

*Toussaint Louverture*



# *Toussaint Louverture*

A Black Jacobin in the Age of Revolutions

Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg



**PlutoPress**  
[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)



First published 2017 by Pluto Press  
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)

Copyright © Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg 2017

The right of Charles Forsdick and Christian Høgsbjerg to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3515 5 Hardback

ISBN 978 0 7453 3514 8 Paperback

ISBN 978 1 7868 0028 2 PDF eBook

ISBN 978 1 7868 0030 5 Kindle eBook

ISBN 978 1 7868 0029 9 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America



# Contents

<i>Illustrations</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
Introduction	1
1. Toussaint Unchained: c. 1743–91	14
2. Making an Opening to Liberty: 1791–93	32
3. Black Jacobin Ascending: 1793–98	54
4. The Black Robespierre: 1798–1801	81
5. The Harder They Come, The Harder They Fall . . . : 1801–03	104
6. . . . One and All: 1804–	128
<i>Notes</i>	151
<i>Index</i>	173

# Introduction

Haiti is the country where Negro people stood up for the first time, affirming their determination to shape a world, a free world . . . Haiti represented for me the heroic Antilles, the African Antilles . . . Haiti is the most African of the Antilles. It is at the same time a country with a marvellous history: the first Negro epic of the New World was written by Haitians, people like Toussaint Louverture, Henri Christophe, Jean-Jacques Dessalines.

So declared the great Martinican poet and activist Aimé Césaire in a 1967 interview with the Haitian poet René Depestre, stressing the inspiration for him of the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804, a set of events that led to the birth of the world's first independent black republic outside Africa.<sup>1</sup> Césaire's classic anti-colonialist 1939 poem *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* was a founding poetic text of *Négritude* – a movement which influenced Depestre himself. It also contained a powerful tribute to the tragic heroic leader of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint Louverture, evoking his period of imprisonment in the French Jura mountains at the hands of First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte and linking this to a more general experience of 'blackness':

What is mine too: a small cell in the Jura,  
The snow lines it with white bars  
The snow is a white gaoler who mounts guard in front of a prison  
What is mine  
a man alone, imprisoned by whiteness  
a man alone who defies the white screams of a white death  
(TOUSSAINT, TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE)<sup>2</sup>

From William Wordsworth's mournful sonnet 'To Toussaint Louverture', written in the year of Toussaint's arrest in 1802, up to

musicians such as Sidney Bechet, Santana, Wyclef Jean, Charles Mingus and Courtney Pine, the Haitian Revolution has, as Philip Kaisary recently noted, generated an ‘extraordinary and voluminous cultural archive’ as ‘a diverse array of writers, artists and intellectuals’ were fascinated by an epic liberation struggle that ‘overthrew slavery, white supremacy and colonialism’.<sup>3</sup> It was truly a world-historic event, but until the last couple of decades or so has tended historically to be overlooked or ‘silenced’ by historians outside Haiti itself.<sup>4</sup> The late Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot in 1995 noted its ‘unthinkability’ to prevailing classical Eurocentric modes of thought, by which he signified the fact that ‘the Haitian Revolution thus entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened.’<sup>5</sup>

As Césaire noted, it was in Haiti that the ‘colonial problem’ was first posed in all its complexity.<sup>6</sup> In 1492, the tropical Caribbean island was ‘discovered’ for the Spanish Empire by Christopher Columbus, an encounter that resulted in the half-a-million strong existing indigenous Taino population being all but exterminated within a generation as a ruthless search for rivers of gold led only to rivers of blood. Columbus had described ‘Ayiti’, as the Taino had called it (‘Land of mountains’), as a ‘paradise’, and promptly therefore renamed the island ‘La Espanola’ – or Hispaniola – ‘Little Spain’. For the Taino, however, their hopes of finding paradise were irredeemably lost. While the knot of colonialism may have been first tied in Haiti, Césaire also noted that the subsequent generations of Haitians were also one of the very first peoples to untie it, for the Haitian Revolution, which culminated in Haiti’s declaration of independence on New Year’s Day 1804, saw the birth of one of the world’s first post-colonial nations. It is only if one has some appreciation of the world-historical importance and inspiration of the Haitian Revolution that one can begin to understand why Western imperial powers have tied a tight neo-colonial noose around Haiti ever since.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Black Jacobins and the Role of the Individual in History*

