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A Singular Enlightenment: C. L. R. James, Anti-Colonialism, and Transatlantic Political Thought

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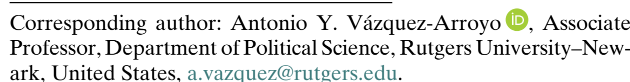
This article formulates an original account of the Enlightenment through an interpretation of C. L. R. James's The Black Jacobins*, a landmark work of transatlantic anti-colonial thought. It defends a dialectical account of the Enlightenment as a singular transatlantic historical process whose content and critical import changes across space and time. In* The Black Jacobins*, James shows the Enlightenment's revolutionary and emancipatory political legacy by staging the dialectic of the Enlightenment in a colonial situation defined by a slave-plantation economy. James illustrates the Enlightenment's political legacy as a "concrete universal" that has particular and singular aspects, each with its own unique contours. In doing so, the article considers other themes at the center of both historical and contemporary political theory such as how to best conceptualize colonialism; the traveling and misplacement of Enlightened ideas; and the critical importance of the dialectical legacy and critical theory in these efforts.*

Contestation over the meaning and legacies of the Enlightenment has been persistent ever since its initial emergence in eighteenth-century Europe. Not only has the Enlightenment been subjected to internal criticism, as the space of controversy and contestation that define it as a historical category, but has been derided by critics who rejected it altogether (Lilti 2019; 2023).[1] The last group of critics can be arrayed in terms of three distinct historical moments: the first moment consisted of rejecting the Enlightenment by way of a robust defense of crown and altar, tradition and religion, and was almost coeval with it, but ran its course throughout the nineteenth century; the second moment, roughly from 1945 to 1970s, denounced reason's complicity with domination in the forms of the instrumental reason, scientific absolutism, and the reification of technology after the catastrophic carnage and destruction of two world wars; and the third moment, which fed off the second, rejected the Enlightenment for its so-called Eurocentrism and the pernicious effects it has had on the non-European world.[2]

As early as 1944, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (2002) formulated a famous version of the second type of critique by denouncing Reason's monotheistic ambitions, Enlightenment as "monotheism's secularized form," while foreshadowing an aspect of the third by calling imperialism "reason in its most terrible form" (81, 70). But unlike the founding text of Frankfurt School critical theory, recent critiques of the Enlightenment tend to reject the critical and political import of enlightened legacies *tout court*, by either focusing on their European origins or by denying that there is any such thing as "The Enlightenment" and pitting "many enlightenments" in one or another country against any unified construction.

Yet as Antoine Lilti (2009) has observed, there is a sort of backhanded symmetry in these efforts: the scholarly sophistication and localization of a plurality of enlightenments is at odds with invocations of "The Enlightenment" in public discourse, where it overwhelmingly connotes univocity (171–2). Politically, there is little divergence between the two positions today. Pluralists and monists conceive the Enlightenment mostly in terms of the liberal rhetoric of the North Atlantic world and argue for its legacy in terms of the preservation or further consolidation of militant atheism, toleration, cosmopolitanism, and human rights. Both formulations sport the tacit conflation of liberal-democratic capitalism with "the Enlightenment" that disavows other legacies of the Enlightenment—say, socialism and communism—as legitimate heirs.[3] Intellectually, however, matters are different. If the pluralization of the Enlightenment is attractive to theoretical and political sensibilities at home with de-differentiation and nominalist multiplicity, it has nevertheless elicited strong reactions among more traditional scholars. So, the central analytical and political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[1] This is the difference between, say, critics like Olympes de Gouges, a defender of sexual equality, and a catholic-monarchical figure like Joseph de Maistre. See, respectively, Scott (1996, 19–56), on the latter see Galli (1981, 7–56; 2009, 95–134).

[2] A lucid discussion of this historiography is found in Lilti (2019). Lilti defends the internal plurality of the Enlightenment without reverting to pluralizing it; even so, he does not work out the dialectical questions involved.

[3] Compare Wood (2012, 289–317).

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questions become: is the Enlightenment one or many? Could one theorize the continuities and discontinuities in its different usages and realizations across the Atlantic world, while still speaking of The Enlightenment as a unified historical category with different political legacies?

In this article, I address these questions by interpreting a classic of anti-colonial and transatlantic thought, CLR James's *The Black Jacobins*, to argue for a view of the Enlightenment's political legacy as a "concrete universal" that has particular and singular aspects, each with its own unique contours. These are most clearly visible, not in the "original" formulation of the concept, but rather in the way it unfolds and acquires determinations in subsequent usages or "imperfect" implementations (Schwarz 1992). In other words, in this essay, the Enlightenment is conceived through a materialist and dialectical account of the history of ideas that does not privilege the idea's moment of emergence.[4] *The Black Jacobins* thus foreshadows the idea of a dialectical account of the Enlightenment and raises questions about the Enlightenment as a singular process that is "a concrete universal" that is at once universal *and* particular with important political, intellectual, and historical consequences.

The argument is organized into five different sections. In the first, titled "Capsizals," I illustrate the problems with a monist, "transnational," approach to the Enlightenment that privileges a diffusionist logic of "applications" in reference to Jonathan Israel's monumental account and how it presents Black Emancipation. Israel's monist account capsizes into a dualism that weakens his account of the Enlightenment in ways that denies what is particular to Black Emancipation in relation to Enlightenment thought. This sets the stage for the second section, titled "Conscriptions," a critical engagement with David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004). Scott rewrites James's problematic in terms of "colonial Enlightenment," which not only exemplifies the pluralization of the Enlightenment, but it has largely set the parameters for a postcolonial reading of *The Black Jacobins* that misrepresents important aspects of James' arguments. The next two sections, respectively titled "An Enlightened History" and "Imperatives," show that as a classic of anti-colonial thought *The Black Jacobins* offers an account of the Enlightenment and its legacies for anti-colonial politics: it avows and enacts a form of political literacy adept to colonial and postcolonial predicaments, which bears important lessons about the actual historicity of the Enlightenment. Most importantly, it challenges commonplaces about colonialism, race and class, capitalism, and imperialism that persist to this day. The scholarly and theoretical implications of the argument come together in the final section, "Concrete Universal," as do its contribution to an understanding of the transatlantic aspect of modern political theory.

