

# Black Spartacus, black Jacobins

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Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus. The epic life of Toussaint Louverture*, Allen Lane, 2020, 427 pp.

In 1697, the western part of the Caribbean island that Columbus named Hispaniola, which is close to both Jamaica and Cuba, became French, under the name Saint Domingue. By 1791 slaves on plantations in Saint Domingue, a very high proportion of whom had recently been shipped from Africa, were producing more sugar, coffee, indigo and cotton for the world market than all the other Caribbean colonies put together. In that year these slaves rose up, triggering a complex set of struggles which ended in 1804 when Saint Domingue became the independent country of Haiti. The single most important leader of this, the Haitian revolution, arguably one of the most important events in world history, was the former slave, Toussaint Louverture.

In 1802, with the aim of restoring slavery there, Napoleon sent 30,000 soldiers to Saint Domingue. Assisted by tropical diseases, armies led by Louverture and the other former-slave generals defeated and nearly annihilated this force, as they had done with a British force four years earlier. One effect of this was that Napoleon abandoned his plans for rebuilding a French empire in north America, and as a result sold to the US government for 15 million dollars the French-owned territory stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada and from the Great Lakes to the Rocky Mountains which forms about one third of today's USA. This is only one of the far-reaching - but not widely known - effects of the Haitian revolution.

What happened in Saint Domingue between 1791 and 1804 is a key event in the history not of Haiti alone, but also of Jamaica, Cuba, France, England, Spain, the USA, many African nations, and ultimately the world as a whole. To the extent that a valid understanding of this event is denied them, working-class people across the world today are disempowered, a problem that those seeking to build an alternative to dominant forms of education will sooner or later need to address.

In terms of vocational courses, the approach most likely to be worthwhile would be through project work. This in turn would depend on awarding bodies requiring students to produce project work that extends beyond the narrowly vocational. And this in turn would require teachers who have equipped themselves to encourage and support project work in areas like Haitian history. It's in this kind of context that we should evaluate a book like *Black Spartacus*.

The dust jacket explains that Sudhir Hazareesingh has been since 1990 a fellow of - and politics tutor at - Balliol College, Oxford. He was born in Mauritius - that is, one of the islands in the Indian Ocean which when the Haitian revolution arose was a French colony (Isle de France) and, like Haiti, a plantation economy using enslaved people from Africa to produce cash crops for the world market. This francophone background has equipped Hazareesingh to draw very thoroughly on French sources for his valuable new biography of Louverture. (These sources are thoroughly documented in the book's end-notes, although there is no bibliography as such.) Hazareesingh has also, we can safely assume, been often on the receiving end of racism.

He is well informed about the academic studies of the Haitian revolution produced over the last 40 or so years, including in north America by David Geggus and Carolyn Fick. He traces scrupulously the twists and turns of the role played by Louverture in the struggles that led, after Louverture's death in a French dungeon, to Haitian independence. He provides also a historical review of non-academic literature, as well as visual art, film and music, about these events. His book contains 16 colour plates and many other images in the text itself which together offer an introduction to the two centuries of iconography inspired by Louverture's life. It should be on the reading list of every teacher education course that aims to prepare people to teach working-class children, young people, university students and adults in the UK today, as well as of TU education tutors. At the same time, however, those concerned would be unwise not to read or re-

read C. L. R. James's 1938 study *The Black Jacobins. Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*.

Hazareesingh more than once characterises this book, oddly, as a 'biography' of Louverture. Nevertheless, he, like David Geggus (ie the main English language academic expert on the Haitian revolution) is clear that *The Black Jacobins*, though it contains minor factual mistakes, has not been superseded. But near the end of *Black Spartacus* (p357), in a chapter summing up what he sees as Louverture's importance, especially in 'the modern global South', Hazareesingh also says:

. . . there was something unmistakably Louvertureian in Frantz Fanon's single-minded pursuit of revolution; in Fidel Castro's indomitable physical and discursive energy; in Ho Chi Minh's and Yasser Arafat's strategic artfulness and ability to transform material weakness into political strength; and in Nelson Mandela's generous spirit of reconciliation.

This reflects a from-above standpoint to which, at least in 1938, and for many years after that, James was very strongly opposed.

Born in Trinidad in 1901, and having worked in a school there as a history teacher, James moved in 1932, on the invitation of his friend, the cricketer Learie Constantine, to Nelson in Lancashire. Here, in Constantine's house, he entered into - and was strongly influenced by - dialogue with working-class Labour and trade union activists, wrote (1932) *The Life of Captain Cipriani*, a biography of the Trinidadian union leader, and began to collect material from France on Haiti. Moving to London (Finchley), he produced, along with *The Black Jacobins: the play Toussaint Louverture; the story of the only successful slave revolt in history*, in which Paul Robeson starred (1936), *World Revolution 1917-1936. The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (1937); an English translation of Boris Souvarine's massive *Stalin: A Critical Survey of Bolshevism* (1938), and the Africa-focused *A History of Negro Revolt*. From 1935 onwards he was a central organiser of a black-led international movement of solidarity with the Ethiopian struggle against Mussolini's invading forces. Meanwhile he had also become a prominent figure in the Trotskyist movement and, via this, the Independent Labour Party and National Council of Labour Colleges. In 1938 (October) he was invited by Trotskyists in the USA to carry out a lecture tour in which he spoke about the position of black people there. (He was shortly afterwards sent to Mexico to discuss this with Trotsky himself.)

In order fully to appreciate the underlying thrust of *The Black Jacobins* it helps also to know that in 1938 a fierce struggle was going on amongst US leftists around the Communist Party's demand for a black-ruled country stretching across the areas of the southern states where black people - especially sharecroppers - were concentrated. The Trotskyists, including James, rejected this approach, arguing instead for a 'black and white unite and fight' programme within the CIO union movement that would reach out to the growing numbers of black industrial workers. Within this, however, James asserted a need for an autonomous from-below black organisation - in effect a socialist version of the Garvey movement.

In *The Black Jacobins* as a whole, and especially in his analysis within it of the two-way interaction between the changing course of the French revolution and events in Saint Domingue, James was trying to work out a theoretical basis that would be adequate to organising such a movement. He says (pp356-357):

. . . the ex-slaves of the San Domingo Revolution established their affinity with the population of revolutionary France. Between 1789 and Waterloo in 1815 the people of France staggered Europe and the world with the colossal scope of their achievements in war and in peace. No one had previously conceived that so much power was hidden in a people . . . For self sacrifice and heroism, the men, women and children [in Saint Domingue CW] who drove out the French stand second to no fighters for independence in any place or time. And the reason was simple. They had seen at last that without independence they could not maintain their liberty, and liberty was far more concrete for former slaves than the elusive forms of political democracy in France.

In preparing ourselves to introduce the events of the Haitian revolution and comparable events to students, and to encourage them to investigate these events further for themselves, FHE practitioners ideally need access to several sources, each of which is as independent as possible of the others. They need also to know about recent discoveries in the field. (For example, since James wrote *The Black Jacobins* it has been shown that, although Louverture was formerly a slave on the Breda plantation, he had by 1791 been free for several years.) In both these respects, *Black Spartacus* offers a valuable supplement to James' book, but does not supersede it.