

Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture

Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus: The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Girouz, 2020, 427 pages

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“The War of Spartacus and the Slaves was the most just war in History; perhaps the only just war in History.” So declared Voltaire in 1770 in his entry on ‘Slavery’ in the *Encyclopédie*, symptomatic of a new-found interest in Europe in the mid-eighteenth century in the almost forgotten Thracian Gladiator who led a heroic rebellion against the Roman Empire in 73 B.C. Yet few of Voltaire’s readers among the European philosophical establishment would have made any direct link between admiration for a slave revolt in the ancient world and the obscene barbarism of contemporary New World colonial slavery, and so the need for new ‘just wars’ waged against it. Indeed, as Sudhir Hazareesingh points out in his impressive study *Black Spartacus*—likely to be the definitive biography of ‘the epic life of Toussaint Louverture’ for the foreseeable future—referring to the famous phrase of Michel-Rolph Trouillot on the Haitian Revolution, the very idea of contemporary enslaved Africans waging a revolutionary

war against racialized slavery in the name of universal human rights, was ‘unthinkable’ (34). The *Histoire philosophique des Deux Indes* of 1770 by Raynal and Diderot denounced the barbarity of slavery and predicted an ‘avenger’ could one day arise, but this was written primarily as a warning to colonial slave-holding elites— not a call to arms (33). Yet slave revolts were already underway in the Atlantic world, and indeed just a few months after Bernard Saurin’s popular play *Spartacus* was staged to acclaim in Paris in February, 1760, ‘Tacky’s War’ rocked colonial Jamaica.¹

It was not until 1796, five years after the Haitian Revolution had erupted, that a republican governor of French colonial Saint-Domingue, Étienne Laveaux, could finally honour one of the revolutionary leaders— his new black deputy, the formerly enslaved military genius Toussaint Louverture—as not just ‘the saviour of legitimate authority’ in the colony but ‘the black Spartacus, the leader announced by the philosopher Raynal to avenge the crimes perpetuated against his race’ (99). As Hazareesingh notes, “this was the first time Toussaint was publicly likened to Spartacus. Nothing moves as swiftly as revolutionary time, but even he probably could not have imagined, when he embraced the slave revolt in 1791, that five years later the governor of Saint-Domingue would be comparing him to such an illustrious Thracian predecessor” (99). Toussaint himself seems to have appreciated the comparison, having a bust of Raynal in his offices (100).

Despite his title, Hazareesingh does not dwell on the evocation of Toussaint as the ‘Black Spartacus’, though he has found a great quote from Fidel Castro, who while in prison in 1954, declared how “the insurrection of black slaves in Haiti” inspired him, and that “at a time when Napoleon was imitating Caesar, and France resembled Rome, the soul of Spartacus was born in Toussaint Louverture” (327). This may be so because, unlike the revolt of Spartacus and his legions that were soon defeated and crushed by those in power after two years of fighting, the Haitian Revolution represented an inspiring twelve-year epic and victorious anti-colonial struggle, “the only successful slave revolt in history,”

1 For more on representations of Spartacus in the eighteenth century, see Brent D. Shaw, “Spartacus before Marx,” Princeton, Stanford Working Papers in Classics, 2005, <https://www.princeton.edu/~pswpc/pdfs/shaw/110516.pdf>.

as C.L.R. James noted in *The Black Jacobins*. While Toussaint's own fate was destined to be as tragic as that of Spartacus, ultimately his cause, the abolition of slavery and black self-governance, triumphed as part of the larger colonial struggles of which he was a pre-eminent leader in Saint Domingue.