CAPSIZALS

The most striking reaction to the pluralization of the Enlightenment is found in Jonathan Israel's effort to reclaim the univocity of the Enlightenment. In a series of weighty tomes, Israel has unearthed a "Radical Enlightenment," traceable to Spinoza's philosophical monism. It consists of nothing less than "the system of ideas that has principally shaped the Western World's most basic social and cultural values in the post-Christian age;" that is, everything that is worth protecting today from the perspective of a moderate, centrist, republican order continually under siege by assaults from both the right and the left (2010, xi). Once thus conceived, Israel continues, the impulse to diversify it becomes understandable, but ultimately misguided: "basing one's view of the Enlightenment on a 'diverse family' typology, though understandable as a reaction to … historiographical problems, weakens our sense of the Enlightenment's unity, universal pretensions, and cosmopolitan flavor, as well as near global reach, *and* our sense of its continuing relevance to politics and society today" (2019, 1).

What is the political content of this unity as Israel conceives of it? Israel (2011) formulates an answer along these lines:

> …the Enlightenment is best characterized … as the quest for human amelioration occurring between 1680s and 1800… leading to revolutions in ideas and attitudes first, and actual political revolutions second, … both sets of revolutions seeking universal recipes for all mankind and, ultimately, in its radical manifestation, laying the

[4] By way of clarifying the stakes of the argument, it is worthwhile to briefly define at the outset what the invocation of dialectics amounts to in the context of this article. Succinctly put, in contrast to positivist or other analytical forms of reasoning, dialectical thinking is driven by contradictions. In conversation, Hegel is said to have once defined "the nature of dialectics" primarily in terms of contradictions: "'In essence,' said Hegel, 'it is nothing more than the formalized, systematically trained spirit of contradiction that we all have inside us—a gift that proves its worth in distinguishing between truth and falsehood'" (Eckermann 2022, 560). Dialectical contradiction is best conceived as "determinate negation." A determinate negation, simply put, consists of the negation of an affirmation that at once separates and unifies the two moments initially opposed in relation to a third. In Hegel's philosophy, for instance, different versions of determination (*Bestimmen*) are at work and concepts become precise and determinate by way of contrast with objects and other concepts (2010, 28–43, 60–82, 508ff.; and *Encyclopedia*, §§1–12, 209, 246, 439). Hegel was fond of earthly examples (i.e., oak, salt, bud), so a rather prosaic example to clarify this abstract thought may not be out of place here. Think of apples, oranges, and strawberries. All fruits. All opposed. Each is different from one another in color, shape, and taste. Each thus negates the other. Yet despite these differences, all are related to each other insofar as each makes the concept fruit actual. Each is no less of a fruit, even when they negate each other. The differences are irreducible. But this is the crucial aspect of dialectical reasoning: without these negations, the concept of fruit would not exist; and even when each is grasped as part of the concept "fruit," each retains what is particular to it. Each, in their difference, enriches the concept that unites them without surrendering their difference. The Enlightenment, for instance, is one concept in which each formulation of it is irreducible to the other; and yet these are unified within it. Political ideas clearly lack the concreteness of physical objects, like fruit; but that hardly amounts to less theoretical definition and determination (Cruz Vergara 2022).

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> foundations for modern basic human rights and freedoms and representative democracy (7).[5]

The Enlightenment is thus "characterized less by plurality than by duality," and, based on that insight Israel frames the Enlightenment in terms of "a set of rifts between closely interactive competitors"—in his reckoning, the moderate and radical streams of Enlightenment—which could, nonetheless, be "readily classifiable as a single narrative" (2011, 6). Israel's massive reconstruction of the Enlightenment in terms of this duality rests on a larger periodization and level of detail hitherto unsurpassed. Even when his core narrative is overwhelmingly intra-European, his comparative transnational approach commendably looks beyond Western Europe. But even as the Enlightenment's transatlantic movements are acknowledged, Israel (2019) depicts the transatlantic spaces as merely "a battleground for rival moderate and radical Enlightenment factions" in which a conflict born and fully fleshed out in Europe is simply reenacted (2).

Yet this representation of Enlightenment's transatlantic moment illustrates the pitfalls of a singular narrative in which "the unfolding Enlightenment" becomes a unifying thread, but that reduces particular instances (in all their difference, as alluded earlier on) to an example of a universal that is understood to be born in Europe with all its conceptual determinations already in place. This is not to say that Israel does not allow for innovation. But this is cast as mostly epiphenomenal: "Certainly the great Enlightenment projects of the 1800–30 period were no mere emulation of past efforts. *Some new elements appeared.* But these are all best viewed as *applications* of typically pre-1800 principles in new contexts, as with Bolivar's revolution in South America, or *extensions* of eighteenth-century concerns…" (2019, 23).[6] The language of "applications" and "extensions" is very revealing. Through these terms, Israel further describes the ways in which the Enlightenment traveled across the Atlantic, and beyond, as already formed and reduces the "new elements" to mere applications and extensions, rather than reworkings or appropriations, radicalizations, or dialectical misplacements of the Enlightenment, that at once enrich and complicate its history.

