Aimé Césaire

TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE

The French Revolution and the Colonial Problem

Toussaint Louverture

Critical South

The publication of this series is supported by the International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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Translated by Kate Nash

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Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
111 River Street
Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-5937-4 – hardback
ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-5938-1 – paperback

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

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024936979

Typeset in 10 on 12pt Sabon
by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NL
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ Books Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

For further information on Polity, visit our website:
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Foreword

Strategists May Sometimes Be Poets

Gary Wilder

Towards the end of this long-neglected work, Aimé Césaire casually remarks that 'strategists may sometimes be poets' (216). He is referring to Carl von Clausewitz's lyrical reflections on the flexible military tactics necessary for a successful people's war – tacking between an unsettling dispersion of forces and terrifying lightning strikes. Noting that Toussaint Louverture acted in just this fashion, Césaire wondered whether Clausewitz had 'studied the war in Saint-Domingue without mentioning it' (216). This offhand formulation offers us a valuable lens for understanding this book and its author.

Early on, Césaire alerts us that *Toussaint Louverture* is not meant to be a conventional scholarly monograph. He does not offer us a straightforward historical account of the revolution in Saint-Domingue. This is a historical essay on poetic politics and a political essay on historical poetics. Césaire's insightful interpretation of these events is enough to warrant our attention today. But this book, unfamiliar to most English-language readers, also illuminates important aspects of Césaire's own thinking about the relation between history, politics and aesthetics. This untimely dialogue between two titanic Black radicals helps us to better understand Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution, Aimé Césaire and decolonisation, and the myriad reverberations between these two eras and figures. It may also help us to relate each to the peculiar challenges and impasses of our postcolonial present.

Staging the Colonial Problem

A great deal of recent discussion about the Haitian Revolution has been inflected by C.L.R. James's masterpiece *The Black Jacobins* (1938). James was especially concerned with the self-organising and history-making capacity of enslaved Blacks. He attended to the way these rural cultivators on the imperial periphery leveraged a world-historical opening to abolish slavery and institutionalise Black freedom. James was equally concerned with the question of revolutionary leadership. He thus placed a politically brilliant and tragically flawed Toussaint Louverture at the centre of his account.

In contrast, Césaire focuses on what he calls 'the colonial problem', which first 'took shape' (*noué*) and 'came apart' (*dénoué*) in revolutionary Saint-Domingue (3). Like James, Césaire contends that insofar as plantation production by enslaved Blacks was the condition of possibility of European capitalist development, Saint-Domingue may be regarded as a crucial site of the origin of Western civilisation. But he also emphasises how this civilisation was shaped by a foundational 'colonial problem'. The latter derived from a bourgeois French Revolution that sanctified not only citizenship rights but property rights.

For Césaire, the economic growth that allowed the French bourgeoisie to become a revolutionary class demanding political universality depended on plantation slavery and colonial capitalism. Metropolitan freedom presupposed human bondage in the colonial Caribbean. This imperial situation depended upon and reproduced anti-Black racism. Césaire explains that within France's Caribbean colonies, class divisions were coded as racial divisions (and vice versa). Social hierarchy was fixed as a racial ontology. Any effort to create a civil society in the colonies, Césaire argues, was invariably, and necessarily, undermined by a military state charged with maintaining this ontological order. It followed that any attempt to institutionalise republican freedom for certain groups within Saint-Domingue, while maintaining the system of plantation slavery, was bound to fail.

Césaire demonstrates how this foundational 'colonial problem' expressed an ongoing set of contradictions: political universalism vs. bourgeois social hierarchy, metropolitan republicanism vs. colonial authoritarianism, universal humanism vs. racial subjection, an ideal of human freedom vs. the reality of slave-based production. These

contradictions, he suggests, were the source and product of a fundamental conflict between abstract principles and material interests. He argues that the French Revolution revealed and intensified the 'colonial problem'. Revolutionary republicanism demanded both the maintenance and the abolition of Caribbean colonialism. He points out that these contradictions 'culminated in Napoleon's politics of force' (254). The latter was not an avoidable deviation; it expressed 'the profound logic of a system' (210).