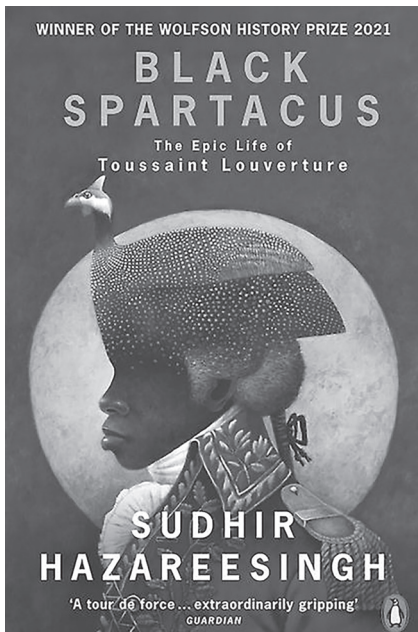
Hazareesingh suggests "James's representation of Toussaint as a French 'jacobin' ignored his monarchist leanings, and the strong emphasis on local autonomy in his political thought, which eventually culminated in his 1801 constitution" (8). Hazareesingh is insightful on the appeal of royalism to Toussaint with "its belief in providential leadership and the values of duty, sacrifice and honour; its commitment to politeness and gentility of manners; and of course its profound religiosity" (57). Yet such sympathies, surely hardly that surprising given the long African tradition of 'kingship', do not seem to decisively undermine the essential Jamesian framework of 'black Jacobinism' for making sense of Toussaint's mature politics.² Hazareesingh himself makes powerful arguments about Toussaint's "revolutionary republicanism," with its focus on "the equal dignity of the citizenry and a commitment to the ideals of popular sovereignty and service to the general interest," his "republicanism of war," and his "republicanism of brotherhood which held up the enticing prospect of a multiracial community of equals" (12). For example, at one point he includes what he calls "a wonderful example of how well Toussaint schooled his soldiers" in "republican philosophy." When Toussaint's soldiers received an invitation from the former revolutionary leader, Jean-François, to abandon the French Republic and rally to the King of Spain, "they greeted this summons to treachery with a magnificently contemptuous proclamation: 'Our liberty is very different from yours,' they responded, 'you are just the slaves of a king, and we are free republican men who despise your monarch'" (85). As for Toussaint's declaration of colonial sovereignty for Saint Domingue rather than subordination to metropolitan domination in his 1801 constitution, here too, Toussaint's 'black Jacobinism' ought not be entirely dismissed. Given that the Jacobins had

2 For more on African kingship, see John K. Thornton, " 'I Am the Subject of the King of Congo': African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution," *Journal of World History* 4 (2), 1993.

long since been politically defeated, Toussaint would have to go it alone, rightly suspicious of Napoleon Bonaparte's ultimate intentions regarding the fate of Saint Domingue and slave emancipation.

The accumulation of scholarship on the Haitian Revolution over the eighty years since James's classic study allow modern biographers such as Hazareesingh, who has done extensive research and found new sources in various French and Spanish archives in particular, the opportunity to bring us a far more richly layered account of Toussaint's political and intellectual itinerary. Hazareesingh rightly quotes Nick Nesbitt's argument that the Haitian Revolution was "the most masterful political improvisation of the Radical Enlightenment" (11). However, in general, he is not so interested in the possible wider transnational influences on Toussaint, such as the American War of Independence, but instead digs down into the local, rich revolutionary African-based counter-culture of the enslaved of colonial Saint-Domingue. Toussaint's "creative adaptation" of Mackandalism (36) is highlighted, as is his desire to move beyond its racial essentialism towards "a vision of a political community of equals, in which black, white and mixed race people could coexist peacefully" (65). Toussaint's "revolutionary republicanism," Hazareesingh notes, had diverse influences, including "a republicanism of *métissage* which integrated local traditions of natural mysticism, including those of the native Taino Indians, with elements of royalism and Catholic moral teachings" (12).

For Hazareesingh, Toussaint was "the colony's Black Spartacus" (39), so underlining both Toussaint's critical role as a revolutionary leader and his "universal hero" status, indeed perhaps "the first black superhero of the modern age" (329). Fittingly, Hazareesingh's analysis of Toussaint's military genius and how it "lay in his capacity for creative adaptation" is compelling (76). The idea of Toussaint as 'superhero' effectively captures something of the allure and appeal after his death in 1803, and Hazareesingh has a splendid final chapter on the afterlives of Toussaint. The appeal of a 'Black Spartacus' certainly also fits extremely well with the twenty-first century cultural zeitgeist, when people's uncertainty about their own abilities to change the world has led to a new surge in popularity for 'superheroes' (expressed for example in the success of Marvel's 2018 *Black Panther*).



