aim of defending the superiority of western civilization, the only way a politically and ideologically radical group can be only acknowledged as legitimate is within the framework of a process like the French Revolution. The only way to allow for the existence of Jacobins in the Caribbean, especially if they are Black, is by taking the audacious step of flatly rejecting the idea that there are higher and lower models of civilization.



Otherwise, when history sees the Third World (making up no less than three-quarters

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of humanity) through the eyes of the centers of power, it explains that we are an odd, strange, anomalous offshoot of Western civilization, and that we will remain so until we reach the levels of civilization that they have achieved at our expense. From this perspective, then, the existence of, for example, Petrocaribe is completely unthinkable and totally improbable.

But for the author of a book published in 1938, entitled *The Black Jacobins*, Hugo Chávez's revolutionary endeavors and the resulting highly innovative energy consortium that he has sponsored, flow directly out of the Caribbean's potential to forge its own destiny. The author of that book is one of those outstanding teachers of history that the Caribbean and the Americas have spawned in such abundance, one of those who have, with such consummate skill, reworked paradigms of the universal culture in order to more fully understand our realities. This teacher was Cyril Lionel Robert James, known to all as C.L.R. James.

C. L. R. James

The father of the English-speaking Caribbean's modern intellectual tradition was born on the island of Trinidad in 1901. The son of a schoolteacher father and a mother with a love for literature, he inherited from her one of his two great life-long passions: literature and sports. By the age of ten he was already totally familiar with the classics of English literature. Through his intelligence and his skill in playing cricket he won one of the competitive scholarships that the colonial government awarded to children of the colony to do their high school studies at the Queen's Royal College.

In 1932 he emigrated to London. But his formal education never went beyond secondary school. He was, however, a literary critic and sports journalist, a writer and a socialist and anti-imperialist activist, a revolutionary and a Marxist fighter, a political writer and agitator, and teacher and mentor to several generations of Caribbean students. His unique vision of the world and human society was expressed in a perspective that incorporated art, literature, politics, philosophy, history, and economics.

Shortly after arriving in England he wrote his play *Toussaint L'Ouverture*. In 1937 he published a history of the Communist International, *World Revolution*, and with his friend George Padmore – who was a Marxist and Pan Africanist – he created the International African Services Bureau to struggle for the continent's independence.

In the England of the 1930s he embraced Marxist ideology and came to fully understand the significance of race and social class in Caribbean society, Black nationalism, and historical and dialectical materialism. In that decade he transitioned from being a young radical from a colonial society into a Marxist convinced of the possibility of using political action and theory to reach the goal of ending oppression and achieving self-determination. An anti-Stalinist, a Trotskyist, he became one of the most outstanding Marxist theoreticians of the colonial world, all of which was rooted in the context of his being a Black intellectual experiencing racism in a highly industrialized society in the midst of a period of economic

decline.

In 1938 his two epic works on the history of Blacks, social revolution in the Caribbean, and colonialism were published: *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* and *A History of Negro Revolt*.

The Black Jacobins

The impact of capitalism's great crisis between 1929 and 1933 is almost always viewed in exclusively economic terms. However, we need only mention a few events to show that that period had deep repercussions on the political and intellectual life of many societies. In the Caribbean, the 1930s were a watershed in the development of society, which had been in political turmoil since 1934. In 1937 oil workers in Trinidad spearheaded riots, while Jamaica was shaken by a general strike.

In Cuba, U.S. imperialism's system of domination was being shaken up. Throughout the world there was growing consciousness of Africa's need to gain its independence. The Pan Africanist movement, which had been founded and led by Jamaican Marcus Garvey in the previous decade, was growing. Fascist Italy's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia enraged those who watched the violation of the only country that had managed to remain free from foreign colonial domination. The great powers were highly alarmed. Studies and reports aimed at curtailing revolutionary developments were published in the United States (*Problems of the New Cuba*, 1934) and England (*Report of the Royal Commission*, 1938).

The 1930s also saw the rise of a Caribbean school of thought, an appreciation of the creative character of Marxist analysis during a revolutionary period. It is not coincidental that *The Black Jacobins* was published in the same time frame as works of the scope of those produced by Alejo Carpentier, Rubén Martínez Villena, W. E. B. DuBois, and Ramiro Guerra, to cite only some of the most relevant writers who produced fundamental works of Caribbean thought during that decade.

The Black Jacobins is a pioneering work in studying the revolution in Haiti (Saint Domingue) in depth -- the origin, development, and culmination of the first and only successful slave revolt in history. This was the first time the political independence of Blacks was taken rather than given, as was the case with the decolonization following the Second World War. But the aim of this book was not to show off the author's erudition. *The Black Jacobins* is, above all, a weapon in the struggle against colonialism, racism, and imperialism, a work that looks to the future.