Toussaint Louverture thereby challenges any facile story about a republican French revolution simply extending to the plantation colonies. Yet, Césaire insists that the metropolitan revolution was indeed consequential for the slave insurrection that culminated in an independent Haiti. Insofar as it 'disrupted the power and disarticulated the system that kept classes together in colonial society, releasing its latent energy', the French Revolution was 'less an agent of transformation [in the colonies] than the catalyst that … accelerates [a] reaction' (254). He explains, 'it would be a terrible mistake to think of the revolution of Saint-Domingue purely and simply as a chapter of the French Revolution. … Let us be clear: there is no "French Revolution" in the French colonies. In each French colony there is a specific revolution, engendered by the French Revolution, connected to it, but each unfolding according to its own laws and with its own objectives' (4). In Césaire's dialectical account, the very failure of revolutionary republicanism to resolve the 'colonial problem' opened the possibility for the people of Saint-Domingue to attempt to do so.

Césaire also traces a dialectical process through which the major social groups in Saint-Domingue – white colonists, free mulattos and enslaved Blacks – successively seized the historical initiative which culminated in the first modern anti-colonial revolution. Each group carried its version of the struggle as far forward as the historical situation allowed. Each failure created conditions for further development by a different group. Whereas white colonists and mulattos attempted to institutionalise a limited form of political freedom without abolishing slave-based production, self-emancipated Blacks fought directly for 'universal freedom' (148–9).

Césaire identifies systemic imperatives and traces dialectical developments. He indicates how this historical situation both propelled and constrained action. But he never claims that the Haitian Revolution expressed a static social logic. Neither does he suggest that history unfolds according to a priori laws. Nor does he

portray this revolution as a simple confrontation between coloniser and colonised or white vs. Black. Rather, attending to contingent events and specific conjunctures, he offers a *political* reading of these intersecting revolutions. He elaborates a dynamic terrain of contestation shaped by a multitude of actors with variegated interests who entered and exited shifting alliances. He analyses proliferating divisions and provisional alignments within and between core social groups within the colony and the metropole. Beyond the distinctions between white, mulatto and Black there are those between colonial planters and metropolitan merchants; colonists and the republican government; *grands blancs* and *petits blancs* within the colony; government officials who want to reclaim French sovereignty from Toussaint and those who support his autonomy; French, British and Spanish imperial forces on the island; Toussaint and other Black generals; the revolutionary Black leadership and the toiling Black masses. No group's interest is ever fixed or self-evident.

Césaire tracks the formation and dissolution of shifting power blocs. This is a drama of provisional judgements, decisive acts, unavoidable setbacks and necessary adjustments. Cross-cutting these strategic calculations were a set of interlocking balancing acts: political principles vs. material interests, military campaigns vs. political projects, parliamentary ideals vs. the actual colonial situation.

This is the perspective from which we should understand Césaire's interest in Toussaint. He regarded 'the first great anti-colonialist leader history had ever known' as a 'genius' who had mastered the art of politics (148, 230). No other figure at that time better understood or worked more skilfully and creatively to overcome the colonial problem.

Césaire's Toussaint

Césaire's Toussaint paid close attention to the unfolding French Revolution as it affected colonial Saint-Domingue. He quickly learned that 'demoralising negotiations' with metropolitan assemblies were 'not worthwhile' (149). Like 'the *nègre* masses [who] realised they could expect nothing from Paris', Toussaint understood that Black freedom would have to be seized through military force and secured through political manoeuvre (121). Césaire's Toussaint became a revolutionary leader when he became convinced that

universal freedom in Saint-Domingue could only be won through a long, Black-led struggle and that 'spirit and courage would not be enough … what was needed was … a head for politics' (149). If the initial spontaneous slave insurrection marked 'a moment of feverish inspiration and prophecies … Toussaint Louverture's moment was the day after inspiration … the moment of calm reflection that corrects mistakes and refines methods' (141). Toussaint quickly recognised that revolutionary victory would require a political programme to transform mass consciousness through a 'war … of education … that involved … popularising a doctrine' or slogan (166). Toussaint's initial slogan was 'universal freedom'.

Césaire praises Toussaint's political flexibility and creativity as well as his capacity for 'strategic reversal' at decisive moments (184). His Toussaint had a canny sense of political timing. He knew when to strike, when to forge pragmatic alliances, and when to stall through negotiation. His diplomatic missives and public proclamations, astonishing offensives and cunning pauses, and his canny use of revolutionary slogans suggest that Toussaint could effectively stage and orchestrate political drama. His political acumen enabled him to defeat internal and external adversaries, unify the territory and secure political autonomy for Saint-Domingue. It also solidified the loyal mass support upon which his dazzling ascent to power depended. In short, Césaire's Toussaint cultivated an effective poetic politics. He was a charismatic political alchemist endowed with rhetorical finesse, communicative skill and creative vision. The poetic strategist transformed colonial lead into revolutionary gold.

