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AN UN/THINKABLE REVOLUTION? C.L.R. James' *THE BLACK JACOBINS* REVISITED

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James, Cyril Lionel Robert, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: Vintage Books, 1963, 2003. [First edition, 1938; London: Secker & Warburg.]

I.

C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Secker & Warburg 1938 [1963]) is surely one of the twentieth century's most generative works of critical thought (Hartman 2017). Its audacious scope and theoretical virtuosity offer, alongside texts like Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (1971), a compelling analysis of the forms of political, economic, and cultural domination intrinsic to the rise of capitalism -- and the species of insurgency to which it has given rise. But more than this, like Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* (1935) or Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1952 [1977]), it is also a passionate account of the integral role of empire, race, and the enslaved -- of both their labor and their liberatory spirit -- in the shaping of the modern world at large. In it, the French Revolution is rendered unthinkable without its deep entanglement in San Domingo, in its colonial economy and its wider geopolitical theater. The insurrection in what was to become Haiti, moreover, far from being mimetic of its metropolitan counterpart, is shown to have been a bold refiguring of revolutionary struggle well beyond the confines of Europe -- or the limits of the bourgeois enlightenment imagination. In interrogating the critical role of Haiti in the

history of France, and of colonialism sui generis, *The Black Jacobins* would become, and has remained, an enduring provocation. As David Geggus (2010:91) was to comment, some seventy years later, “[h]istorians have increasingly recognized the colonial revolution as an autonomous force that helped to radicalize the French Revolution, rather than being merely a reflection of it.”

James himself kept returning to the book to rethink its key assumptions about the prospects of universal emancipation at signal moments in twentieth-century history, among them, African and Caribbean independence, the Cuban Revolution, and the rise of Black radicalism in the US (Douglas 2020:287-9; Scott 2023:xix-xxii; cf. Rosengarten 2008); he also was to rethink his own vanguardist Marxism, arguing for the revolutionary potential, the “spontaneous conscious actions,” of masses beyond the confines of Europe (Black 2024; cf. McClendon 2005).¹ At once a swashbuckling anticolonial drama and a meditation on the philosophy of history (Dubois 2009), *The Black Jacobins* has inspired generations of writers on a broad spectrum of critical issues: the trajectories of Marxist thought (e.g. Rosengarten 2008; Bogues 2017); class struggle and popular protest (e.g. McLemee and Le Blanc 1994; Buhle 2000); the theorization of revolution (e.g. Høgsbjerg 2020; Glaberman 1999); heroic history and the structural limits of human agency (e.g. Needham 1993:283 *et passim*; Miller 2001; Meeks 1994); and the dialectics of decolonization and abolition (Gilmore 2007; Renault 2016; Mimms 2021; Wilder 2025). The list goes on, as we shall see.

It is the unusual capacity of *The Black Jacobins* to push both theory and historiography “beyond the boundary” of the comfortable or tractable (Gordon 2008:166) that emboldens us to reflect upon it once more, to look to it for insight amidst the darkness of our own contemporary moment. This is in spite, and in respectful recognition, of the enormous library that it has catalyzed. For, in wrestling with the revolution in San Domingo, C.L.R. James immortalized a kind of calling, a commitment to return repeatedly to historical processes that defeat easy descriptive mastery or analytical closure. For James, this uprising was one of the founding elements in the emergence of a new world order; even more, of a transcendent universal humanism that was

¹ Black (2024) notes that, in 1948, James counterposed “spontaneous class struggle to organization,” stating that “[t]he historic task of the workers movement had become how to negate the vanguard party.”

always to be threatened by the contradictions that gave birth to it. As such, the story of *The Black Jacobins* and the advent of postcolonial Haiti haunt the history of Euro-modernity – above all, as the supplement that holds its truths. For its defiant self-liberation was also to condemn it to perpetual punishment in the rising capitalist imperium, rendering it an historic exemplar, the very embodiment, of abjection and undoing for so many former colonies on the long road to the global present.

Which is where our narrative begins.

II.

Long before 1789, wrote James (1963:47), “the French bourgeoisie was the most powerful economic force in France, and the slave-trade and the colonies were the basis of its wealth and power.” At the time, no colony on earth yielded as much wealth as San Domingo. And none exceeded it in the deployment of slaves. Yet economic prosperity did not, does not, ensure stability; that, said James, “rests on the constantly shifting equilibrium between the classes” (p.55). While France’s bourgeoisie chafed under royal rule and imagined its overthrow, San Domingo was filling with native Africans who were “resentful, . . . intractable, . . . ready for rebellion” (55-6). Two-thirds of the half-million slaves in the colony in 1789 had been born in Africa. While the button might have been pushed in Paris, for James it was the will to self-liberation among those slaves that most fully embodied the potential of the French Revolution. In extending the terms of struggle to the imperial margins, moreover, their insurgency transcended the anthropology of Enlightenment thought – which treated black slaves as less than human. In so doing, it laid the ground for a truly universal humanism.

Superseded, too, was the geographic imaginary of liberal Europe, which separated metropole from colony, civility from savagery, and those who made history from those on whose backs history was made (Featherstone 2008:13). In creolizing the revolution and transporting it across the hemispheres, the Haitians appropriated the spirit of liberty and equality circulating in France, thus to embrace those who enjoyed

neither liberty nor equality, let alone humanity. James (1963:46-7) saw this as the contrapuntal outworking of colonial capitalism and its inherent contradictions. The slave-trade and plantation labor provided the enabling *mis-en-scene* and material basis for bourgeois revolutionary ferment against feudalism in Europe – and also the *causus belli* for the slave insurgency in its richest colony. The two populations and their entangled worlds, in short, were conditions of each other's possibility, forged by the inclusive historical moment -- and the forces that moved it.

But James had yet more to say about this. Rather than a mere colonial echo of French fervor, the liberatory project “overheard” by blacks at the edge of empire was actively “construed...in their own image” (1963:81). Haiti, he would later observe, was a “laboratory of capitalism” (Renault 2016:36). In 1789, San Domingo was not just the most productive colony on earth. It was, moreover, a highly condensed site of “primitive accumulation” that cannibalized persons, relations, resources, and conditions formerly beyond the capitalist world (Luxemburg 1951; Gordon and Cornell 2021). *The Black Jacobins* casts a wide-angled lens on the factions and forces, the arguments, alliances and conflicts that played themselves out in this theater of violent extraction; also in the intertwined revolutions to which it gave rise. As Said put it, in James's narrative these exchanges “criss-cross and refer to one another like voices in a fugue” (Said 1993:338; Featherstone 2008:13); or, more substantively perhaps, in the dialectics of history-making. But, James insisted, the vision of liberation fomented by the Black Jacobins – “construed,” that is, “in their own image” -- was more radical than its metropolitan counterpart in the universality of its address. It placed *all* the peoples of the entangled colony and metropole -- black, white, mulatto – in the same frame, on the same footing as it were; differently implicated in the moral and material economy that united them, patently, but all equally entitled, all striving, to be free.