The political and critical limits of this unitarian narrative of the Enlightenment become more graspable in Israel's treatment of the Haitian Revolution, which reduces Black emancipation and the Haitian Revolution to a *particularity* of an already fully-formed universal Enlightenment.[7] Israel is unequivocal in his defense of Black emancipation. Even so, the grip of Eurocentrism on the narrative remains in place, as does the truncation of the Haitian Revolution (Israel 2017, 361–84; 2019, 729–68). Absent any reference to Laurent Dubois's work on revolution and emancipation in the Caribbean during the Age of Revolutions—*A Colony of Citizens* and *Avengers of the New World*—or foundational works like Michèle Duchet's *Anthropologie et historie au siècle des Lumières* and James's *The Black Jacobins* in his otherwise voluminous bibliography, Israel's account of "Black Emancipation" proceeds to cut Toussaint Louverture down to size, but lionizes the French abolitionist Léger-Félicité Sonthonax. Israel (2015) claims that the "Caribbean Revolution proper began" not with the rise of the Saint Domingue masses, but "with the dispatch to Saint Domingue of 6,000 troops (bringing 30,000 rifles), to assert the now fully republican Assembly's authority" (405) under Sonthonax's command. Not only the "essential impulse behind revolutionary subversion in the Caribbean area in the 1790s, including Haiti," is presented as emanating "from revolutionary France itself"; but that "the principal agent of black emancipation in the Caribbean was unquestionably the philosophic tendency within the revolution, that is, the Radical Enlightenment" (2015, 419).[8]

In sum, in Israel's account, an already formed Enlightenment traveled across the Atlantic and beyond. Subsequent actualizations of the Enlightenment are thereby reduced to the addition of "some new elements," mere applications and extensions, rather than the reworking or appropriation of its tenets in concrete material conditions, radicalization, or dialectical misplacement of the Enlightenment that at once enrich and complicate it (Schwarz 1992; Vázquez-Arroyo 2018).

To gain fuller measure of the stakes involved in the non-dialectical oppositions of one and many enlightenments, and how under scrutiny it capsizes, it is helpful to contrast Israel's construction to a figure closer to the world of political theory: J. G. A. Pocock, who presents a more complicated and far more interesting case than the common-place pluralization of the Enlightenment and its legacies. In the context of his study of Edward Gibbon, Pocock has detected several enlightenments out of which Gibbon weaved his own powerful formulation of "enlightenment history."[9] Not a champion of de-differentiation, for Pocock (2008) the question at stake is not about multiple phenomena or national variations of a single phenomenon or theme. Rather, "'Enlightenment' is a word or signifier;" and while there is no such thing as a "single or unifiable phenomenon describable as 'the Enlightenment,'" one can think of a variety of interconnected statements from the rather discontinuous seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to which the term can be "usefully applied" (83). By casting it as a signifier Pocock (2008) dismisses talk of "The Enlightenment" as a linguistic reification,

[5] See also Israel (2019, 898–922).

[6] Emphases added. See also Israel (2017, 363–5, 863ff.).

[7] This is a good example of the difference between particularity of an already-formed object or concept, which is reducible to it, as opposed to a unique instantiation that is irreducible or indissoluble (*Unauflöslichkeit*) in any universal, but that further constructs it. Compare Adorno (1997, 174–5). See also Footnote 4, above.

[8] For an interpretation of the Haitian Revolution in terms of "Radical Enlightenment," see Nesbitt (2008, 9–40). Compare Nesbitt (2013, 29–65, 159–72).

[9] See Pocock (2008; 1999–2015, 1:1–71, 2:1–96ff., 369ff.).

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rather than a concept. For Pocock, then, "it is the definite article rather than the noun which is to be avoided" (83). With this shift, Pocock writes of "an Enlightenment" rather than "the Enlightenment."

But this is not to deny continuities and overlapping tenets and concerns. Instead, what these otherwise discontinuous statements have in common is best recast as something like a set of family resemblances. Pocock (2008) proposes the following:

> …There is a superstitious fear that to reduce "Enlightenment" to a number of processes going on in a number of contexts is to imprison "it" within "national" contexts, which are presupposed to be in various ways undesirable. This is fallacious; of the various "contexts" in which "Enlightenments" are seen as going on, some were "national"—as there is no reason why they should not have been—and others were not. In this essay, I shall present "an" Enlightenment which occurred in "a" particular context—one that was multinational but specific and entailed the pursuit of certain intellectual objectives to the exclusion of others in a manner which distinguished it from other "contexts" and other "Enlightenments," but does not exclude them from inclusion in further narrative in which it would be possible to generalize about "Enlightenment," without reducing "it" to a unifiable process (84).

Yet five pages later the stridency of these passages softens. When engaging with the actual details of Enlightenment historians, he concedes that "there remains the possibility" that all "'Enlightenments' display similarities and may perhaps have had shared origins and effects" (91).

The appearance of these tics in an otherwise supremely confident narrative tells the tale. For all the initial talk of signifiers with emphasis on pluralization and indefiniteness, Pocock ultimately reverts to ideas of Enlightenment as a period of European history, even if one with countercurrents and national variations within it, which are tacitly reduced to the diffusion of ideas emanating from a core. But, to Pocock's credit, there is no reification of *the* Enlightenment. For the idealization and reduction of the Enlightenment to a diffusionist episteme one needs to return to Israel's reconstruction of the Enlightenment in terms of moderate and radical wings fighting for ascendance across the span of two centuries and several continents. Responding to Israel's work, Pocock (2016) has rightly characterized it as driven by a tendency to homogenize different narratives of Enlightenment as opposed to "particularize" them (67).[10] In contrast, for Israel, it makes little sense to pluralize the Enlightenment according to nationalities as Pocock does. Israel (2011) insists that "the rifts" of the Enlightenment "were characterized less by plurality than by duality;" and criticizes Pocock for being "too vague and diffuse," and rather frames the Enlightenment in terms of "a set of rifts between closely interactive competitors"—in his reckoning, the moderate and radical streams of Enlightenment—which could be "readily classifiable as a single narrative" (Israel 2016, 6). So, for Israel, two ultimately become one; while for Pocock, one becomes many, only to capsize back to one.

These capsizals symptomatize the quick sands nominalist, positivist and analytical approaches to the Enlightenment find themselves in when trying to thematize the unity of identity and difference; a unity that remains elusive for the thought forms in which their respective accounts of the Enlightenment are embedded. But it is one thing to criticize the contradictions and tendentiousness of strategies of pluralization and univocity, as these ultimately consist of reducing *particular* historical moments to *particularities* of an idealized version of universality. Another thing is to grasp the grain of truth in these gestures. Although completely subordinated in these accounts, the truth-content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) in them, as Adorno would put it, consists of how the Enlightenment was never homogenous, and paths to achieve it were never univocal. These paths to Enlightenment are always alternate, each singular and thus unique, but also mediated by particular (national) social formations. Any transnational account of the Enlightenment, moreover, needs to both explain and comprehend how it first emerged and how it was transformed and remade in a transatlantic space that is no mere stage in which it simply became applied, but a space that is constitutive of its unfolding in both its regressions and radicalizations. This dialectical unfolding is precisely what in *The Black Jacobins* James so powerfully presented.