The magisterial work that arguably for the first time elevated the Haitian Revolution to its rightful place in modern world history

was *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution* by the Trinidadian Marxist historian Cyril Lionel Robert James, first published in 1938. C.L.R. James was of course more than just the author of *The Black Jacobins*; a towering Pan-Africanist intellectual and activist, he was also a pioneer of the modern West Indian novel, a literary critic, playwright, sports writer and one of the twentieth century's outstanding representatives of the revolutionary democratic tradition of 'socialism from below'.<sup>8</sup> *The Black Jacobins*, one of the grandest of 'grand narratives' ever penned, stands as perhaps James's *magnum opus*. It has long won for itself the status of a classic, and not simply among Marxists. Though there have been some outstanding accounts of the Haitian Revolution written since 1938, including perhaps most notably Laurent Dubois's *Avengers of the New World* (2004), *The Black Jacobins* not only – as the historian James Walvin has noted – 'remains *the* pre-eminent account' of the Haitian Revolution, 'despite the vast accumulation of detail and argument advanced by armies of scholars' since, but also stands as the ideal 'starting point' for understanding the experience of slavery in general.<sup>9</sup>

In his preface to *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James famously noted how the Haitian Revolution is 'the only successful slave revolt in history, and the odds it had to overcome is evidence of the magnitude of the interests that were involved'. He continued:

The transformation of slaves, trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organise themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement . . . by a phenomenon often observed, the individual leadership responsible for this unique achievement was almost entirely the work of a single man – Toussaint Louverture . . . between 1789 and 1815, with the single exception of Bonaparte himself, no single figure appeared on the historical stage more greatly gifted . . . yet Toussaint did not make the revolution. It was the revolution that made Toussaint. And even that is not the whole truth.<sup>10</sup>

Louverture has now been the subject of extensive biographical attention across two centuries, ranging from largely denigratory accounts of his life published while he was still alive (by authors such as Cousin d'Avalon and Dubroca), to much more recent and carefully researched accounts by Madison Smartt Bell, Jean-Louis Donnadie and Philippe Girard. All biographers, faced with significant gaps in the archive regarding Louverture's life prior to the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution in 1791, are obliged nevertheless to address how a man born into slavery in the 1740s managed, five decades later, to mastermind resistance against the French, British and Spanish, to deliver emancipation from slavery, and to lay the foundations for what would be the second independent state in the Americas. The Victorian writer Thomas Carlyle had stated in his famous 1841 Lectures 'On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History' that for him:

Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in the world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here . . . the leaders of men . . . the modellers, patterns, and in wide sense the creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain . . . the History of the World . . . was the Biography of Great Men.<sup>11</sup>

Even though Carlyle, himself a notorious racist, would not have felt Toussaint Louverture worthy of the title of a 'Great Man' – indeed he regarded Louverture as 'a murderous Three-fingered Jack' – the insistence by many biographers on Louverture's exceptionalism has, unwittingly or otherwise, reflected such a logic.<sup>12</sup>

James's *Black Jacobins*, in identifying the revolutionary leader in its subtitle, struggles with these issues, with its author claiming of his protagonist at one point that though 'we have clearly stated the vast impersonal forces at work in the crisis of San Domingo . . . men make history, and Toussaint made the history that he made because he was the man he was'.<sup>13</sup> Though James always qualified and disciplined his judgements on Louverture with reference to the concrete historical context, he clearly wanted to vindicate Louverture's achievements in the context of racist portrayals from the likes of Carlyle as well as

register the critical role Louverture's individual leadership played in shaping the Haitian Revolution throughout the work:

At a certain stage, the middle of 1794, the potentialities in the chaos began to be shaped and soldered by his powerful personality, and thenceforth it is impossible to say where the social forces end and the impress of personality begins. It is sufficient that but for him this history would be entirely different.<sup>14</sup>

James, however, progressively adjusted his own views on the balance between historiography and biography over the course of his life to the extent that – in a series of lectures at the Institute of the Black World in Atlanta in 1971 – he explored a new approach in which Louverture would be, if not totally eclipsed, at least no longer placed centre-stage in a rewriting of the Haitian Revolution ‘from below’.<sup>15</sup>

### *The Mythologisation of Louverture*

Those attempting to understand Louverture's life are not only faced with archival gaps, but also forced to negotiate the extensive mythologisation by which these have been filled. As one early biographer, Percy Waxman, once noted, ‘so much that is purely legendary has been written about Toussaint Louverture and so little trustworthy “source material” exists that it is extremely difficult for one with no gift for fiction to attempt a complete story of his life’.<sup>16</sup>

Mythmaking about Louverture is not only, however, a case of fiction filling the vacuum left by this lack of archival traces. As recent new research on the Haitian Revolution by scholars such as David Geggus and Philippe Girard has shown, despite the paucity of information before 1791, there is a rich body of material in English, French and Spanish that covers the years of the Revolution itself as well as the War of Independence leading to the establishment of Haiti in January 1804.<sup>17</sup> The mythologisation of Louverture began during his lifetime, with biographies and various eyewitness accounts of him serving to praise and condemn him in equal measure, according to the ideological stance of their authors. A central aspect of many of

these narratives was speculation on the revolutionary's origins, in an attempt – by his detractors – to explain the origins of his violence and deceit, or – by his apologists – to underline the exceptional circumstances that led to his emergence as a leader.

Deborah Jensen has suggested that Louverture contributed to these processes himself by acting as his own spin-doctor, and it is clear that through a carefully orchestrated engagement with the international press, as well as the drafting of his memoir during the final months of his life, the revolutionary leader sought to craft his biographical narratives whilst shaping his own posthumous reputation.<sup>18</sup> In a recent article drawing on archival sources to test many of the received versions of Toussaint's life before the Revolution, Philippe Girard and Jean-Louis Donnadiou describe this process when they claim:

When reminiscing about his past, Toussaint was walking a fine line: he had to portray himself as a faithful slave to appeal to conservative planters, underline his long-standing admiration for Raynal to appeal to French republicans, emphasise his past as a slave rebel to maintain his credibility with the black rank and file, and offer a narrative of piety, fidelity, and obedience to set an example for the field laborers who were balking at his attempt to revive the plantation system. Toussaint, who liked to be described as a black Spartacus and was conscious of his historical importance, may also have massaged his past with an eye to his standing among future generations.<sup>19</sup>

Mindful of this context, David Bell has recently asked: 'Will there ever be a truly authoritative biography of Toussaint Louverture?', to which – in the light of archival lacunae and the contradictory detail often circulating as fact – he replies: 'Unfortunately, the answer is probably no'.<sup>20</sup> Although mythologization is not exclusive in any way to Louverture himself (Napoleon – despite no shortage of archival material and the existence of many authoritative biographies – was and remains subject to similar processes of mythologisation), the slippage between historical phenomenon and politico-cultural legend is accordingly marked, and serves as a fascinating subject of enquiry in its own right.<sup>21</sup>

In one of the most useful anthologies of the extensive catalogue of posthumous re-figurings of Louverture, George Tyson states: ‘he has been all things to all men, from bloodthirsty black savage to “the greatest black man in history”’.<sup>22</sup> What is of interest is, precisely, the often contradictory complexity of this mythologisation or instrumentalisation, i.e. the ways in which the context of production of versions of Louverture impact on these diverse posthumous re-figurings, creating often unexpected connections between the Haitian revolutionary and other distinct historico-political moments and cultural settings. For aspects of the revolutionary’s life from the years following the outbreak of the revolution, as the variable interpretations of Louverture’s trajectory make amply clear, negotiating the evidence can be a matter of ideological choice, with certain biographers – such as Pierre Pluchon – seeking to domesticate the revolutionary implications of their subject’s history and present him even as an *ancien régime* figure.<sup>23</sup>