That said, according to Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995:73), the Haitian Revolution was “unthinkable” to the European imagination “even as it happened.” And it has remained marginal to mainstream historiography in Europe and America ever since. What is it -- if he is correct -- that has robbed the liberation of San Domingo of its meaning, its “thinkability, as a world-historical event? What is it that condemns its heroic

protagonists to being seen as little more than “primitive rebels,” much like other decolonizing insurgents elsewhere in the global south (Hobsbawm 1959; Comaroff 1985)? Trouillot attributes this “unthinkability” to ontology: Europeans remain incapable of crediting inhabitants of the “non-West” with a capacity to *conceptualize* freedom, much less *consciously* to bring it into being. Thus, while the many uprisings of black slaves were undeniable by the late eighteenth century, both in Haiti and beyond, Europe continued to doubt that black slaves could foment revolution, at least not in the modern sense of the term – except perhaps with the aid of outside agitators (Trouillot 1995:92). This is what differentiated it from the then recent, eminently “thinkable” American revolution, fought by white colonists against their metropolitan rulers, leaving slavery intact.

It was precisely to counter this “unthinkability” that James sought to show quite how cogent, how thinkable, was the will to liberty that powered the slave uprisings in San Domingo; how, “ignored by all the politicians,” its perpetrators had “organized on their own and struck for freedom” (2023:84). Was it the presumed impossibility of the Haitian Revolution – and the racial ontology underlying that presumption -- that moved imperialist powers, in its aftermath, to undo (“unthink”?) it as historical fact? Very possibly, as we shall see in due course.

Despite his effort to decenter, i.e. to decolonize, Eurocentric conceptions of modern world-making, it has been argued that James retained a distinctly Western vision of consciousness, agency, revolution, and abolition – and persisted in treating history as first made in Europe; *vide* his title, *The Black Jacobins* (Renault 2016:37; Featherstone 2008:17). What is more, he compared Haitian slave militants to rebellious peasants and Luddites in Europe (James 1963:88), ignoring the fact that they inhabited a world very different from the industrializing North, a world in which imagining a society of free labor or universal citizenship may well have been highly unlikely. In this respect, too, he has been faulted for underplaying the role of African political culture in the San Domingo uprisings (Hall 1998), although he did note that most of the slaves had been born in Africa, evinced a sharply critical intelligence, and went into battle with endogenous beliefs that made them fearless (James 2023:108, 146, 376). He wrote,

too, of the centuries-old Creole “cult” of voodoo, of its oaths of anti-white violence, its songs of a New World Zion (p.18). But no clear line is drawn between these observations and the forms of popular action, or social imaginings, evident in the Haitian uprisings. Even his account of the rebellion in the 1750s led by the legendary West Africa-born visionary, orator, and organizer, Mackandal,² has it that those involved, “bands of free men – maroons (p.20), were “[a]n uninstructed mass, feeling their way to revolution” (1963:21), not actors making history, or reshaping society, in their own way.

Equally critical is the allegation that, for all James’s commitment to Marxist historiography, *The Black Jacobins* is organized around the heroic leadership of Toussaint and secondary figures like Jean-Jacques Dessalines, individuals from “a small privileged caste” of slaves who had “profit[ed] by the cultural advantages of the system they [were] attacking” (1963:19). By contrast, it has been noted, Aimee Cesaire’s study of the San Domingo uprising, albeit entitled *Toussaint Louverture* (1952), put “the colonial problem” at its core, a problem owed to “a bourgeois French Revolution that sanctified not only citizenship rights, but property rights” (Wilder 2025:2). Yet, notwithstanding his focus on Toussaint-as-hero, for James this “colonial problem” – more broadly, the racial capitalism of empire -- was no less central the analysis than it was to Cesaire’s. In Haiti, after all, slaves, the human infrastructure of the “economic life of the age” (James 1963:ix), were the quintessential form of (white owned) property. In the 1963 edition of the book he may have underscored his portrayal of Toussaint as a tragic figure (Kaplan 1998:55; Chetty 2019).³ But, as Scott (2023:xx) observes, he saw this as a product of “circumstances that were at once constitutive of. . . [Toussaint’s] predicament and beyond his control,” having been caught in the contradiction between French bourgeois republicanism and the slave revolution (see below, p.00). James was quite clear: “Toussaint did not make the revolution. It was the revolution that made Toussaint.” The theoretical provenance here is unmistakable: “Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make. Their freedom of achievement is

² The figure of Mackandal, variously spelled, has its own literature. See, for example, Rivera Prosdociimi (2021), itself a reflection on Manuel Rueda’s *Las metamorfosis de Makandal* (1998).

³ Perhaps this shift of emphasis reflected the humanism refiguring much Marxist thought at the time. Andrew Douglas (2013) reflects on James’s humanism *in extenso* amidst recent critiques of the concept and its political resonances (cf. also McClendon 2005).

limited by the necessities of their environment” (James 1963:x; after Marx 1963[1852]); also, one might add, by the historical constraints on their consciousness, an intractable issue with which James struggled but, arguably, never fully resolved.

III.

This, in turn, takes us deeper into C.L.R. James’s thinking on the nature of the Haitian Revolution, on its historiography, and on revolution *sui generis*.