CONSCRIPTIONS

Before we can have an adequate understanding of the centrality of these concerns in *The Black Jacobins*, it is important to confront an interpretation of James that brushes them aside, and instead posits its own version of pluralization in the name of "colonial enlightenment:" David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity*. This book stages a postcolonial reading of this anti-colonial classic that symptomizes a historical moment in which colonialism became overwhelmingly theorized from the perspective of what is known as Postcolonial Theory. Indeed, Scott's intervention reflected a terminology and politics emblematic of a particular streak within postcolonial studies, and the concomitant rewriting of anti-colonial thinkers into post-colonial sages. Emergent in the mid-1980s, right in the midst of the first wave of North Atlantic neoliberalism, this eclectic and diverse theoretical force field gained ascendance in the 90s, just as neoliberalism was consolidated.[11] Out of it emerged important correctives

[10] For the best critique yet of Israel's "Radical Enlightenment" thesis, see Lilti (2009; 2019, 223–57). For Israel's response, see Israel (2019, 1–33, 923ff.).

[11] Often conflated with Subaltern Studies, the history of postcolonial theory is independent of it. It was brought to life within literary studies in the 80s and 90s. What were its main historical determinants? Intellectually, the publication of Said's *Orientalism*, the 1984

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to traditional narratives of the Enlightenment, but also a set of basic tenets that in due course became commonplaces. One such platitude, in fact, consisted of homogenizing and rather unhistorical critiques of Eurocentrism, modernity, universalism, and Enlightenment (Lilti 2019, 41–86). This is the discursive field in which Scott intervened. *Conscripts of Modernity* not only exhibits all these tenets, but it both represents and completes a longer-term tendency within academic postcolonial studies to repudiate social revolution as something proto-totalitarian, to cut down seminal anticolonial thinkers into liberal postcolonial elders, to repudiate collective self-determination and dislodge political critique in the name of ethics. In the case of Scott, this is further compounded by how, under the guises of a critique of modernity, he deploys the terminology of Cold War liberalism to interpret anticolonial revolutions in the Caribbean.

In the name of "colonial enlightenment," Scott's version of pluralization, *Conscripts of Modernity* takes as its point of departure James's suggestion about how Toussaint Louverture's ultimate "failure" was one of enlightenment, not darkness. As Scott (2004) writes, "The tragedy of colonial enlightenment, I will argue, is not to be perceived in terms of a flaw to be erased or overcome, but rather in terms of a permanent legacy that has set the conditions in which we make of ourselves what we make and which therefore demands constant renegotiation and readjustment" (21). In the name of adjustment and negotiation to "the paradoxes of colonial Enlightenment," however, more than just accounting for sedimented legacy is at stake: emancipation and the intellectual traditions and the forms of collective agency capable of actualizing it, are safely ensconced in what Scott characterizes as a "future past," and thus denied any contemporary import. These, he goes on to argue, no longer bear on a postcolonial present. Instead, the politics of adjustment and negotiation, along with modesty and receptiveness in the face of contingency abide in the postcolonial predicament, which demand rejection of the radical traditions of socialist and anti-colonial nationalism. Scott's invocation of adjustment and negotiation amounts to a coded plea for defending William E. Connolly's postmodern liberalism, which Scott has made his own and has recast in postcolonial terms.[12] This postcolonial liberalism is the political perspective that deeply informs how Scott interprets *The Black Jacobins.*

It is along these lines that Scott interprets *The Black Jacobins* as staging a variation of a "longing for total revolution" whose outcome can only be tragic (2004, 5, 6, 10, 89, 91, 92, 95, 135). Scott's argument largely pivots on the idea that in the processes of revision, from the 1938 to the 1963 edition of the book, tragedy displaces romance as the master trope in *The Black Jacobins.*[13] In Scott's interpretation, the 1938 edition offers romance as its master trope, and thus remained attached to a longing for total revolution concerned with totally overcoming colonialism. But this longing belongs to another present, which is James's, not ours, and ought to be kept there. Through this interpretative move, Scott tacitly downplays the dialectic of realism and utopia that is central to James's actual account of tragedy and severs its critical import from present-day struggles. Equally diminished are the subtleties of James's account of Toussaint's tragic predicament, as that of an actor in a political situation embedded in a colonial situation structured by the imperatives of a plantation economy.

Central to Scott's argument is the notion that "the paradox of the Enlightenment" comes into focus once the ideas of the Enlightenment are expressed in contexts shot through with the legacies of colonialism and slavery. Yet, like Israel, Scott ultimately shares the assumption that once the Enlightenment first emerged it was fully actualized, even if its paradoxical and tragic natures are most clearly revealed in Toussaint's actions, struggles, and eventual fate. This assumption is tacitly disclosed by the centrality accorded to "conscription" in Scott's story. In sharp contrast to James's own account, Toussaint emerges not as a revolutionary agent radically misplacing, actualizing, and radicalizing a political legacy, let alone a legitimate heir of it. Instead, Toussaint is dramatically depicted as a "conscripted" and "tragic subject" imprisoned by "the *modern* conditions of his life" and thus forced to "seek his freedom in the very technologies, conceptual languages, and institutional formations in which *modernity's rationality* has sought his enslavement" (2004, 168; emphases added). As these undialectical and rather overwrought passages clearly show, few notions are more mystified than "modernity" in Scott's book (2004, 106ff.). Meanwhile, the figure of Toussaint qua political actor that emerges in these passages is minimized; instead, he is presented as an enfeebled political actor, a depiction which has no correspondence with James's, let alone with what the historical record indicates (Forsdick and Høgsbjerg 2017b; Hazareesingh 2021).