### *The New Conservative Revisionism*

Such a strand of thinking with respect to Toussaint Louverture has been renewed in recent years with what the late Chris Bayly described in 2010 as ‘the “conservative turn” in the global history of the revolutionary age’.<sup>24</sup> This new revisionist scholarship with respect to the Haitian Revolution is perhaps most clearly represented in the work of Philippe Girard, whose *Toussaint Louverture: A Revolutionary Life* (2016) was marketed as ‘the definitive biography of one of the most influential men of the modern era’.<sup>25</sup> Girard’s biography, it must be said at the outset, is indeed a finely written and evocative work, particularly impressive in the depth of the archival research undertaken in the detailed reconstruction of Louverture’s early life, and its contribution deserves to be acknowledged by every scholar and student of the Haitian Revolution. Yet politically, the conservatism shaping Girard’s underlying argument about Louverture is unmistakable. In his view, it is no longer apparently ‘accurate’ to maintain that ‘Louverture was the idealistic herald of slave emancipation, the forefather of an independent Haiti, and a black nationalist’. Rather, for Girard,

above all, he was a pragmatist . . . if we examine Louverture solely through the prism of our current preoccupations with race, slavery, and imperialism, we risk missing the issues that mattered to *him*, starting with his personal ambition . . . his craving for social status was a constant. Educating himself, seeing to his children's future, making money, gaining and retaining power, and achieving recognition as a great man: he never wavered from the pursuit of these ends. He was a social climber and a self-made man . . .<sup>26</sup>

If Pluchon domesticated Louverture's revolutionary 'black Jacobinism' by portraying him instead as essentially a figure of the *ancien régime* and aspiring member of the master planter class, Girard's Louverture appears more like a would-be member of the bourgeois capitalist class with an individualistic atavistic mentality; indeed, at one point Girard suggests that his portrayal of Louverture as, 'in many ways, a citizen of the modern, capitalist world' in fact 'humanizes a figure who can seem unapproachable otherwise.'<sup>27</sup> While Louverture was, of course, 'in many ways, a citizen of the modern, capitalist world' – given slave ships, sugar plantations and so on were some of the most advanced and modern forms of capitalist production of their day – in fact simply to regard him above all as a personally ambitious aspiring bourgeois does not 'humanise' him – it *reduces* him to merely one fragment of his life and personality.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, leaving aside Girard's deeply problematic assumption that Louverture's commitment to 'educating himself' is a signifier of an inherent 'craving for social status' (rather than something that arguably places him as part of a long-standing strong autodidactic tradition within radical and revolutionary political thought),<sup>29</sup> it might be remembered that Louverture was not – and never claimed to be – a revolutionary until the revolution erupted in the last dozen years of his life. As a black person living in a non-revolutionary situation in a barbaric slave society, where black people could be killed on a whim by white people as a matter of course, with little (if any) chance of any legal or other repercussions, sheer survival and *existence* represented in itself a form of *resistance*.

Moreover, once the revolution began in 1791, it is surely a little odd to maintain that Louverture was 'above all' a 'pragmatist' concerned

with 'personal ambition', 'social status' and 'making money'. Such a person, it might be suggested, would be an unlikely person repeatedly to risk life and limb by putting themselves on the frontline of a black slave army fighting under the banner of 'Liberty or death' – and indeed, would be the least likely person to be able to inspire others to follow him into battle under such a slogan. If Louverture had wanted money and status above all, there were surely safer ways to try and secure them, even once the revolt had begun. Indeed, rather than seeing Louverture essentially as a 'self-made man', we would re-iterate the point made by C.L.R. James, who stressed that on a fundamental level 'it was the revolution that made Toussaint'.<sup>30</sup>