In arguing that the Haitian slaves most fully realized the liberatory potential of the French Revolution, James relied heavily on Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (cf. e.g. Hartman 2017). Hence his position on universal history-making, of which, critically, he saw Haiti as an integral part. *The Eighteenth Brumaire* famously distinguished the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century from their proletarian counterparts in the nineteenth. The former had their moments of ecstasy but were short-lived: their proponents soon became preoccupied with producing a new legal order to expand capitalism, “wholly absorbed in the production of wealth and in peaceful competitive struggle” (Marx 1963:16) -- and in the protection of property, human and other. The latter, nineteenth-century proletarian revolutionaries, said Marx, “criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin afresh” (p.19) His prognosis was grim. Although the proletariat had been enthusiastic foot soldiers in the February Revolution that put an end to monarchical rule in France in 1848, their prominence did not last long; real power was to elude them (pp.22-23). Bourgeois republicans allied themselves with the peasants and the petty bourgeois against them in the name of the people. What the workers believed to be their moment of triumph was in fact their last hurrah. Thousands were brutally butchered or deported without trial, all in the name of “property, family, religion, order.” Thus was the ground leveled for the bourgeois republic, a society in which one class came to exercise unlimited domination over the rest. And so, the proletariat passed to the “background on the revolutionary stage,” condemned to failure. Echoes here, as we shall see, of post-1804 Haiti, at least in part,

James made it plain that, while he wrote in the spirit of Marx, his analysis of the Haitian revolution moved onto new social and geographical terrain -- and, in doing so,

shifted the coordinates of theory-making. Like Gramsci, to whom he has often been compared (e.g. Rosengarten 2002, 2013:125-34; Trotman 1993),⁴ he sought to apply Marx's conception of history to "Southern questions" (Gramsci 2015), not just taking it beyond the European metropole, but situating it in processes of global scale that emanated from its politico-economic margins. Just as W.E.B. Du Bois had argued in *Black Reconstruction* (1935:15) that enslaved workers were the founding stone of the modern world economic order, so James saw the material base of French bourgeois republicanism in the slave labor – those bent backs (above, p.00) -- that drove the "sugar factories" of San Domingo. The dependence of the former on the latter complicates the unilinear, Eurocentric telos of modernity shared by Marxists and liberals alike. For James, the engines of history were not forever localized in any one place. They were caught up in a multi-sited dialectic that gave rise to a system whose "constantly shifting equilibrium meant that centers and margins were not, are not, predetermined, once and for all" (Renault 2016:42). Paying due recognition to slave-based production as the prehistory of industrialization, it follows, might have yielded a more radical reading of revolution in the late eighteenth century, one that addressed itself to the roots of capitalism itself.

In this respect, too, it is relevant that, in San Domingo, class was heavily inflected by race. Thus, planters and merchants, big whites, were distinct from those of humbler status, "small whites," among them, petty lawyers, grocers, and immigrant adventurers. But the two were united by whiteness. Free blacks and Mulattoes, many of whom had accumulated considerable wealth and cultural capital, were presumed to share an affinity with slaves, despite their mutual antipathy. In the upshot, race and class exist in a complex counterpoint in *The Black Jacobins*, caught up in that "constantly shifting equilibrium" (2023:55) – the phrase keeps reappearing -- that propelled the revolution. Here James returns to the *Eighteenth Brumaire* (p.44): race prejudice may unite class fractions in ordinary times, but, under duress, opponents tend to align themselves with those sharing bonds of property and social conditions of existence. Again, though, his position remained nuanced. Race, he stressed, is an

⁴ According to Rosengarten (2002) there is no conclusive evidence that James had encountered Gramsci's work directly, despite the large literature comparing their writings.

insidious ideology: while thinking imperialism only in its terms is disastrous, ignoring it is an error “only less grave than to make it fundamental.” The suspicion that Toussaint, in his commitment to France, favored whites over the black revolutionary masses was integral to the tragic failure of his leadership. In the end, in the war for Haitian independence, “racial divisions emphasiz[ed] the class struggle” (p.359).

As this suggests, it was the dynamic interplay of the historical, political, material, and cultural dimensions of conflict -- rather than the mechanical operation of abstract structural forces -- that characterized James’s deployment of Marx. In his account of the fitful contestations and shifting alliances that underlay the conjoined French and Haitian revolutions, constituent factions of varying scale – imperial, national, provincial, local – did battle, aligning and realigning themselves substantively and strategically in what Gramsci (1971) might have called historic blocs (cf. Sotiris 2018). A much fuller array of players than the usual Marxian class antagonists took to the field, their identities inflected by colonialism, race, and culture. Thus, for their part, the slaves’ sense of freedom and their will to insurrection was held – if not fully shown by James, empirically or analytically (above, p.00) -- to have been shaped not just by their immediate suffering. It was also inflected by their Africanity (cf. Dubois 2004).⁵ their forms of political socialization, customary practices, voodoo ritual beliefs, imagined futures, and the “necessities of their environment.” In sum, individuals, singular and plural, as well as “the masses,” entered a conflict with no foregone conclusion, moved by more than brute material interests, although those interests *were* brute and brutal enough.

In this regard, despite his preoccupation with the role of leadership in staging revolt, James felt it necessary in later years to return to the role of popular consciousness (cf. Bogues 1997:113-4), something he never explicitly theorized in *The Black Jacobins*. When he did, he did so in a manner reminiscent of Gramsci’s (1971:419) concepts of the “national popular” or “folklore of philosophy” as the common sense of ordinary people (Rosengarten 2002). In his 1971 lectures on the book, James said that, if he had written about the revolution at that moment, he would have done so from the vantage of the ordinary, unremembered folk who made it what it was (Scott

⁵ For Dubois, notes Karen (2006:410-11), the revolution in Haiti “owed as much to West Africa as it did to France.”

2023:xxii). Perhaps, in addition to focusing so heavily on the unflinching spirit of self-emancipation among the enslaved – and its source in the visceral experience of plantation labor -- he may indeed have paid more analytic attention to their everyday “folklore of philosophy”: their popular consciousness, their cultural dispositions, and their vision of a post-emancipation world.

James’s preferred analytical concern with the intellectual leadership of Toussaint was addressed to what made revolution “thinkable,” what transformed an “uninstructed mass, feeling their way to revolution,” into a force for epic revolutionary struggle (2023:21). Recall that he himself subscribed -- at least at the time of writing, later given up -- to an understanding of vanguardism focused on leaders who emerged from the people and, in symbiosis with them, could ignite the “volcanic eruption” of insurrection (2023:x). He would later use the term “organic intellectual” for those leaders, although probably *sans* Gramscian influence (Rosengarten 2002; see n.4 above). It is this, it seems, that tilted James toward heroic history despite his commitment to the reciprocal production of context and charisma, despite his assertion that Toussaint was made by the revolution, not the converse; hence his statement, in the original introduction to the book, that the history of the revolution in San Domingo was largely the unique record and achievement of the “political personality” of a single man (2023:x). In the final analysis, in other words, this was to be a study of the dialectics of struggle that simultaneously – and uneasily -- essayed and then partially eschewed heroic poetics, both played up and tempered their social and economic determination. With time and subsequent iterations, it shifted somewhat in emphasis from the first to the second.