Césaire's Toussaint had a visionary capacity to foresee alternative possibilities that were germinating within existing arrangements. Anticipating dawning dangers, he attempted to invent a new political form. Scholars have long debated why he never declared national independence after winning de facto sovereignty. Instead, he proposed a novel political arrangement. Slavery and colonialism would be abolished in a self-governing Saint-Domingue. The French government would have no authority over its everyday affairs or leaders. Yet this autonomous polity would remain an official 'colony' of France. Its entire population would be 'free and French' (206). 'Toussaint made a valuable contribution to political science in developing the theory of "dominion" for the first time. … Brilliant intuition. It was the first seed of the idea of a French Commonwealth. Toussaint had only one fault: he was ahead of his time, by a good century and a half' (205, 208).

Toussaint hoped that this political experiment would allow emancipated Blacks to enjoy real self-determination. They would not be answerable to European rulers. Yet imperial partnership with metropolitan France would also provide this fragile republic with geopolitical security, trade relations and technical expertise. We can debate how this flawed and contradictory arrangement would have played out if Bonaparte had accepted the invitation. Regardless, Césaire invites us to appreciate how Toussaint, as poetic strategist and political seer, attempted to craft a new political form through which to creatively resolve the foundational colonial problem. With this untimely proposal, Toussaint 'was offering Europe, France, the chance to alter destiny: an opportunity that does not come very often and that no nation rejects with impunity. For France it was an exceptional opportunity to put an end to the colonial misadventure, on good terms, without losses and gaining prestige' (208). We know that rather than accept this proposal, Bonaparte sent an invasion force charged with overthrowing Toussaint, re-establishing slavery, and reasserting French sovereignty in Saint-Domingue.

Césaire does not treat Toussaint uncritically. He recounts how, after securing political authority, the leader's political artistry declined. He lost the knack for political creativity, strategic flexibility and effective communication. He disastrously applied military solutions to political problems. We read how Toussaint 'faltered' the moment that the French state shifted from possible partner to imperial enemy. Césaire contends that Toussaint should have traded his earlier slogan of 'universal freedom' for a new one – 'independence' – that better grasped the changed situation. Nothing less, he argues, could have mobilised mass support for the coming confrontation. Instead, Toussaint dissembled by denying any plans for independence and reassuring the Bonapartist state and white colonists that he remained a loyal ally of France. Such declarations, Césaire argues, may have made tactical sense by allowing him to prepare for war without alarming his adversaries. But they only confused the masses who needed a compelling reason to fight and a clear aim to pursue.

C.L.R. James also focused on what he regarded as a tragic turning point when Toussaint lost touch with the masses. James famously argued that Toussaint's failure to communicate with them was bound up with his inability either to accurately assess the situation or to act like the decisive leader he had been. Unable to fully believe that Bonaparte would turn on him, such a loyal soldier for the French republic, unwilling to believe that France would

really attempt to restore slavery, James's Toussaint began to hesitate and vacillate. He lost precious time during which he should have been preparing for war.

In contrast, Césaire suggests that Toussaint saw clearly that an all-out war would have to be waged against Bonaparte but that the time was not yet right for a decisive victory. What James reads as hesitation, Césaire reads as a strategy to stall for time until the rainy season when Yellow Fever would decimate French forces. To this end Toussaint first negotiates a ceasefire that allowed his army to remain intact. Then he intentionally allowed himself to be arrested and deported. This would not only buy additional time. It would also facilitate political unity across the Saint-Domingue population. Césaire explains that Toussaint had made numerous enemies and fomented deep divisions during the long struggle. The required unity would only be possible if he removed himself from the scene. Césaire thus argues that despite his growing political rigidity, despite his failure to ignite the masses with a new slogan, Toussaint redeemed himself through a heroic act of self-sacrifice. 'Toussaint accepted this role of martyr, in fact he went to meet it, because he believed it was indispensable. … I see it as better than a mystical act: a political act. Yes, he saw this journey that took him into captivity and death as his final political act and, without doubt, one of the most productive' (232). Césaire regards the very events that James treated as signs of Toussaint's ultimate failure, as elements of a considered strategy of self-sacrifice that led to the victory he had orchestrated.