By characterizing the problem this way, the predicaments in which Toussaint (and James) acted become depoliticized and their historical agency is misrecognized. Scott's invocations of modernity, moreover, have the effect of de-differentiating the imperatives of domination and exploitation, along with the concrete

Essex conference on "Europe and its Others," the 1985 *Critical Inquiry* issue, "Race, Writing and Difference," and the ascendance of Theory (Brennan 2014). Politically, it emerged out of the rise of neoliberalism in the 80s and was deeply mediated by the de-Marxification of intellectual discourse in France and the ethical turn that upended collective emancipation and the state form in the name of an international individualism. This turn, and the no less crucial resurgence of North-Atlantic liberalism, were lent further credence by the collapse of USSR and the new world order inaugurated during the triumphalist 90s. See Bourg (2007) and Vázquez-Arroyo (2016, 25–62; 2023, 534–8).

[12] See Scott (1999, 3–20, 93–105, 131ff; 2005). On Connolly, see Vázquez-Arroyo (2004).

[13] *Pace* Scott, "tragedy" was already an important theme in the 1938 edition: see Douglas (2019, 93–101, 108–32) and Glick (2016, 122–67).

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historical crucible out of which the Haitian Revolution emerged, thus negating the modicum of agency and historical responsibility in revolutionary situations that James's account clearly avows. Stated differently, Scott fails to do justice to James's nuanced understanding of historical causality and political responsibility, one of the most illuminating aspects of *The Black Jacobins.* James's Toussaint is a historical actor subjected to the social forces and political imperatives structuring the situation in which he acted, a situation to which he responded by sometimes expressing, or being swept by these forces, at other times rearticulating them with a modicum of freedom, or downright refusing them. No one's conscript, in these predicaments responsibility for the actions he undertook was at times lessened, mitigated, or enhanced by the structuring of the colonial situation in which he acted (Vázquez-Arroyo 2016, 256). To suggest otherwise is to de-historicized the crucible James sought to historicize.

For instance, even if one confines the discussion to the Enlightenment in revolutionary France, one could readily see how contradictory and equivocal many claims stemming from the Enlightenment were, and how these became transformed in the revolutionary process. In what remains the best reconstruction of the Enlightenment in relation to slavery and the colonies, Duchet (1995) showed that the legacies of the Enlightenment were complex, contradictory, and contested in ways that polemics against it fail to register. During the French Revolution, as James shows, these contradictions exploded and led to abolition, which is why he concatenates the masses in Saint Domingue with the masses in Paris (1989, 85–144); an insight confirmed by subsequent historians.[14] These contradictions were further challenged, questioned, and radicalized, as James clearly shows, by the Haitian Revolution. The already radical ideas of the French Revolution were thus made more complex and enacted on a very different basis by the Haitian revolutionaries. In these struggles, the agency of the colonized was both denied and affirmed. James unequivocally affirms the importance of collective agency against all odds and the transformation and radicalization of the Enlightenment's emancipatory legacies in a colonial situation, along with the right of the colonized to inherit, misplace, and radicalize them.

But this is precisely what Scott's notion of conscription negates. For it only makes sense to speak of something like "conscription" if one either simplifies or moralizes colonial predicaments. But once the concrete imperatives and practices that define a "colonial situation" are grasped, including multiple subject-positions ranging from victims to structural beneficiaries and collaborators, such simplifications are revealed to be just that.

[14] Gauthier (2014, 97–266); Le Cour Grandmaison (1992, 191ff). To speak of "concatenations" is to suggest a particular connection: a form of causality bereft of evolutionism. Anderson's historical writings have shown the critical significance of this category (1979, 420–2; 1986; 2011).

The political valences of Scott's notion of "colonial enlightenment," and how these are at odds with those animating James's classic book, become even more clear once his account of "tragedy" is brought into closer focus.[15] For Scott (2004), "the images through which James figures his tragic hero, Toussaint Louverture—the image of the man of exceptional knowledge, courage, skill, compassion, and so on—are the recognizably conventional images of the mythic hero of enlightenment" (191). In the very next sentence James is curiously cast as "a mythmaker." Leaving aside the meaning of "mythmaker" in this context, and the absence of references and substantial textual evidence to support Scott's concoction of "the mythic hero of enlightenment," James's account of tragedy has little to do with Scott's conventional understanding of this genre, as revealed by the curious invocation of mythical heroes in this passage. In contrast, the conception of tragedy underlining *The Black Jacobins* is closer to the relationship between tragedy and revolution as exemplified by the figure of Trotsky, and as carefully formulated by Raymond Williams.[16]

In Williams's socialist account, the core concerns are not about heroes. The focus is on the orders and disorders in which revolutionary action is embedded in situations in which masses and leaders confront and seek to transform the structures, imperatives, and practices in a political situation that at once enables and limits, often tragically, the purview and scope of their actions. These are situations mediated by both inextricable, often obdurate, structures along with accidents and occasions. All of which needs to be grasped and seized by politically literate actors for whom "a sense of tragedy," Williams (1980) insists elsewhere, means a sense of the struggle for the "ending of an imperialist and capitalist order" (115).[17] In line with James's staging of tragedy and enlightenment, Williams's account of tragedy is thus driven by the concerns of a genuine socialist who aims at the destruction of an existing order, the seizing of power, and the founding of a new political order. In formulating tragedy in this way, Williams (1966) was deeply attuned to the predicaments of the Bolshevik Revolution and anti-colonial struggles, and the hardening that "the inevitable working through of a deep and tragic disorder" inexorably brings about (75). Or as Williams further writes: "The real tragedy occurs at those dreadful moments when the revolutionary is so nearly lost, or so heavily threatened, that the

[15] Reasons of space preclude a full discussion of two problematic pillars of Scott's interpretation: "future pasts" and "problem spaces." The latter, for instance, has been taken uncritically as a mere heuristic device for contextualization: see Getachew and Mantena (2021) and Nichols (2017).

[16] James was keenly aware of Trotsky's fate; and Trotsky's life, considered tragic by many, is eventually narrated as such in Deutscher's trilogy (2015), completed in 1963.

[17] In *Conscripts of Modernity* (Scott 2004) Williams is cursorily invoked, while Terry Eagleton's reworking of Williams' account is shelved for its strong political valences: "I do not share Eagleton's left-wing/right-wing scale of political value and his desire to read tragedy into the narrative of socialism" (225n2).