Much of *The Black Jacobins* is given to recounting the San Domingo Revolution in meticulous, historically-realist detail; the narrative is exquisitely “thick” in that respect. Largely absent was a sustained analysis of the process whereby the populace and its leaders, charisma and context, *actually* created each other in the face of mounting structural constraints. This is especially ironic since, for James, it was the breakdown of communication, and of trust, between the charismatic leader and his formerly devoted followers that precipitated the hero’s undoing. And empowered the revolutionary struggle. James, notably, sought to tweak his account of Toussaint’s leadership in the

1963 edition by adding the six paragraphs at the beginning of the final chapter (Scott 2023:xx). Toussaint, he said, was not merely a “political figure in a remote West Indian Island” (p.291); his story was a figuration of modern history-making, and its emancipatory possibilities, writ large.⁶ As such, it was inappropriate to view his ultimate capture and demise in a French prison simply as a personal tragedy, to be read in terms of “abstract humanism” or the martyred grandeur of a mythic figure. It was, rather, the consequence of a concrete historical contradiction: the impossibility of reconciling his fealty to France and the liberation promised by the French Revolution with the determination of Haitian slaves to take charge of their own freedom and end colonial domination. Toussaint’s arrest, deportation, and death – rather than his living presence and the contradiction it embodied -- opened the way for the final fight that gave birth to an independent Haiti. For only independence, secured through revolution, could secure abolition and a new order. Gary Wilder (2025:xiii) notes that Aimé Césaire’ (1960) saw Toussaint’s capitulation as strategic, an act of self-sacrifice, performed to unify the diverse rebel factions for final victory. For Césaire, he added (p.xi), Toussaint’s desire to secure a free San Domingo within the wider French imperium was an imaginative ploy: the effort to invent something akin to a “dominion,” a political formation whose time had not yet come. And hence was doomed to fail. Whether this was even thinkable at the time, and in the historical circumstances, remains open to question.

This, in turn, takes us to the long afterlife of the Haitian Revolution, to which *The Black Jacobins* is not specifically addressed, but which poses a number of questions that arise from James’s narrative: questions about the nature of revolution itself, about its thinkability, its temporalities and the sort/s of emancipation that it may, or may not, yield; about how to read, in the current conjuncture, James’s efforts to complicate Marx’s theory of history by seeking, if incompletely, to plumb the dialectics of human agency and the structural conditions within which it is played out; about, concomitantly, the entanglement of class, race, and other identitarian solidarities in revolutionary world-making; about decentering modernist historiography away from hegemonic

⁶ Renault (2016:42-3) observes, in this respect, that James deployed Trotsky’s law of uneven development to argue that revolutionary uprisings can occur in a plurality of times and places, not just in the capitalist West. His account of the Haitian Revolution exemplifies the point.

centers toward so-called imperial margins to make sense anew of global trajectories in economy and society.

IV.

As we have already suggested, *revolution* – whether read through Marx or Arendt or whomever – condenses a complex historical unfolding: a labile, contested, contradictory process in pursuit of emancipation, freedom, reconstruction, whatever. It is, inexorably; a process that occurs, simultaneously, in temporalities short, medium, and long; temporalities linear and circular, multiple, fractured, more or less rhizomatic. The story of San Domingo, soon to become Haiti,⁷ is no exception. In what sense *was* it a revolution? How did its afterlife turn out? And what does it invite -- no, compel -- us to think about revolution in the midst of the turbulent history of the present, of the long history of capitalist modernity?

First, the afterlife.

Like everything else about Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo revolution, an enormous amount of writing addresses that afterlife. C.L.R. James, perhaps paradoxically, does not do so (see e.g. Thornton 2021), despite his comments about its impact on the history of anti-imperialism elsewhere.⁸

The Black Jacobins ends with an optimistic coda, ca.1938: Haiti as a harbinger of, a precursor to, African decolonization. The Haitian Revolution itself ended in a spirit of triumphal optimism: after all, it is often said to have been one of the signal events in modern world history, the first successful slave revolt that established an autonomous state ruled by once enslaved people. An epochal eruption of rare force, it sent shockwaves across the hemispheres, to wherever slavery underpinned colonial empires. Susan Buck-Morss (2009) argues, if somewhat controversially, for its foundational impact on Western thought. She suggests that it insinuated itself into

⁷ After the revolution, there were, for a while, two Haitis: a northern kingdom ruled by Henri Christophe and a southern republic under Alexandre Pétion. They combined into a single polity in 1820.

⁸ Paradoxical, Thornton implies – and here we are going further than he actually does – because it is in the aftermath of San Domingo, 1804, that a Marxist analysis would be expected to look in order to take the measure of the Haitian Revolution; if, indeed, as we ask below, whether it was a revolution at all, and under what historical accounting.

European Enlightenment ideas of freedom and dialectics, not least as expressed in Hegel's classic master-slave relationship;⁹ this at the historical juncture when slavery had come to underwrite “the entire economic system of the West” (Buck-Morss 2000:821). From this optic, “the slave insurgency in Saint Domingue” comes to be seen as “a privileged moment in universal history” (Fischer 2010:163). For Nick Nesbitt (2008:1), like others too many to mention, “[t]he Haitian Revolution continues to be . . . of vital importance in thinking about . . . social justice, human rights, imperialism, torture, and above all what Hannah Arendt (1963) identified as the eternal and preeminent problem of political thought: human freedom and its relation to the sociopolitical structures we choose to give our communities.”¹⁰ If, indeed, history-making were merely a matter of “our” choice. For James, as we noted above, the story of Haiti laid the ground for a truly universal humanism (above, p.00). Assertions of its significance scarcely require citation any longer.

At the same time, the immediate aftermath of the revolution was deeply troubled. The Constitution of Haiti, promulgated in May 1805,¹¹ declared the former colony to be an empire – hugely optimistic in the circumstances – of which Jean-Jacques Dessalines had already been proclaimed Emperor Jacques I. Oddly, he became a crowned emperor some weeks before Napoleon Bonaparte, forty-one years before Louis Bonaparte. *The 6th Octobre of Jean-Jacques Dessalines?* Oddly, too, since his constitution not only banned slavery, but declared that “The Citizens of Hayti are brothers at home; equality in the eyes of the law is incontestably acknowledged, and there cannot exist any titles, advantages, or privileges, other than those necessarily resulting from the consideration and reward of services rendered to liberty and independence.” Resonances here of the dawn of modern constitutionalism.

⁹ See e.g. Philip Cunliffe (2010) for a sympathetically acute questioning of Buck-Morss's attribution of the influence of the Haitian revolution on Hegel – itself resonant with the earlier writing of Pierre-Franklin Tavarès – in *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* (2009). Other reviews of the book also raised issues with Buck-Morss's reading of the significance of the Haitian revolution on European thought.