Césaire concludes that Toussaint was a 'mediator' who 'took the Declaration of the Rights of Man at its word' and waged a 'struggle for the transformation of formal rights into real rights' (256). Through these efforts, 'Haiti was born. The first black nation in the world' (247). His political artistry made Toussaint forever 'a centre. The centre of Haitian history. The centre no doubt of the history of the Antilles' (247). This, Césaire, concludes, 'is why the Mediator well deserves the name his compatriots give him today: the Precursor' (256). Césaire criticises what he calls the 'fashionable' tendency among his Haitian contemporaries 'to diminish Toussaint in order to elevate Dessalines' (246). For 'Toussaint is the beginning, and without Toussaint there would have been no Dessalines, the continuation' (247).

Césaire thus identifies Toussaint as a precursor to Dessalines' victory and Haitian political independence. More generally, he

implies that Toussaint was precursor to all subsequent anti-colonial struggles and leaders. But he did not only clear the path for acts of revolutionary refusal. He was precursor to all subsequent attempts to grasp, untangle and resolve the 'colonial problem' which continued to haunt political modernity. Césaire's Toussaint anticipated, especially, those who sought to do so through political artistry, the skilled exercise of creativity, flexibility, improvisation, experimentation, invention, persuasion, inspiration, timing, self-sacrifice and the capacity to take the long view. He was a precursor of poetic politics among revolutionaries who sought, through immanent critique, to realise expansive potentialities that may be germinating in actually existing relations of domination.

Strategically, Césaire's Toussaint was also a precursor for those who recognised that such struggles were never simply or decisively waged between oppressors and victims, colonisers and colonised, whites and Blacks. They unfolded on complex terrains where various groups formed and dissolved shifting power blocs. And he was precursor of those who recognised that colonial emancipation depended more on cultivating new political subjectivities than simply asserting a priori cultural or racial identities.

More specifically, Césaire's Toussaint was precursor for those revolutionary descendants who understood that in a world of global capitalism and Western imperialism, nominal political independence could not secure substantive freedom; it would only create the conditions for new forms of economic, geopolitical and neocolonial subordination. A precursor of those who sought to invent new forms through which to link political autonomy to international interdependence and universal emancipation.

Césaire as Toussaint

It should be clear that Césaire also regarded Toussaint as *his* precursor. Indeed, running through this text are a series of untimely projections and identifications. Throughout his career, Césaire treated Haiti as an indispensable reference point. Césaire was a central figure within the cohort of African and Caribbean students in Paris in the 1930s who founded the Negritude movement. In a later interview with the Haitian writer René Depestre, Césaire relates that his youthful appetite to learn more about 'the totality of the black world' led him to discover that in revolutionary

Saint-Domingue 'the first Negro epic of the New World was written by Haitians, people like Toussaint L'Ouverture, Henri Christophe, Jean-Jacques Dessalines'.[1] For the young Negritude poets, Haiti was emblematic of Black pride and power, consciousness and will, self-determination and historical significance.

Césaire spent the Second World War sequestered in Martinique where he taught secondary school, co-edited the journal *Tropiques*, and continued to write experimental poetry and anti-colonial essays. In 1941 he began work on a dramatic play about Toussaint as a revolutionary hero. Unsatisfied, he stripped the piece of all specific references. He thereby transformed a historical drama into a neo-classical tragedy entitled *And the Dogs Were Silent* (1946/1958). Its protagonist was a mythic Rebel who chose death over compromise. Neither version highlighted the flexible poetic politics that we see in the later *Toussaint Louverture* book.

In May 1944, while working on this play, Césaire made his first visit to Haiti. At the invitation of the French embassy, he spent seven months in residence where he delivered public lectures and taught classes at the university. His presence helped to galvanise a younger generation of radical Haitian students. In September, he presented a talk entitled 'Poetry and Knowledge' at the International Congress of Philosophy in Port-au-Prince. Later published in *Tropiques*, this critique of philosophical concepts from the standpoint of the poetic image remains one of Césaire's most generative reflections about the underlying relations between epistemology, aesthetics and politics.

This encounter with Haiti as an existing society deepened his understanding of the 'colonial problem'. Here was a sovereign state that remained subject to the dictates of European financial domination and U.S. hemispheric imperialism. Formal decolonisation had not guaranteed substantive freedom to ordinary Haitians. Césaire later recounted: 'Most of all in Haiti I saw what should not be done! A country that had conquered its liberty, that had conquered its independence, and which I saw was more miserable than Martinique, a French colony! … It was tragic, and that could very well happen to us Martinicans as well.'[2]

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[1] René Depestre, 'An Interview with Aimé Césaire', in *Discourse on Colonialism*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001, p. 90.