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revolutionary movement has to impose the harshest discipline on itself and against relatively innocent people in order not to be broken down and defeated" (395). This is especially so, Williams emphasizes, when such moments are traversed with "revenge and senseless destruction, after the bitterness and deformity of oppression" that constitute unavoidable aspects of revolutionary anti-colonial situations (78). These moments are precisely what James's book sought to convey and draw lessons for socialist anti-colonial politics.

That *The Black Jacobins* lent expression to and staged the tragedy of revolution Williams theorized, and that James sought to draw lessons from Toussaint's ultimate defeat and his errors by way of analogies with the October 1917 revolution should be clear to any reader who takes the architecture of James's book seriously. Responding to his own political situation and commitments, James sought to interpret Toussaint in the context of defeats and tragic outcomes—not least the fate of the Bolshevik Revolution, and the onset of the Spanish Civil War in the first edition, along with pending revolutionary struggles of emancipation in the non-western world—and thus make the Haitian Revolution a central referent in contemporary struggles and those to come (Høgsbjerg 2016; 2020). James saw his book as enhancing the political literacy of future political actors in colonial and post-colonial predicaments by learning from past defeats as part of a shared history that he explicitly traces in the appendix to the second edition of *The Black Jacobins.*

In the 1980 preface to the book, James (2001) is not only clear about how he wanted "to write a book in which Africans or people of African descent instead of constantly being the object of other peoples' exploitation and ferocity would themselves be taking action on a grand scale and shaping other people to their own needs;" he explicitly, tells readers that the new edition was written "not with the Caribbean but with Africa in mind" (xv, xvi). For the dice was already cast in Haiti, but not so in analogous predicaments. It thus became paramount to write an enlightened history that would retrieve the agency of the masses of former slaves as revolutionary actors and would also contribute to the political education and literacy of those engaged in Pan-African struggles. Carrying this out required James to dispense with the "romanticism" that he characterized as typically caught up in the "volcanic eruptions" and "the meteoric flares" of events. Instead, the imperative was to seek and adequately grasp historical causation, as the preface to the first edition makes explicit. There, James (1989) emphasizes the long-term causes of the revolution and soberly comprehends what lies in the "sub-soil" (sic) of events, sedimented over centuries of imperial plunder and justified by a racialization with clear "materialist origins" (x, 43, 44).[18]

[18] Heretofore all references to *The Black Jacobins* are to the 1989 and will be inserted within the text.

This thus required a realist depiction of the masses that James rightly credited with beginning a world-historical revolutionary process but without idealizing them, or those who led them. James memorably depicts and celebrates the role of the masses, the basis of Toussaint's power, while fully registering the effects of the brutalization of slavery, including and how it "detribalized Africans," in a colonial situation in which "violence and ferocity" were at the root of a "calculated brutality and terrorism" that persisted throughout and produced "a backward and ignorant mass." In turn, he ascribes their confidence, political education, and political literacy to their engagement and participation in the revolutionary process that abolished slavery and sought to establish freedom and equality (7, 12, 198). James, accordingly, recognizes the ignorance and backwardness of the masses as a result of slavery, and poses the political relationship between masses and leaders, rulers and ruled, in a situation shot through with the imperatives intrinsic to the struggle to seize power for the creation of a new order and its consolidation (94–5).

If James is clear-eyed about both the greatness and shortcomings of the masses, he is similarly unsparing on those who led them and sought to "translate mass feeling into action" (121). Toussaint is praised for his leadership and ability to identify and seize openings, the capacity to respond to the spontaneous violent eruptions and forestall the prospects of a famine, due to an understandable but ultimately unsustainable "devastation" that "was making it impossible for them to exist," and for his unrelenting commitment to anti-slavery (103, 148). But he is unflinchingly criticized for his "excessive reserve and aloofness," autocracy, the despotic means he deployed at times and the lack of accountability to the masses (188). Key to his tragic fate is that he "never troubled to explain," as he was "over-confident that he had only to speak and the masses would follow," which ultimately led to his downfall: "sowing off the branch on which he sat" (240, 275). If Toussaint's defeat was mediated by the imperatives structuring the situation he responded to, as a political actor he made decisions and bore responsibility within the constraints the situation imposed. That is why in a powerful account of historical possibility James explores an alternative path, while also illustrating the reasons why it remained a missed opportunity, placing the political responsibility on Toussaint. Hence: the centrality of accounting for Toussaint's actions and errors and accurately registering both for the sake of struggles to come; all as part of a shared transatlantic history that foster political literacy in a largely post-colonial but still imperial and capitalist world order (284ff.).

Scott's conscription of *The Black Jacobins* into his own postcolonial, liberal, recasting of revolution distorts all of that. All in all, in the name of adjustment and negotiation to "the paradoxes of colonial Enlightenment," emancipation, and the intellectual traditions and the forms of collective agency capable of actualizing it, are safely ensconced in a "future past" no longer bearing on a present defined by a chastened

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politics of adjustment and negotiation, modesty, and receptiveness, in the face of contingency.[19] Politically, to be sure, Scott's reading of James amounts to a rejection of the radical traditions of socialist and anti-colonial nationalism and effectively amounts to an active disavowal of the radical traditions informing the recent past.[20] By severing these moments of a shared transatlantic history, along with the socialist and colonial internationalisms defining it, Scott negates their critical import for the present. Upended, too, is a history of concatenated transatlantic thought, encompassing both possibility and missed opportunities, available for a radical politics of emancipation, for anyone willing to learn and redeem those legacies in new situations.