¹⁰ Quoted in Borowetz (2024:1035).

¹¹ For an easily accessible copy online, in English translation, see <http://faculty.webster.edu/corbetre/haiti/history/earlyhaiti/1805-const.htm>.

Very soon after, however, both the banning of slavery and the commitment to equality were to be tested. Faced with economic disaster, largely the effects of the long revolutionary struggle on the agricultural and commercial infrastructure of the country, Dessalines restored the French plantation system in a vain effort to revivify the production of sugar. In point of fact, Toussaint had laid the groundwork for this by introducing *fermage*, an agri-order in which government leased land to managers under whom laborers, bound to that land, toiled like serfs. In return, they received a quarter of the income from the crops and other forms of care. Although slavery and the lash were banished, corporeal beatings were widely administered (Leyburn 1961:34). Workers, moreover, were subjected to strict labor discipline – to the extent that, for many of them, this appeared much like a return to slavery. Racial capitalism did not end with the revolution (see e.g. Borowitz 2024:*passim*). Nor did the new constitution do away with inequality, least of all along the lines of race and its admixtures that separated mulattoes from those of African descent (e.g. Nicholls 1974), among whom very few attained any measure of wealth. If anything, the yawning chasm between classes that lay in the colonial past widened. Which, as Dubois (2012:4) notes, led to “intense struggle[s] within Haiti . . . to define . . . freedom and realize its promise”; it also led to the emergence of the *lakou* system, under which “peasants liv[ed] in households around a common yard, maintained their autonomy and secured access to land ownership,” albeit very limited and under “the exploitative control of a predominantly city-based minority” (Fatton 2013). A different gloss has it that these “formerly enslaved masses of Haiti organized themselves into communal social arrangements that prioritized subsistence labor and extended kin networks, and continued to rely on marronnage, . . . [an] anti-capitalist mode of resistance, socio-political critique, and grassroots mobilizing” (Eddins 2022:219;; after Casimir 2020).

As it was to turn out, Dessalines did succeed in refounding a measure of economic stability and growth. But his unflinching authoritarianism yielded increasing discontent, which ended with his assassination in 1806 – leading, in turn, to a period of civil strife, internal warfare, and political chaos. And so revolutionary triumphalism gave way to the tragic. Foreshadowings here of Joseph Conrad (1911:133), more than a century later: “Hopes grotesquely betrayed, ideals caricatured – that is the definition of

revolutionary success. There have been in every revolution hearts broken...”

Foreshadowings, too, of Greg Beckett’s (2019; cf. also Trouillot 1995) portrayal of Haiti, recent past and ongoing present, in which “crisis [is] a way of life.”¹² This characterization, although derived from a post-millennial ethnography, could well be projected backwards to the early chapters of the post-revolution – and their forward motion in time.

Those troubled early years and the decades that followed, though, were not merely the product of internal instability or of governmental mismanagement. Nor, as Dubois (2012) stresses, are they attributable to racial or cultural or “natural” deficiency on the part of the Haitians – an accusation often leveled. Externalities were also, indeed primarily, the source of endemic social, political, and economic crisis, of the historical anomaly, of an emancipated former colony founding an independent state. A postcolony, as it were, *avant la lettre*. The long history of the post-revolution is a history of structural violence owed in major part to persistent foreign intervention, itself a corollary of the global trajectory of an expansive colonial – that is, racial – capitalism. Of political-economy writ large in the Age of Empire.

Haiti’s entrance into the world of sovereign nations, as a decolonized Black state – again, unthinkable at the time – was marked by immediate diplomatic isolation. Because it posed an ideological threat to slaveholding countries, Euro-America was not welcoming. The United States, a young republic with a deeply entrenched slave economy, was especially hostile, refusing to recognize Haiti’s sovereignty until 1862, almost sixty years later (Matthewson 2003). Britain (1833) and Spain (1855) also took their time. France, San Domingo’s former colonizer, gave its recognition in 1825, twenty years after the revolution. But this was only in exchange for the payment of an “indemnity,” the infamous “Independence Debt,” of 150m francs (later reduced to 90m) to compensate former slave owners for the loss of their property (Dubois 2012). Thus were former slaves made to pay their slavers for their hard-won freedom. “Decolonizing” capital has typically indemnified itself, in one way or another, against the loss of its

¹² By contrast, Laurent Dubois (2012:370) argues that hope is never fully evacuated. He cites a contemporary wall graffiti that declares, “A different Portau-Prince is possible,” adding, in his own voice, “A different Haiti is always, still possible too.”

former “possessions,” prefiguring the fate of twentieth-century postcolonies. As a consequence, Haiti was compelled to take out high-interest loans from French banks, initiating a century-long cycle of indebtedness (Phillips 2008); in 1898, for example, debt service payments consumed approximately 80% of the country’s national revenue, severely constraining public investment in infrastructure, economic growth, health, welfare, and education (Farmer 2003). It also forced Haiti to focus its productive economy on cultivation for export, particularly coffee, to generate foreign exchange. This, in turn, hindered the development of a diversified agri-sector and, with it, the melioration of inequality. And It accelerated deforestation and soil degradation, creating long-term environmental challenges (Diamond, 2005). The balance of the indemnity, recently called “The Greatest Heist in History,”¹³ was only paid off in 1947; very belatedly, the sheer injustice of it all has prompted scholars and public intellectuals to raise questions about Haiti’s right to reparations (e.g. Hart 2021; Casey, Fernández, and Nikova 2022).

In the upshot, Haiti remained peripheral to the international order (Smith 2009), Its economic vulnerability further compounded by the policies of its trading “partners” over the long run. The United States, even after recognizing the country, imposed discriminatory tariffs on its exports while flooding its markets with American goods (Schmidt 1995); echoes here of the still unfinished business of US fiscal imperialism. This, notoriously, was reinforced politically by attacks on Haitian sovereignty, most significantly by the U.S. military occupation from 1915 to 1934 under the pretext of the need to protect American interests amidst social instability (Renda, 2001). During this period, the U.S. controlled Haiti’s finances, rewrote its constitution – among other things, removing prohibitions on foreign land ownership – and established governmental institutions that served its own ends. It also imposed *corvée* (effectively forced) labor for infrastructure projects, ironically reintroducing elements of the *ancien regime* that the Haitian Revolution had overthrown (Renda, 2001). Even after the formal end of the occupation, the US maintained significant influence over Haiti’s political and economic

¹³ Rosalsky, Greg, “The Greatest Heist in History: How Haiti Was Forced To Pay Reparations For Freedom,” *NPR*, 6 October 2021; <https://www.wlrn.org/news/2021-10-06/the-greatest-heist-in-history-how-haiti-was-forced-to-pay-reparations-for-freedom>.

affairs. It managed the country's customs revenues until 1947 and ensured that the authoritarian regimes to follow – particularly the Duvalier dictatorships (1957-1986), for which it laid the ground – would prioritize American material and strategic concerns over those of Haiti. As large numbers of dispossessed Haitians would seek refuge elsewhere, largely in the US, the country would come to epitomize toxic state failure – indeed, the south in the north – prompting militant defenses against mass outward migration (e.g. Kahn 2018).