Yet there are dangers and pitfalls involved with the Toussaint as ‘super-hero’ thesis, and while Hazareesingh is too careful a scholar to ever lose his footing as such, historians of the Haitian Revolution may well find aspects of the work more convincing than others. In the first part of the work, where Toussaint’s early life is swiftly but richly detailed, Hazareesingh convincingly disposes of the ‘royalist conspiracy theory’ around the August 1791 insurrection, advanced in recent years by Madison Smartt Bell and Philippe Girard (49), only to assert that Toussaint was in fact the hidden driving force behind it. This seems to downplay the in-

spiring early leadership of Dutty Boukman, whose role as a Vodou priest is omitted (as is for example the role played by Vodou priestess Cécile Fatiman), while other early leaders like Georges Biassou, Jeannot Bullet and Jean-François Papillion are also given relatively short shrift amid the seemingly inevitable rise of ‘the black Spartacus’. Even Jean-Jacques Dessalines at times struggles to find his rightful place in the narrative as the Haitian Revolution unfolds and is described once in the book as simply Toussaint’s ‘bulldozer’ (307). In fact, his own radical new vision of race and citizenship in the Haitian constitution of 1805, which recognised Poles and Germans who had fought for Haitian independence as ‘black’, is unacknowledged. Again, while the role of women in Haiti’s war of independence is acknowledged, individual female revolutionary leaders such as Sanite Belair are not discussed.

For James, “it was the revolution that made Toussaint” rather than Toussaint simply making the revolution.³ Hazareesingh gives us instead

3 C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* [1938], London, Penguin, 2001, p. xix.

a revolutionary leader apparently fully made in 1791. Having played no discernible role in any earlier anti-slavery liberation struggle—aside from helping to manumit one slave in his intermediary role as his manager’s coachman on the Bréda plantation in 1773 (31)—Toussaint seemingly has nothing to learn from the dialectics of the struggle itself after deciding to join the insurrection. Indeed, that there might even be a struggle from below that is potentially outside of Toussaint’s control is barely appreciated by Hazareesingh. Even a wave of revolts waged by black *cultivateurs* against a new decree of forced labour in 1798 in Saint Domingue’s northern plain districts, is apparently not the result of independent activity on the part of the workers themselves. Rather, they occur under Toussaint’s direction and the command of his military officers from above in order to undermine the authority of, and to expel the French civil commissioner, Gabriel-Marie Théodore Hédouville (144).

Hazareesingh does concede that “in the late Toussaint era a black bourgeoisie began to emerge” (268) and he also notes that “the wealth of his new black elite, combined with [Toussaint’s] draconian labour regulations and his refusal to allow plantations workers land ownership, all damaged his standing among black communities”(289). Yet the position of Toussaint as a representative of this new black ruling class is not recognised as tragic by Hazareesingh. Rather, it is barely recognised at all, as Hazareesingh seeks to defend his “universal hero” from the “myth” that Toussaint “only cared about the propertied classes in the final years of his rule,” citing the fact he reduced import duties on essential domestic goods as evidence enough that “the well-being of ordinary men and women remained one of his key concerns” (271).

That said, historians of the Haitian Revolution owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Sudhir Hazareesingh for his superb (and beautifully illustrated) study, which reveals new layers of complexity to our understanding of Toussaint’s political philosophy amid all the contending forces of the Haitian Revolution. Hazareesingh’s sophisticated understanding of the wider French traditions of republicanism, and the way he builds on Karma Nabulsi’s work on the “republican tradition of war” (70) is particularly valuable. Nonetheless, Hazareesingh’s focus on Toussaint as a ‘superhero’ means he inherently has little if any use for the methodology of history ‘from

below', such as that pioneered by the later work of James himself in the 1970s on the Haitian Revolution, and then by the work of scholars such as Carolyn Fick. Despite then the many strengths of *Black Spartacus*, Hazareesingh's more one-sided approach means that many of the debates and controversies around certain moments in Toussaint's life look set to continue.

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