Absent here, in sum, is any sense of the capacity that any political actor committed to act in real political situations, and thus confronts predicaments of power, needs to possess: the ability, to borrow a phrase from Gillian Rose (1992), "to know, misknow and yet grow" (310). That is: to grasp a predicament, in all its complexity, both its internal imperatives and the historical logics that produce it, fully aware of one's fallibility, which also implies the possibility of failing (or that of misknowing or misrecognizing); and yet, out of the experience learn and grow as a political actor. This is a lesson in political literacy avowed by James, but that Scott decisively upends. Instead of the "paradox of colonial enlightenment," in The *Black Jacobins* one finds a powerful enlightened history of the radical misplacement of the Enlightenment in a colonial situation. The texture of the situation that James stages, which constitutes a particular instantiation of the tragedy of revolution, is best described by recourse to one of Erich Auerbach's (1984) formulations: the colonial situation Toussaint confronted, and James grasped, is thoroughly mediated by "the inextricable fabric of heredity, historical situation, individual temperament, and the consequences of our own actions" (122). All of which is accounted for by James and negates Scott's conscription.

AN ENLIGHTENED HISTORY

The Black Jacobins is a classic historical interpretation of the Haitian revolution that powerfully stages the dilemmas of actualizing the political principles of the Enlightenment in a colonial situation supervened by a plantation economy, its social and cultural imperatives, and constitutive practices. It also offers a radical recasting of history as one genre of political theory in which the interplay of realism and utopia in revolutionary action can be glimpsed in its situational contradictoriness.[21] In doing so, it resonates and goes beyond the themes developed by European thinkers—Thucydides, Machiavelli, Weber, de Beauvoir, Trotsky, Weil—by placing at the heart of its narrative the question of political action—structure and agency—in context of a colonial situation located in a Caribbean plantation society. Cast in this light, *The Black Jacobins* partakes in a well-known genre: political theory as historical excavation. And yet, this characterization requires further clarification, because *The Black Jacobins* is a reworking of the Enlightenment's tradition of "enlightened history," and goes beyond even its most radical expression in Raynal's (and Diderot's) *Histoire des deux Indes* (1770).[22] Like Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories* and Tocqueville's *Ancien Régime*, it is a work that offers a historical account, but is hardly a work of history in any conventional sense. Its most immediate inspiration is Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, in and of itself a radical and political heir of Enlightenment histories that dialectically combines a sense of political responsibility with historical causality. In the case of James, the account is shot through with the imperatives of colonialism in a plantation-based social formation that also includes important reflections on political possibility and stages the complex dialectic of rule in ways that enhance the reader's political literacy.

James's inheritance, creative formulation, and radical actualization of this genre are accomplished by inscribing the Haitian Revolution and its political crucibles in a transatlantic history that at once sheds critical light on the European articulation of the Enlightenment and its misplacement in a colonial situation in the non-European world. In it, the Haitian Revolution emerges as a world-historical event that led to the first successful slave revolt in modern history, the establishment of the first Black independent republic in the western hemisphere and the defeat of Napoleon in the Caribbean. The Haitian Revolution is conceived as an integral link in a transatlantic concatenation of revolutions that reverberated throughout the

[19] See, inter alia, Scott (2004, 21, 177, 191, 193).

[20] In a review of *Omens of Adversity*, Nichols (2017) similarly registers this hostility. Wilder (2009) has offered a critique of Scott's unhistorical sense of tragedy and the way *Conscripts of Modernity* forecloses "colonial emancipation" *tout court* (101–40).

[21] If in the mid-nighties, Trouillot (1995) wrote about the silencing of the Haitian Revolution, subsequent works have radically changed that, including its inscription within theoretical discussions of universalism. See Buck-Morss (2000) and Grüner (2010). An argument against reducing the Haitian Revolution to a universal that denies its specificity is found in Getachew (2016). Getachew's intervention, however, steers clear of the conceptual questions at stake in invocations of universalism and specificity, and does not register James's own formidable contribution to the argument she makes. Despite valuable criticisms of the ways scholars have tended to obscure the "Haitian Revolution's specificity," Getachew ends up occluding important aspects of this historical process, too. This is done through invocations of academic common-places—Arendt, republicanism and (neo-republican) critiques of domination—that have the effect of likewise rescinding what is particular in this revolution. For instance, these distort the dialectic of domination and exploitation at the core of the plantation economy, as slavery was first and foremost concerned with exploitation, with degrees of domination oscillating across time and space. This point would become clearer in the discussion below.

[22] On the enlightened histories, see Griggs (2007), Pocock (1999–2015, vol. 1), and Tortarolo (1999, 89–113).

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nineteenth century, a world-historical crucible, of which James only offered a vignette: how "the history of liberty in France and of slave emancipation in San Domingo (*sic*) is one and indivisible" (61–2), and how the history binding the two is an instance of connected history and needs to be studied as such.[23]

Instead of the traditional unidirectional trajectory in which revolutionary enlightened principles are "applied" in the colonies (Israel's approach), James formulates a mutually constituted constellation defined by a connected history in which events concatenate and crystallize in a meaningful differentiated totality. This is a history of liberty best understood as the unity of continuity and discontinuity that grasps and narrates the *misplaced*, always imperfect, actualization and concatenation of revolutionary principles. In this history, Enlightenment principles of freedom and equality acquire new meaning and determination in a colonial situation, while the presuppositions of their prior actualizations are revealed in the *misplacement* and non-identity of idea and actuality, metropolis, and colony.[24]

The Black Jacobins offers a systematic formulation of transatlantic political theory in the age of revolution, one firmly anchored in the Caribbean, which grasps the importance of a colonial situation defined by a plantation economy. James's book, however, refuses to disavow the universality of his account and places the events in San Domingo as part of an account of negative universal history, which narrates the past as a unity of continuities and discontinuities, blockages, and opportunities (Vázquez-Arroyo 2008). This enables James to grasp the lessons to be drawn for the emancipation of Africa and the West Indies and situates the revolution in a larger canvass in which the violence of revolution and counterrevolution is staged. James poignantly reflects on the politics of elite/mass; the sedimentations of the past and its binding imperatives; the historical and situated unfolding of a dialectic of the universal and the particular, and how this dialectically unfolds in a colonial predicament. Here we can see the dialectic of subjective and structural violence, and the dialectic of revolution and counterrevolution, along with reckonings with alliances and foreign invasions, while encircled by the empires of the day.