[2] Aimé Césaire and Françoise Vergés, *Négre je suis, négre je resterai*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2005, p. 56.

After the war, Césaire was recruited by the French Communist Party to enter official politics. In 1945 he was elected to be Mayor of Fort-de-France and as Deputy from Martinique to the French National Assembly. The anti-colonial poet was now a practical politician accountable to a diverse constituency. His first consequential political act was to co-sponsor the 1946 law that transformed France's Antillean colonies into formal *départements*, and its people into full citizens, of the French state. Such unqualified political assimilation was a longstanding demand of left and centrist Antilleans. Through 'departmentalisation', Césaire hoped to end colonialism without confining the Antilles to a nominal political independence.

For ten years, Césaire fought to compel the French state to apply the provisions of this law to the new overseas departments. During this period, he also intervened in national legislative struggles over the future of the French empire. Revolutionary struggles for national liberation were then unfolding in Indochina and Algeria. On another front, he sought to raise anti-colonial consciousness in and beyond the Antilles through poetry, plays and political essays. But by 1956, he concluded that departmentalisation had proven to be a new instrument of colonisation that reproduced racial division and overseas subordination. At the same time, Césaire resigned from the French Communist Party (PCF) on the grounds that Black Antilleans would have to lead their own struggle for colonial emancipation. In 1958 he founded the independent Peoples Party of Martinique and performed a strategic reversal. He who had been such a strong public advocate of departmentalisation now became one of its fiercest critics.

Césaire joined a group of African national legislators, led by his old friend Léopold Senghor from Senegal, who hoped to transform imperial France into a transcontinental democratic and socialist federation. Former colonies would be freely associated members who would benefit from the economic solidarity of the whole. Metropolitan France would be decentred as one among many equal federal partners. This vision of self-determination without state sovereignty, or non-national decolonisation, was based upon several convictions. Mere political separation, i.e., national independence, would exclude former colonies from the French power and prosperity to which they had an ongoing claim. Their labour, raw materials and markets had been its condition of possibility. The task was to democratise rather than disavow these inevitable relations of

social, economic and political interdependence that would continue to link metropolitan France to its overseas colonies. Moreover, they believed, former French colonies could not realise substantive decolonisation by becoming sovereign states; they would have to radically transform metropolitan France itself. Finally, they believed that decolonisation offered a historic opportunity and responsibility to remake the world order in ways that were both post-imperial and post-national. In other words, Césaire and his comrades sought to invent a new political form, and through it an alternative world order, that would abolish colonialism *and* transcend the national state.

However flawed, we may understand this federalist project as an experimental attempt to unravel and resolve the persisting colonial problem. The spectres of Toussaint's anti-colonial aspirations and Haiti's postcolonial failure clearly inflected Césaire's thinking. It was no accident that during this period of strategic reversal he immersed himself in the historical research that would lead to his *Toussaint Louverture* book.

Césaire and Toussaint were very different figures. As an anti-colonial radical committed to parliamentary solutions, Césaire was not the kind of revolutionary leader that Toussaint certainly was. We may understand Césaire's fascination with 'the first great anti-colonial leader' as a compensatory fantasy for his own deep political desires. Yet it can also be argued that Toussaint was his direct precursor. After all, Césaire's postwar interventions were also marked by political creativity, flexibility and a capacity for strategic reversals in relation to changing conditions. He too was a mediator who grasped the importance of forging alliances across apparent divisions of race, class, territory and ideology. Like Toussaint, he was a poetic strategist who worked to link pragmatic realism to utopian vision. He oriented his actions to non-negotiable principles (i.e. Antillean emancipation, and 'a true humanism … a humanism made to the measure of the world').[3] But he rejected ideological orthodoxy and political dogma. He did not mechanically apply a priori axioms or ready-made solutions to a given situation. On the contrary, he cultivated an experimental relation to politics.

Like Toussaint, he assessed existing conditions – in the colonial Caribbean, metropolitan France and worldwide – in order to identify the best possible arrangements through which Antilleans

[3] Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, p. 73.

might pursue meaningful self-determination. He too possessed a poetic (and dialectical) capacity to identify transformative potentialities that dwelled within existing relations of domination. He recognised that the imperial Fourth Republic had already created an institutional infrastructure that could be reworked, or elevated, into an emancipatory federal form. I suggest that we read Césaire's postwar vision of political autonomy and interdependent partnership with a reconceptualised France as an attempt to recall and rework Toussaint's untimely programme for a dominion that had not yet been invented. Like his precursor, Césaire was a virtuoso political artist who tried to offer France a 'chance to alter destiny' by putting 'an end to the colonial misadventure, on good terms' (208).