And so the tragic cycle was to complete itself. The Haitian Revolution was effectively undone,¹⁴ thus to render historically true the racist ontology that made it -- as Trouillot argued – “unthinkable” to begin with. At least in the *conscience collective* of Euro-America and its hegemonic historiographies.

V.

Which takes us to our other, our final question, which may itself appear to be an historiographic heresy: In what sense, given its troubled, complicated afterlife – its temporalities short, medium, and long, linear and circular, multiple, fractured, more or less rhizomatic – was the overthrow of the French colonial regime actually a revolution?

Max Gluckman (e.g. 1963:9-10), after Marx, famously reflected on the distinction between rebellion and revolution. For Gluckman, the first, broadly speaking, refers to the overthrow of a regime, and the displacement of its personnel, while leaving enduring historical structures and institutions in place; it is immanent, that is, in repetitive processes of social reproduction. The second involved the overthrow of those structures and their replacement with a new social-economic formation; it conducted, in other words, to radical rupture. This bears comparison with Arendt's treatment of the distinction in *On Revolution* (1963: Chapter 1). For her, too, rebellion, which seeks liberation *from* oppression – it is a “negative” freedom – does not produce a new order, a durable, positive alternative; it remains trapped, rather, in the repetitive logic of the old

¹⁴ For all the differences between them, there is obviously a parallel to be drawn between the tragic afterlife of the Haitian Revolution and the destructive aftermath of Black Reconstruction in post-civil war America; see below. Although W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) mentions Haiti several times in *Black Reconstruction*, he does not compare the two histories substantively.

order, merely replacing one sovereign with another. Revolution, on the other hand, is the pursuit of a “positive” political freedom, a freedom *for*, by constituting a new beginning in which freedom to act, to speak, to participate in public life is its objective, free of tyrannical authority. C.L.R. James makes no such distinction and, on occasion in *The Black Jacobins*, uses both “rebellion” and “revolution” to describe the overthrow of the French colonial regime. Like almost every other scholar who has engaged with this history, even those pessimistic about its effects or its larger historical significance (see below), he presumes that there *was* a Haitian Revolution.

There is no question that that French overrule and colonial slavery were brought to an end, sent packing never to return. In that sense, liberation here, a rebellion in Arendtian terms as in Gluckman’s, was a *political* accomplishment for the ages – although, again in an Arendtian register, the kinds of freedom it delivered, in what proportions and for whom, makes it clear that she would not have regarded it as a revolution, *sensu stricto*. It is noteworthy that, in *On Revolution* (1963), she chose not to address the question of Haiti, for which she has been taken to task (e.g. Scott 2004). The Marxist question, particularly relevant for C.L.R. – to what extent did it produce a new social-economic formation for the new nation? – is altogether more complicated.

Carl Wilén (2023:111), who notes the rising flood of literature on the Haitian Revolution since the millennium – no longer, after Trouillot, a “silenced past” – explores the rise of what he calls the “sceptical turn” in recent historiography; this by contrast to what he dubs, somewhat awkwardly, “the universality analysis.” The latter, familiar already from the body of work cited earlier, posits the epochal significance of the San Domingo uprising.¹⁵ It is unambiguously triumphalist: summarily, the revolution, founded on the mass mobilization of slaves, put an end to slavery, yielded a Declaration of Independence in 1804 and, with it, called into being a new sovereign state. As such, it amounted to “a historical rupture” – this, for many, being the critical element in any true revolution – “with the age-old history of exclusion, owing to the inclusion of the former slaves within the Rights of Man and the Citizen” promulgated in 1789. It pointed

¹⁵ In addition to those already cited by us above (Trouillot 2005, Buck-Morss 200, and Dubois 2004), Wilén includes Hunt (2000), Hardt and Negri (2000[sic], 2001) and Hallward (2004) as “important advocates” of this position. He might have added many others, among them, the contributors to Geggus (2001), and Fischer (2010), whom he cites elsewhere. C.L.R. James, remarkably, is not included.

forward, moreover, and contributed demonstrably, to the universal history, the long telos, of “human rights, modernity, democracy, transnational anti-slavery, and anti-racism” (*ibid.*:112, 116). And more proximately, to abolition in Europe and elsewhere. Enough, by emphatic implication, to qualify it as a revolution.

The “sceptical turn,” by contrast,¹⁶ questions whether the San Domingo uprising was “a democratic and universalistic revolution” at all, when the polity that it yielded was emphatically autocratic and militaristic, with no palpable aspirations beyond its own geopolitical confines. Citing Geggus (2010), Wilén (2010:112) notes that, from this critical vantage, its impact on “the history of contemporary democracy and human rights” was negligible; also that, far from constituting a revolutionary rupture, it evinced marked “historical continuity between the old regime and the post-revolutionary social formation” (p.116). Not only did the promise of freedom, democracy, rights, and equality go largely unrealized for much of the population, but the overthrow of the colonial order yielded an economy based, for many, on a (slavery adjacent?) variant of coerced bondage rather than free labor. And, some have said, on bare bones subsistence production, this under the *lakou* system mentioned earlier; Genovese (1979:90) refers to this mode of “peasant proprietorship and self-sufficiency [as] wonderful euphemisms for . . . the poverty and wretchedness . . .”¹⁷ Those “wonderful euphemisms,” recall, were seen by the Casimir (2020) and Eddins (2022) as an anti-capitalist, grassroots mode of resistance and an alternative form of communal organization.