As well as implicitly seeking to downplay Louverture's commitment to revolutionary ideas, Girard also attempts to domesticate Louverture's blackness, suggesting that Louverture 'was no black nationalist' but instead 'an aspiring Frenchman', and as governor of colonial Saint-Domingue 'would do his best to imitate' the 'mannerisms' of the white former master planter class and 'become a "big white" in his turn'.<sup>31</sup> As Girard puts it at one point, if 'the most enthusiastic white converts to the Revolution were known as "white blacks"; in many ways he was a "black white" who had made the economic world view of his former masters his own'.<sup>32</sup> This seems to us to be, at best, very *one-sided*, given Louverture was the central figure in the leadership of the Haitian Revolution, a foundational struggle for self-determination which was – among other things – inherently also a struggle for 'Black Power' in an Atlantic world dominated by slavery and a system of white supremacy under the flags of competing European colonial powers. Even though Louverture himself never pushed for outright independence for Saint-Domingue, he represented a major challenge to French colonial domination nonetheless. As for his 'imitating' the 'mannerisms' of 'big whites', C.L.R. James notes that in 1798, at a time when 'the whites of Port-au-Prince were bowing and scraping before him, an incident took place which lets us see what Toussaint thought of the whites as whites'.

A white colonist wanted a post as storekeeper and asked Toussaint for it. Toussaint said no. The colonist's wife tried many times to approach Toussaint, but was unsuccessful. Some time after she gave

birth to a son and asked Toussaint to be the godfather. Toussaint, usually so suave and conciliatory, for some reason or other, decided to let this woman know his mind.

‘Why, Madame, do you wish me to be godfather of your son – your approach to me has no other aim than to get me to give a post to your husband, for the feelings of your heart are contrary to the request that you make of me.’

‘How can you think so, General? No, my husband loves you, all the whites are attached to you.’

‘Madame, I know the whites. If I had their skin – yes, but I am black and I know their aversion to us . . . After my death, who knows if my brothers will not be driven back into slavery and will yet perish under the whip of the whites . . . the French Revolution has enlightened Europeans, we are loved and wept over by them, but the white colonists are enemies of the blacks . . . You wish your husband to get a post. Well, I give him the employment he demands. Let him be honest and let him remember that I cannot see everything, but that nothing escapes God. I cannot accept your offer to be godfather to your son. You may have to bear the reproaches of the colonists and perhaps one day that of your son.’<sup>33</sup>

Whilst acknowledging biographical and historical uncertainties, the aim of our work is then to challenge versions of Louverture that aim to accommodate him to the norms and values of *our* age of late capitalism, and to reassert the incendiary political implication of *his* life, actions and revolutionary political thought. In this sense, we are openly situating ourselves in the tradition of radical historical scholarship of the Haitian Revolution best exemplified by C.L.R. James, and our subtitle, referring to Toussaint as a ‘black Jacobin’, is in part to pay explicit homage to James’s masterwork. In the face of a growing conservative revisionist scholarship on Louverture’s life, which would like to bury what it dismisses as the ‘ethical’ or ‘idealist’ interpretation, it remains important to defend the intellectual and theoretical ground which James and *The Black Jacobins* – and those scholars who have followed in James’s footsteps, such as Robin Blackburn, Carolyn Fick and Laurent Dubois – have battled so hard to win in the field of Haitian Revolutionary studies.