Let me mention one more way that Toussaint was Césaire's precursor. They each proposed visionary solutions to the colonial problem that were not immediately legible to either their contemporaries or immediate descendants. History still has not fully forgiven either of them for not declaring political independence. Both risked their short-term reputations for a potentiality that could only be realised in a future that each attempted to anticipate. Césaire decided that rather than pursue national independence for the Antilles, he would try to transform imperial France into a post-national federation. Can we not read this as an echo of Toussaint's act of political self-sacrifice that might only be legible to future generations?

Césaire as Precursor

This deceptively straightforward text stages a dialogue between Césaire and Toussaint that illuminates the deeper colonial problem they both confronted. It allows current readers to think critically about each figure and era from the standpoint of the other. *Toussaint Louverture* thus enacts an untimely relation between past and present that confounds conventional notions of linear temporality, successive chronology and ontological divisions between tenses.

Here, as in so much of his postwar poetry, criticism and political activity, Césaire is attentive to the vital presence of supposedly past phenomena whose traces persist in an untimely present. He thus recognises the persistence of the colonial problem in his own time. He also addresses the Precursor as a contemporary whose spirit he conjures. He seeks to reactivate for a different era aspects of

Toussaint's political artistry, orientation and unrealised vision. This text thus reminds us that the movement from an alienated present to a liberated future may be usefully routed through a not-yet realised past.

In this spirit, I propose that we engage Césaire the way he engaged Toussaint – as a flawed but visionary precursor whose efforts to grasp and resolve the colonial problem may continue to inform our own parallel efforts today. *Toussaint Louverture* reminds us that the founding colonial problem, woven into the very fabric of modernity, continued to haunt Césaire's postwar present. Neither colonial emancipation nor political universality could be realised through a bourgeois social formation situated within a capitalist and imperialist world system. Under such conditions, mere political independence for weak and poor colonies could not create conditions for meaningful self-determination. Nominal independence would render them especially vulnerable to the predations of the international division of labour, sovereign debt, uneven development, and neocolonialism. In response, Césaire, like Toussaint, recognised that substantive freedom (for colonised peoples) would require novel political forms through which political autonomy could be linked to international interdependence in the service of a more just world order. He also recognised that real decolonisation would have to transform metropolitan societies along with the interstate system and global economic order in which they were embedded. Given the existence of a single, if unevenly integrated, world system, meaningful freedom could not be realised in a single country. Is this not still the case today? Now as then, relative freedom in some places of the world is premised on dehumanising servitude in others.

The colonial problem that Toussaint and Césaire confronted has yet to be resolved. But its current iteration is not the same as that in the late eighteenth or mid-twentieth centuries. Césaire does not offer us a ready-made recipe or specific blueprint for resolving it. But a Césairean approach to politics, refracted through the spirit of Toussaint, offers us a useful orientation for confronting it. Césaire's legacy reminds us that there can be no single, once and for all solution to such a problem. It can only be engaged situationally and provisionally. To learn from Césaire as precursor is to refuse ideological orthodoxy and resist fetishising inherited forms (including those from Marxist and anti-colonial traditions). An experimental approach to politics does not presuppose necessary

institutional arrangements for realising a given objective. It relates pragmatic constraints to utopian vision in the pursuit of ultimate aims.

Between his 1944 visit to Haiti and his 1960 history of the Saint-Domingue Revolution, Césaire elaborated a distinctive epistemological and political orientation. He attempted to chart a course that transcended the bourgeois opposition between abstract universalism and concrete particularism, assimilation and nativism, imperial internationalism and statist nationalism. He concludes *Toussaint Louverture* by pointing out that the precursor 'was too attached to deducing the existence of his people from the abstract universal rather than seizing his people's singularity in order to raise it to universality' (256). We may read Césaire as attempting to correct this error; he seized Antillean singularity in order to raise it to universality. Such concrete universalism is the basis of his vision of a *true humanism made to the measure of the world*.

Césaire hoped to help construct a world that would transcend the alienating divisions between subject and object, humans and nature, poetry and science, reality and surreality, universality and singularity. Traditional African and New World Black societies, he insisted, along with modernist philosophy and poetry, had a distinct contribution to make to such an effort. This work would require a canny (dialectical) attention to the actually existing world combined with a poetic politics that refuses the impoverished choices offered by political realism.