It is significant, therefore, that two revolutionary intellectuals who were partisans of the freedom struggles in the Caribbean, C.L.R. James and Alejo Carpentier, looked to the legacy of the revolution in Haiti to shed light – with *The Black Jacobins* and *The Kingdom of this World* respectively – on the revolutionary events that they witnessed and took part in.

Despite the intellectual tradition that had demonized the Haitian revolution as the most eloquent

confirmation of the barbarism of Black people, James describes how the slaves in Haiti were able to develop their own picture of what had taken place in France. It seemed obvious to them that “the white slaves in France had risen, and killed their masters and were now enjoying the fruits of the earth.” This is how the slaves understood the spirit of liberty, equality, and fraternity that mobilized the Parisian masses. This conviction inexorably turned them into the most radical wing of the struggle in the colony, into Black Jacobins, whose moral fortitude led them to achieve a triumph that has been the source of admiration for two hundred years. For James, highlighting the interconnection between the mass movement in the mother country and the colonial struggle was, in the 1930s, a matter of the greatest relevance for the Caribbean and Africa.

In *The Black Jacobins* James makes a significant contribution to the historiography of the Caribbean on another topic with his research into the Haitian colony’s contribution to the development of capitalism in France, a subject that powerfully influenced another classic work of Caribbean thinking: *Capitalism and Slavery* by Eric Williams, also a Trinidadian.

By pointing out that the 30,826 white residents of Haiti needed barbaric measures to maintain a population of half a million slaves and freed Blacks and mulattos in servitude, James shows how in the revolt the Blacks adopted the barbarous methods that their masters had taught them in two centuries of civilization: “they were seeking their salvation in the most obvious way, the destruction of what they knew was the cause of their sufferings.” With his eye focused on the need to build a new society in the Caribbean, James explained the fact that the conduct of whites as well as Blacks was the result of slavery, which created a society filled with brutality, human degradation, schisms, and contradictions.

Throughout the text of *The Black Jacobins* the author uses the historical experience of the Caribbean to explore the relationship between the personal traits of the individual and objective historical forces. His analysis of the figure of Toussaint L’Ouverture enabled him delve deeply into the influence of the individual on history, as well as the limits that objective conditions impose on the individual.

James was able to use the example of Toussaint to counter the myths about the capabilities of the Black race. A slave for about 40 years, with some education, Toussaint knew rudiments of French and Latin, had read Caesar’s commentaries and Abbe Raynal’s treatise on the East and West Indies. On the plantation where he was a slave he exercised authority and administrative responsibilities that were typically the role of a white man in a society where color marked the limits of social mobility. According to James, “no single figure [has] appeared on the historical stage more greatly gifted than this Negro.” But Toussaint, above all, was a product of the revolution. The revolution enabled Toussaint to use his intelligence and wisdom to create an army of 500 ex-slaves, which he used to wage the struggle against the internal and external counterrevolution and to intervene in the contradictions among the anti-colonial and anti-slave fighters.

But in the colony the influence of the individual was not the only thing that needed to be examined in great detail. James also paid great attention to examining how the interests of the different social sectors and classes in the mother country influenced their political positions regarding the emancipation

of the slaves and of the colony, inside the colony as well as in the mother country.

Drawing lessons from history about the source of leadership in times of revolution led James to the following conclusion: “The leaders of a revolution are usually those who have been able to profit by the cultural advantages of the system they are attacking, and the San Domingo revolution was no exception to this rule.” He himself was a product of a colonial education, with a Victorian stamp, and like nearly all of the revolutionary intelligentsia in the Caribbean, his most radical ideas had taken root in the same classrooms where they tried to teach students to never question colonialist patterns of thought.

From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro

When *The Black Jacobins* was reissued in 1962 with an appendix suggestively entitled “From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro,” it became absolutely clear that it was a work written to serve the revolution in the Caribbean. On that occasion, C.L.R. James, in the full maturity of his extraordinary intellect, explained that the appendix “ attempts for the future of the West Indies, all of them, what was done for Africa in 1938. Writers on the West Indies always relate them to their approximation to Britain, France, Spain and America, that is to say, to Western civilization, never in relation to their own history. This is here attempted for the first time.”

The Cuban Revolution’s recent attainment of power was more than sufficient impetus and reason to re-examine the past century and a half of the history of the Caribbean. From a Marxist perspective, deeply rooted in Caribbean reality, James saw the personalities of Toussaint and Fidel as symbols of the certainty of the revolutionary transformation of Caribbean society. Thus, nearly a quarter century after it was written, *The Black Jacobins* reaffirmed its suitability as a teaching tool for the present and future of the Caribbean, something we can still confirm today.

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