*A Black Jacobin in the Age of Revolutions*

The second part of our subtitle returns to the importance of situating Louverture in his concrete historical context, stressing the fact that he lived in ‘an age of revolutions’. That great ‘citizen of the world’ Thomas Paine probably deserves credit for coining the phrase, when he wrote in *The Rights of Man*, published in 1791, ‘[i]t is an age of Revolutions, in which every thing may be looked for.’<sup>34</sup> The Haitian Revolution, which erupted the same year as *The Rights of Man* was published, triumphantly vindicated Paine’s prognosis. It not only followed the other great ‘Atlantic revolutions’ of the period, such as the American War of Independence and the French Revolution, but by abolishing slavery for good in what was then the prized French sugar plantation colony of Saint-Domingue, went far further than the other two revolutions in its commitment to the principle of universal emancipation and human rights for all. Yet the historians most famously associated with early work on ‘the age of revolutions’ – such as R.R. Palmer, author of *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800* (two volumes, 1959–64) and Jacques Godechot, author of *France and the Atlantic Revolution of the Eighteenth Century, 1770–1799* (1965) – like the vast majority of other Western scholars, manifestly failed to register the importance of the Haitian Revolution. In the context of the Cold War and NATO, Palmer explicitly stated that for him the ‘age of revolutions’ was about ‘the Revolution of the Western world’, a ‘Revolution of Western Civilisation’, and ‘the Revolution of the non-Western’ did not come until the twentieth century.<sup>35</sup> Even though Palmer had read *The Black Jacobins*, which in many ways deserves to be hailed as the genuine pioneering work on ‘Atlantic history’ and ‘Atlantic Revolutions’, he still, as Lynn Hunt notes, ‘devoted only one page to the Haitian Revolution in the second volume of his work on the Atlantic revolutions. He had ten pages on the failed Polish revolution of 1794.’<sup>36</sup>

As well as drawing attention to the critical transnational dimensions of revolutionary thought and struggle that erupted during Louverture’s lifetime, our subtitle is also designed to pay a

certain mark of respect not only to Thomas Paine, but to the late great historian Eric Hobsbawm, author of works including *The Age of Revolution: Europe, 1789–1848* (1962). Though Hobsbawm focused primarily on the ‘dual revolution – the rather more political French and the industrial (British) revolution’ underway in Europe – he detested the idea of an emerging model of ‘Atlantic history’ that was designed to forgive and forget ‘European expansion in and conquest of the rest of the world’, and instead glorified ‘Western Civilisation’. For Hobsbawm, ‘the age of revolution’ was part of a ‘world revolution’ which ‘spread outward from the double crater of England and France’ and included within it anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, the beginnings of what he called ‘the world-wide revolt against the west, which dominates the middle of the twentieth century’. Hobsbawm had not only read but more critically absorbed the essence of James’s argument in *The Black Jacobins* about the importance of the Haitian Revolution. In *The Age of Revolution*, Hobsbawm accordingly registered that in 1794 the Jacobins ‘abolished slavery in the French colonies, in order to encourage the Negroes of San Domingo to fight for the Republic against the English’, something which had ‘the most far-reaching results’ including helping ‘to create the first independent revolutionary leader of stature’ in the Americas in the figure of Toussaint Louverture.<sup>37</sup>

Before the Jacobin leader Maximilien Robespierre became a revolutionary, Richard Cobb noted that he ‘marinated in over ten years of genteel poverty and social resentment in a small provincial town’.<sup>38</sup> Our work begins by seeking to explore how Toussaint himself ‘marinated’ over a much longer period in the very different environment of the barbaric and brutal sugar plantation colony of Saint-Domingue – a highly prosperous French colony that, in 1789, began to come apart at its seams under the impact of the outbreak of revolution in France itself. Our understanding of Toussaint’s ‘marination’ has been greatly assisted by the archival work of a number of historians, conducted most notably by Haitian pioneers such as Jean Fouchard, and extended more recently by David Geggus, Philippe Girard and others. As the subtitle of our work suggests, however, there is at the same time a critical need to understand details gleaned not only in the context of Saint-Domingue and the French empire of the *ancien régime*, but

## *Introduction*

also in the frame of the political, philosophical and cultural histories of the Enlightenment and the wider Atlantic world, a world that was soon about to be thrown into turmoil. As the great Enlightenment *philosophe* Jean-Jacques Rousseau prophetically noted amidst the Seven Years War (1756–63) in *Émile* (1762), ‘we are approaching the state of crisis and the century of revolutions’.<sup>39</sup>