Such insights from the strategic poet and poetic strategist may usefully orient any attempt today to grapple with the latest iteration of the colonial problem, to invent new paths towards Black freedom, global justice and human emancipation. All people devoted to these aims may learn from the way Césaire turned to Toussaint, in order to conjure and mobilise Césaire himself as precursor.

Translator's Note

It is difficult to translate the racialised and racist terms Césaire uses – in part because it is a matter of terms that were current in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which now have different meanings, in part because terms that might readily be seen as comparable have had different historic meanings in French and English, and in part because of the way Césaire makes use of them for his analysis, and more widely in his own anti-racist project. This is especially the case with '*nègre*', which lacks the political resonance of defiance if translated as 'black', as Matthew B. Smith notes in his translator's introduction to *Resolutely Black*, and this would be misleading given the central place of 'negritude' in Césaire's work. (See Aimé Césaire, *Resolutely Black: Conversations with Françoise Vergès*, Cambridge: Polity, 2020.) Where Césaire uses '*nègre*' explicitly I have left it in the original, translating only '*noir*' as 'black'. There are similar problems with '*mulâtre*', which could reasonably be replaced by 'mixed-race person', but which then lacks the connotations of self-consciousness as a class that Césaire is analysing as central to the Haitian Revolution. '*Mulâtre*' may also be translated as 'free person of colour', terms Césaire sometimes uses. I have mostly left '*mulâtres*' in the original, only occasionally using 'free persons of colour' where it seemed especially significant to note that these were people who had gained their freedom from slavery as individuals and as a group. I have translated '*blanc*' as 'white' throughout, except where it is a matter

of '*grands blancs*' and '*petit blancs*', which refer to specific configurations of race and class.

The issue with translating gendered terms is somewhat different. I have sometimes translated '*hommes de couleur*' as the gender-neutral 'people of colour', rather than 'men of colour', when it is Césaire who is writing and it seems clear that he intends the universal. For the most part, however, and especially in speeches from the eighteenth century, it is clear that the universalism is false, and it is men not women the speaker has in mind.

Similarly, I have occasionally translated '*esclaves*' as 'enslaved people' when it is Césaire who is writing about the conditions of the people in question. Mostly I have translated it as 'slaves', with all that is implied in that word in the eighteenth century.

Introduction: An Exemplary Colony

Imagine the maw of a great gulf stretching to the west, with an oversized prognathous jaw jutting out to the south. This is the French part of Saint-Domingue, lying back-to-back with the Spanish part. Today it is the Republic of Haiti: a thin ribbon of high lands that encircle the never-ending blue of the Caribbean Sea on three sides.

A dozen leagues to the north, eleven to the south, thirty to the centre – nowhere in this land is more than a hundred kilometres from the sea. A thousand square leagues in total, the three provinces of the country are criss-crossed by mountain ranges, the western end of the long Cibao mountain range.

In 1797 Saint-Domingue's most respected historian praised it as: 'this colony so rightly envied by all the powers, the pride of France in the New World, and whose prosperity, created to impress, was produced in less than one and a half centuries'.[1]

Though Moreau de Saint-Méry's statements may seem exaggerated, they should be taken literally: 'With its seven hundred and ninety three sugar refineries, its three thousand one hundred and fifty indigo plantations, its seven hundred and eighty-nine cotton plantations, its three thousand one hundred and seventeen

[1] Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description de la Partie française de l'île Saint-Domingue*. New edition by Blanch Maurel and Etienne Taillemite, Paris: Librairie Larose, 1958.

coffee plantations, its one hundred and eighty-two tafia distilleries, its five hundred cocoa plantations, its tanneries, its brickworks, its lime kilns – Saint-Domingue enjoyed a prosperity the like of which had never been seen before, making it the ideal, the archetype of the exploitative colony.'

Such was the intrinsic wealth of Saint-Domingue.

But, as Moreau de Saint-Méry also points out, prosperity was not its only significant feature: 'Saint-Domingue is the most important of all the French possessions in the New World because of the wealth it produces for the metropole, and for its influence on metropolitan agriculture and commerce. The French part of Saint-Domingue should, therefore, demand the attention of anyone who studies government, who researches in detail the different parts of a great state to find the best type of administration and to show the real foundations of public prosperity.'

The significance of Saint-Domingue's status and influence is far greater than that of its wealth. It is relative rather than intrinsic, and difficult to imagine in our times.

To better understand it, we might say that Saint-Domingue is to the French economy in the eighteenth century what the whole of Black Africa is to the French economy in the twentieth century.