Wilén could have gone much further, following Geggus, who cites Drescher (2001) and Genovese (1979), both of whom subscribed to the historical significance of

¹⁶ In characterizing the “sceptical turn,” Willén (2023:112) focuses almost entirely on the writings of Geggus (2010, 2012, 2016), from whom the words in quotes here are largely taken. He adds that this “turn” is rarely acknowledged in the literature on Haitian history – although it has, he observes, been censured for its “conservativ[ism]” and “neo-imperial revisionism.” In fact, Geggus has a more nuanced position than Willén implies. Among other things, he argues that, while “revolution was not the most transformative force at work in the region” at the time, it was “the most transformative revolution of the age . . . [having] most fully embodied contemporary struggles for freedom, equality, and independence. . . and produced the greatest degree of social and economic change” (Geggus 2010:83, 87). At the same time, as we shall see below, the critical questions he raises run to the intentions of the actors involved and the afterlife of the revolution.

¹⁷ For some (e.g. Dubois 2014; Casimir 2020; Mocombe 2023, see below), retreat into this order, inflected by a vernacular cultural sensibility, was a form of resistance to the dominant political economy of post-revolutionary Haiti. Genovese (1979:90) was rather more cynical.

the Haitian Revolution, but with qualifications. The latter argues that, while it was a “true revolution that sought to build a modern state . . .” it nonetheless “retreated into a ‘tragic counter-revolution’” (Geggus 2010:89, 95; after Genovese 1979:88). For his own part, Geggus adds that, early in the uprising, the slave insurgents had only modest reformist goals, which did *not* evolve over time into revolutionary ones; that far from demanding “the rights of man,” many of those insurgents defended Louis XVI, whom, they believed, had ordered their freedom (p.96). Few of their leaders, he says, showed much interest in republican ideology or democratic ideals (p.97); to wit, while their declaration of independence stressed the prevention of any restoration of slavery, it “made no mention of rights...and informed the colonial powers that the new state would not seek to abolish slavery elsewhere” (pp.96-98).

But perhaps the most outspoken skeptic is Paul Mocombe (2023), who speaks explicitly of the *insignificance* of the Haitian Revolution. For him, the “classic” liberal, i.e. Hegelian, interpretation highlights the “purposive-rationality of mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks, Affranchis, . . . who would go on to assume leadership roles in the revolution and write its history.” Their policies, he asserts, were founded on “racial vindicationism,” taking on the roles of former slave masters as they sought recognition, equality of opportunity and redistribution; this “at the expense of the majority of the Africans,” who sought “total freedom” in order “to establish a communal way of living based on the *lakou* system [and] their Vodou Ethic” (p.248). A simplification of the objectives of the Affranchis? Romancing the rather less sanguine reality of former African slaves, as others suggest? Perhaps. But Mocombe epitomizes the claim made by some skeptics that, from the perspective of the poor black majority, the Haitian uprising was ultimately about the reallocation of roles within the unfolding logic of the capitalist imperium than a structural transformation of the endogenous social-economic order. Convincing? We shall see in a moment.

How, in the spirit of C.L.R. James, to respond to this challenge -- indeed, to the “sceptical turn”? How to fill in the silence of *The Black Jacobins* on the critical questions raised by it? What, more generally, is to be made of these deeply contrasting takes on San Domingo, 1791-1804? If this was a Revolution, upper case – well, was it? – how do

we take its measure? And how are we to read its infinitely complex temporalities and the proportional equation of intentionality to outcome, aspiration and realization? What sorts of adjectives may describe it? Was it purely a struggle *against* the *ancien regime* – a rebellion, again in Arendtian terms, under the (limited, negative?) sign of liberation, or merely, in Gluckman's, regime change? Or was it, as it is almost uniformly called, a revolution *for* something positive beyond that? And for whom?

VI.

Both liberal and Marxist thought – and their various hybrids – tend to treat revolution in totalizing terms, as an historical rupture of epochal proportions. Anything less requires qualification, a recognition of deficit, incompleteness. Hence, for example. Arendt's reckoning of different revolutions as more or less "successful." Or the Marxist-Leninist "two-stage" theory, in which the phases may, or more likely may not, occur *in seriatim* – at least not as fully realized. Or the Trotskyist notion of "permanent revolution," ongoing because it is never complete. And this is not to mention talk of "partial" revolutions, political revolutions that are not economic or social revolutions, economic or social revolutions that are not political, national revolutions that may change the cultural identity of the polity but not much else. Or any combination of the foregoing. If anything seems clear about the Haitian story is that it is an instance of a *rhizomatic* revolution (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, especially 1987).¹⁸ Rhizomatic revolutions are some or all of those things, in different, labile proportions – with different temporalities for different blocs of the populations involved, populations mediated primarily by class and race in unstable, often messy relations to each other.

By "rhizomatic" here we refer to a phenomenon, process, or assemblage composed of diverse elements connected with each other in non-linear, decentralized engagements of greater or lesser density and duration. Metaphorically derivative of the lateral, subterranean shoots of a plant, the image of the rhizome describes well the

¹⁸ The term "Rhizomatic Revolution" appears in the title of a journal, *The Rhizomatic Revolution Review*; see <https://ther3journal.com/>. Its content, however, bears no relation to our use of the term. We are not aware of any previous usage of the concept as we deploy it here.

precursors to and early moments of the Haitian Revolution. It had several sites, protagonists, means and ends connected to one another variably, intermittently, and fitfully: the unsuccessful rebellion led by Maroon former slave, Mackandal (above, p.00); the mass actions of African slaves in Le Cap, culturally infused with indigenous ritual praxis, whose mass mobilization went largely unnoticed by the French; the *fin de siècle* mobilization of Free Blacks and young Mulattoes also from Le Cap; and, in due course, the charismatic emergence of Toussaint and his adjutants. These tendrils of revolution grew disparately underground, became intertwined, and burst through the surface of the political landscape as the revolution took its shape-shifting patterns from 1791 onward. This may be why, while James began his account with a vanguardist view of the uprising, it gave way – exacerbated by intra-Marxist critique of vanguardism, as we noted earlier – to a bewilderingly detailed, fragmentary account of the dispersed encounters that, cumulatively, comprised this rhizomatic revolution. It was precisely its rhizomatic character, moreover, that made it impossible, in the end, for Imperial France to put down.

But it was not only the battle for San Domingo that made the revolution rhizomatic, that determined its diverse effects and its limitations, and that gave it its unique historical character.

