

# ***Confronting Black Jacobins: The United States, the Haitian Revolution, and the Origins of the Dominican Republic.***

Gerald Horne

*Confronting Black Jacobins: The United States, the Haitian Revolution, and the Origins of the Dominican Republic*

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The “Black Jacobins” referenced in this book’s title will be familiar to readers of eighteenth-century Atlantic and Caribbean history, in addition to those who study slavery, antislavery, and abolition, and of course to students of the Haitian Revolution. C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, first published in 1938 and then reissued in 1963, rang (indeed, rings) with an urgent and eloquent Pan-African politics, often openly tied to contemporary issues. The earlier edition closed by drawing connections between Haitian independence and James’s hopes for an impending anticolonial revolution across Africa. Twenty-five years later, in a new appendix, he connected the Haitian Revolution to the then recent revolution in Cuba, powerfully arguing for the continuity of the struggles taking place around the Caribbean over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book itself made the Haitian Revolution part of wider global and historic movements; a chapter entitled “The San Domingo Masses Begin” was followed by one called “And the Paris Masses Complete.” Haitian independence was described as a function of an attempt by the French “bourgeoisie” to reimpose slavery in the colony; James’s protagonist, L’Ouverture, was left behind because he failed to understand the fundamental forces undergirding the movement he had led. In addition to being a telling episode for his modern concerns, James’s Haiti was unmistakably central to world developments. Its revolution deserved equal time as a topic of study with its contemporaries in the U.S. and France.

The nod Gerald Horne offers in this direction is one of his book’s organizing principles. The events in French Saint Domingue after 1791 were witnessed and discussed widely around the Atlantic littoral. As suggested by his subtitle, Horne focuses principally on that discussion in the U.S., but because he is interested in showing the complex imperial imperatives in play, he also turns to events in Britain, France, and Spain. While specialists will not be surprised by his approach, Horne adds to the burgeoning literature treating the Age of Revolutions and its aftermath. His chief contributions involve issues of scope and scale. Horne’s “Age” lasts into the 1870s and therefore incorporates some changes in hemispheric slavery (British and French abolition are referenced; the American Civil War provides an important backdrop). More significantly, while he centers on Saint Domingue/Haiti, Horne widens his lens to include developments in Santo Domingo/the Dominican Republic as well. This doubly broadened purview allows Horne to bring some important continuities into focus. Whether as a place in which slavery was quaking, where markets provided opportunities, where European interests might constitute a threat, where the nation might expand its reach, or where racial issues were on display, American interest in Hispaniola was self-interest. Even as regimes rose and fell and the island unified and split, white and black Americans were consistent in their respective understanding of the region: whites saw horror, if also a

racially organized area that might be useful in extending the nation's power and addressing its racial issues; blacks, meanwhile, saw a source of inspiration, and even opportunity.

For Horne, the latter is the case because people of African descent in America were Black Jacobins as well. While the term is never defined and the theoretical underpinnings that replace James's Marxist analysis are not elaborated, Horne's discussion suggests that it applies to all people of color who acted against slavery. This sort of imprecision allows Horne to make sweeping connections, but it also calls some of his conclusions into question. The first four chapters are significantly hampered by this tendency. Moving from the initial rebellions in Saint Domingue in 1791 up through the unification of Haiti under Jean-Pierre Boyer in 1820, Horne consistently elides the complexities of the period. The "Revolution" he describes is "Haitian" from 1791 on, is singular in its intent (toward abolition), is global (and expansionist), and is set in meaning. Students of Dominguan/Haitian history will note his lack of engagement in debates over the varied and various aims of the initial insurgents, their divergences with those of different sets of leaders, the impact of the British invasion and the chaotic events that produced the policy of emancipation, the conservative polity constructed by L'Ouverture, the flip-flops conducted by Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and the differences between the southern republic and the northern kingdom. Without knowing more about how these developments constitute a consistent and coherent movement, the nature of the American "confrontation" (the phrase that introduces each of these chapters) being described is unclear. As a result, paradoxically, Horne seems to have accepted majoritarian antebellum American reactions to Haiti as fundamentally accurate, albeit with a twist: whereas whites confronting Haiti typically described savagery and horror, Horne sees transcendence and principled abolitionism. This, plus a tendency to generalize (the U.S. is often "Dixie" or "the enslaving republic," other actors are "London," "Paris," etc.), undercuts his points in this portion of the book.

The following chapters are more successful, perhaps because those American reactions were increasingly set in stone. Moving decade by decade, Horne shows how tumult in the Caribbean, British abolition, various episodes of slave violence, and the increasing sectional tensions were discussed in the U.S. using the Haitian idiom. Especially convincing are the portions touching on antebellum Southern hemispheric plans. In adding Southern Caribbean dreams to ideas about Texan annexation, the Mexican War, and filibustering expeditions, Horne makes good evidence for scholars who describe the "Slave Power" and its influence on American politics. He also highlights Haiti's appeal to African Americans, and emphasizes the success of the various emigration schemes in the period more than other scholars have done. While the American Civil War, and the abolition it produced, is made out to be a foregone conclusion (indeed, Horne sees that result as inexorably set in motion in 1791), these chapters nicely link an emergent American imperialism to the slavery issue. As a result, the final chapters render a convincing picture in which postwar policymakers in the U.S., whatever their political stripe, can only see Hispaniola through a racially defined lens. By this time, Horne argues, African Americans had taken a poison pill of sorts: their (limited) rights as citizens had constrained their connections to the wider diasporic community. This is a development that Horne expressly hopes his book will undo.