Given that Louis XV preferred Martinique over Canada in the Treaty of Paris, what can we say of Saint-Domingue? It was an island worth an empire in the eighteenth century.

The Abbé Maury took pleasure in recalling its extraordinary importance to the Constituent Assembly of 13 May 1791, with no fear of contradiction:

'Yes gentlemen, you visionaries, if you lost the two hundred million and more you take from your colonies annually; if you were obliged to search for other resources to compensate for your disastrous commercial treaties, to pay, each year, almost eight million in life annuities you owe to foreigners because of loans you have taken out, if your merchants in Le Havre, Nantes, Bordeaux, Marseille, suddenly lost the four hundred million that colonists owe French business and declared bankruptcy; if you no longer had exclusive trade with your colonies to feed your industries, preserve your navy, maintain your agriculture, pay your exchanges, subsidise your needs for luxury, and maintain advantageous trade balances with Europe and Asia, there is no doubt that your kingdom would be lost forever.'

Truly, who was it that provided France with sugar? Essentially, Saint-Domingue. Who provided France with cotton for spinning?

Saint-Domingue. What enabled the French trade surplus? Only sugar and cotton from Saint-Domingue, which France re-exported to the rest of Europe to its great advantage (when the United States was just sending out its very first bales of cotton and sugar beet did not yet exist).[2]

France became an industrial powerhouse at the end of the eighteenth century – that is well known. When capital, in the modern sense of the word, was established, when great concentrations of finance first appeared.

What is often forgotten is the role of the colonies. It is amongst shipowners that the first great concentrations of capital are found, and the first great modern industrialists are recruited from the same class, in Nantes, Rouen, Bordeaux. And not by chance if Henri Sée is to be believed: 'Here is a phenomenon that is generalisable. Commerce precedes industry … And commercial capitalism precedes, or rather, engenders industrial capitalism.'

But we can only understand commercial capitalism itself if we see how it is tied to colonial commerce and especially to the commerce of Saint-Domingue. Therefore, to study Saint-Domingue is to study one of the origins of existing Western civilisation.

This should be understood in more than one sense.

Saint-Domingue is the first country in modern times to have posed in reality and theoretically – in all its social, economic, racial complexity – what the twentieth century is still struggling to resolve: the colonial problem.

The first country in which this problem took shape.

The first country in which it came apart.

Surely that makes spending some time on it worthwhile.

The events related here are well known.

But they are usually told through anecdote, with an emphasis on the picturesque.

My concern is very different.

I would not say that facts mean nothing.

Without them there would be no history. What is most important in history, however, is not facts but the relations between them, the principle that governs them, the dialectic that produces them. This is what I have tried to grasp.

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[2] In 1789, out of 218 million *livres* of colonial imports into France, 71 million were consumed in France and the rest, 147 million, were re-exported.

I have tried to analyse the characteristics of a colonial type of revolution. I say 'colonial' because it would be a terrible mistake to think of the revolution of Saint-Domingue purely and simply as a chapter of the French Revolution. On the contrary, studying events in Saint-Domingue should be enough to make one aware of the absurdity of confusing revolution in a dependent country and revolution in an independent country.

Let us be clear: there is no 'French Revolution' in the French colonies. In each French colony there is a specific revolution, engendered by the French Revolution, connected to it, but each unfolding according to its own laws and with its own objectives.

One point in common nevertheless: between the two phenomena, a rhythm. In France, Constitutionalists, Girondins, Jacobins – as soon as each of these parties had fulfilled its role and pushed the Revolution to the point where, out of breath, it had to stop, the baton was taken up by the boldest fellow traveller, which, eliminating its rival, in turn became 'a moment', and was itself then overtaken.

We find the same sequence in the revolution of Saint-Domingue: whites, then *mulâtres*, then *nègres* – each pushes the next and embodies different, and more and more intense, 'moments' of the anti-colonial revolution.

But then we are faced with the question, why did the whites fail at the beginning, why did the free people of colour fail in the end, and why did the most impoverished social group, the *nègres*, the group that represented 'generalised grievances', succeed?

What follows is my reply to this question.

BOOK ONE

The Fronde of the *Grands Blancs*[1]

[1] Translator's note: 'la fronde' was a series of seditions against the monarchy in seventeenth-century France. '*Grands Blancs*' may literally be translated as 'Big Whites' – which is appropriate insofar as it refers to wealthy plantation owners (in comparison with '*petits blancs*' who were small farmers, employees, artisans, soldiers and sailors).