Clearly, that battle *did* conduce to a *nationalist* revolution: it created the independent polity of Haiti and erased French sovereignty. But that was not a universally shared *cause de la guerre*. Toussaint himself envisaged, and fought for, a Haiti integral to imperial France, to its culture and its *weltanschauung*, albeit free of colonial overrule and slavery. Improbable though this may appear in retrospect, he was not alone. As James reminds us, the objectives of the various *dramatis personae* involved in the struggle, leaders as well as followers, changed, and changed in different directions, over time. What is more, the African slaves who rose up in 1791 may have shared a collective will to eradicate slavery and rid themselves of their colonial masters. But did they envisage, or desire, the creation of a new state – even if they were instrumental in producing it? Some evidence suggests that they would have preferred a political order more in line with their political cultures of origin. Which raises another

question: while the San Domingo uprising may have established a nation-state – although, in the short term it actually yielded two Haitis (above, fn.7) – in what measure may it be said to have produced a shared nationhood, a modernist national consciousness, a singular political community of Haitians?¹⁹ Arguably, it did so in the long run, much less so in the shorter run; after all, the modernist nation-state was still an embryonic formation at the time. Hence our point about the critical salience of temporality in making analytic sense of revolutionary processes, not least nationalist revolutionary processes.

But another matter here, again in the spirit of Arendt. If nationhood posits universal freedom, equal citizenship, entitlement to civic participation, and legal protections, what proportion of the Haitian population, post-liberation, *actually* enjoyed these things? To what extent did the country *actually* undergo a *political* revolution? Its founding constitution may have promised freedom and equality. But it did not mandate universal rights. And it delivered distinctly different degrees of freedom to the raced-class fractions of its citizenry. In as much as this was a war of emancipation, it endowed Haiti with recognizably modernist governmental, legal, educational, and military institutions. But it yielded a highly unequal polity: while it enriched and empowered the indigenous bourgeoisie that displaced the French slave owners, it left many of the poorest to labor under a legally sanctioned, highly coercive form of indenture. And others to become an immiserated peasantry. This as the country became a postcolony entrapped in, and impoverished by, the emerging global capitalist order. In these respects, the Haitian uprising appeared, in its immediate afterlife, less as a political revolution than a rebellion. Or, if you will, a partial revolution. Which, again, gestures back to C.L.R. James's unintended ambivalence in using the two terms interchangeably. Rebellion and partial/revolution are sometimes hard to tell apart in real historical situations, real time. Which makes the point that deciding whether, when, or to what extent a political revolution has occurred is rarely a straightforward matter.

¹⁹ This recalls the line attributed to Massimo d'Azeglio about the emergence of Italy as a nation after its unification in the 1860s: "We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians." In short, the making of a nation as a polity is not the same as making nationality a form of political consciousness and identity.

Critical to Marxist concerns is the extent to which the Haitian uprising might have yielded an *economic* revolution. Patently, it did not. It may have put an end to slavery -- a critical historical rupture, if a negative one -- but it did not build a distinctively new economic or social formation; this at a juncture at which industrial capitalism was consolidating itself and reshaping labor regimes across much of the world. No two-stage revolution here. Haiti's post-emancipation rulers *did* strive, with some gradual, limited success, to rebuild the material foundations of the new nation-state. But what they envisaged, and set about trying to establish, was a modernist capitalist economy, not unlike the one valorized by the French bourgeoisie. Even the African slave insurgents, according to Geggus (above, p.00), only ever had limited reformist objectives. Dubois (2014), and, by implication, Mocombe (2023; see fn.16 above), however, suggest that the only shadow of a social-economic revolution in Haiti was to be found among those African slave insurgents, among them Maroons (e.g. Casimir 2020; Gonzalez 2019), who took refuge in the cultural, social, and material practices embodied in *lakou*. What Genovese glossed as "wretched " peasant lives might also be read as an enduring spirit of freedom from entrapment in that global capitalist order?

Of course, the financial crisis in the aftermath of the expulsion of the French and the destruction of the sugar plantations -- greatly exacerbated by the "Independence Debt" -- had its own long-term effects, among them, the introduction of forced (slavery-adjacent?) labor arrangements. And, over time, mass immiseration. In the upshot, the post-liberation economy deepened raced-class cleavages in material as well as social, legal, and cultural terms. Note the similarity to the "splendid failure" in the USA of Black Reconstruction under the attack of capital and its "counter revolution" (Du Bois 1935:708; fn.14 above) -- and the echoes of Marx's grim prognosis for nineteenth-century proletarian revolutions in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. For Mocombe (2023) again, if we may extrapolate somewhat, this was a rebellion not a revolution, with the new Haitian elites taking the place of the French slave-masters. A more generous reading may see it as a partial, incomplete economic revolution, given that it *did* move Haiti away from a slave economy to a (struggling) modernist capitalist one. But is this what a Marxist of James's ilk might have had in mind under the sign of revolution? Hardly.

The general point will be clear. Taken serially, the various registers of the San Domingo uprising – national, political, social, economic, cultural – all had trace elements of the revolutionary. At least they did in aspiration – even if this was not necessarily congealed in an explicit revolutionary consciousness – and, over the long term, in their effects. Each at best constituted a partial revolution, albeit in different proportions for different race-class fractions of the population. But, together, they made up the rhizomic elements of what we now take to be, in the retrospective singular, *the* Haitian Revolution, a truly epochal rupture, one that anticipated the history of postcoloniality writ large. Perhaps all rhizomatic revolutions are, intrinsically, the sum of their partialities, more or less incomplete, productive of greater or lesser freedoms. Or none at all.

The rhizome here, then, refers to the fractal sociology of revolution, its fractal cartography, its fractal publics and protagonists, its unfolding temporalities, its variably motivated and cognized praxes, the uneven, labile struggles involved in it, its uneven determinations and outcomes -- all of them, finally, mediated by real people in real time under structural conditions *not* of their own making. Which is why James could describe the bewilderingly complex events that composed the Haitian Revolution, and all its contradictions, but not theorize it in its totality; beyond, that is, divining in it the dialectics of historical circumstance and human agency. As we have stressed, this is all the more so because he did not follow it into its afterlife, on which all analysis of revolutions critically depend. This is also why he saw no need to draw a distinction between rebellion and revolution, be it from the standpoint of Arendt or Marx or Gluckman, framed in negative or positive terms. The Haitian uprising was neither and both, at once rupture and reproduction, depending on the sociological and historical vantage from which it is viewed. Hence, too, James's giving up vanguardism for mass action, each being salient at different times for different fractions involved in the struggle. And his oscillation between triumphalism and tragedy. Neither triumphal nor skeptical accounts of the history of San Domingo, 1791-1804, capture fully the rhizomatic revolution that unfolded, only to be deeply compromised over the long run by the counter-revolutionary force of Euro-American colonial capitalism.

Perhaps all revolutions, finally, are rhizomatic, which is why they are all so damnably difficult to write. Or think.

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