Consider, for instance, James' account of the centrality of the plantation and how it organizes power and domination through violence. In a chapter tellingly titled "The Property," James pithily states: "Violence and ferocity became the necessities of survival and violence and ferocity survived" (7). Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the persistence of the plantation, whose role was first and foremost one of exploitation. In colonial situations defined by a plantation economy, all manner of forms and degrees of domination were subordinated to the economic and social imperatives of exploitation. The recrudescence of domination was a function of exploitation (Blackburn, 2024; Moreno Fraginals 1983, 24–49, 56–117, 162–71).

From the sixteenth century on, plantations and the presence of enslaved Africans were already found in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean; by the seventeenth century, these spread through the Lesser Antilles and Jamaica. With the rise of sugar in the world market in the eighteenth century came the intensification of slave labor which served as the prelude to the revolution in Haiti (Moreno Fraginals 2014, 1: 5–122). These structures continued in Cuba, which sought to fill the void left by Haiti in the world market after 1792 (Blackburn 2024, 57–88, 195–228; Ferrer 2014). Resistance to the domination of plantations traveled, too. It was transmitted through underground networks in the Caribbean during the Age of Revolutions (Scott 2018).

IMPERATIVES

This resistance needs to be understood in its colonial context without conflating its invocation of the Enlightenment with European political agendas. Here is James' remarkable formulation: "[Toussaint] knew French, British, and Spanish imperialists for the insatiable gangsters that they were, that there is no oath too sacred for them to break, no crime, deception, treachery, cruelty, destruction of human life and property which they would not commit against those who could not defend themselves" (271). It is in this vein that James writes of Toussaint's sole serious political mistake, one already adduced here: "the neglect of his own people" under the pressure of the imperatives of necessity inaugurated by the counterrevolutionary offensive aiming to restore imperial control over San Domingo and, by extension, slavery (224, 240). In James' formulation:

> With vision, courage, and determination [Toussaint] was laying the foundations of an independent nation. But, too confident of his own powers, he was making one dreadful mistake. In nothing does his genius stand out so much as in refusing to trust the liberty of the blacks to the promises of French and British imperialism. His error was his neglect of his own people. They did not understand what he was doing or where he was going. He took no trouble to explain. It was dangerous to explain, but still more dangerous not to explain (240).[25]

This is the tragedy of revolution in general and that of Enlightenment in a colonial situation in particular. Under duress, imperatives of necessity for the survival of the revolution call for the hardening of the self and forms of violence that betray the political processes, practices, and forms that are meant to embody it, something poetically articulated in Bertolt Brecht's

[23] Writing on James's play on Toussaint, Høgsbjerg offers a formulation that equally applies to *The Black Jacobins*: "In the Haitian Revolution, the ideas of the Enlightenment, or liberty, equality, and fraternity, became a material force to be reckoned with, embodied in the rebel slave army" (2014, 160). On "connected histories," see Gruzinski (2010; 2017), Marcocci (2016), and Subramayam (1997; 2012; 2019).

[24] Compare Adorno (1997, 314) and Schwarz (1999, 27–53).

[25] See also Deutscher (1984, 256–62) and Williams (1979, 393–8, 410–1).

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great poem "To Those Born Later" (1979, 318–20). Among many examples, one can indicate the fates of the Russian October Revolution during the civil war of the twenties and, to a lesser degree, Cuba, from the Bay of Pigs failed invasion on. In James's own times, the fate of October and the Spanish Republic were tragic predicaments in this very historical sense, and very much on his mind.

Yet acknowledging this tragic dimension hardly clouded James's realism, nor does it let him abjure anticolonialism and radical emancipation. James's characterization of the tragedy of Toussaint is devoid of the humanist hypostatization found in classic accounts of tragedy; namely, his mistake is not traced to *hubris*, or any other transhistorical flaw defining the human condition; instead, it is the outcome of acting in a politically constituted situation shot through with imperial, colonial, revolutionary and counterrevolutionary imperatives that creates the tragic predicament. It took the skills and political literacy of Toussaint, mediated by the ideas of the Enlightenment and the African traditions the enslaved brought with them, to successfully navigate the tumultuous waters of the revolution and, *with* the masses, achieve the foregoing transformations (Thornton 1991; 1993). Toussaint's successes were not any more foreordained than his mistakes, even if these often responded to the imperatives of necessity found in the logic of the situation in which he acted. It is the severance of the political connection between masses and elites that makes the situation tragic in James's account. Even if Toussaint's own temperament, certainly exacerbated by the external imperatives of counterrevolution, played a major role in his downfall, James still refuses to cast Toussaint as a classic tragic hero.

In a passage with striking echoes of Machiavelli's realism and its economy of violence, James decisively delineates an original political ethic in a colonial context besieged by counterrevolutionary duress, a context in which the dialectic of revolution and counterrevolution unleashed by the French Revolution at once reverberates and becomes more complex in its materialist aspect within the context of imperialism and capitalism:

> It is force that counts, and chiefly the organized force of the masses. Always, but particularly at the moment of struggle, a leader must think of his own masses. It is what they think that matters, not what the imperialists think. And if to make matters clear to them Toussaint had to condone a massacre of the whites, so much the worse for the whites. He had done everything possible for them, and if the race question occupied the place that it did in San Domingo, it was not the fault of the blacks. But Toussaint, like Robespierre, destroyed his own left wing, and with it sealed his doom. The tragedy was that there was no need for it. […] between Toussaint and his people there was no fundamental difference of outlook or of aim (286).

While Robespierre's conflict with his left wing was structural, James argues, Toussaint's was not.[26] The wedge between the two was about a racial question that while politically and socially constituted, had an existential resonance with the former slaves that Toussaint underestimated. James, to be sure, frames this rift in terms of "advanced" and "backward." These tropes lead to the finale of James's account of the fall of Toussaint, which he characterizes as "a failure of enlightenment." Here James contrasts Toussaint with Jean-Jacques Dessalines, another revolutionary leader that would go on to become the first ruler of an independent Haiti under the 1815 constitution. For James, Dessalines is the intellectually inferior, but more politically literate of the two:

> It is easy to see to-day, as his generals saw after he was dead, where he had erred. It does not mean that they or any of us would have done better in his place. If Dessalines could see so clearly and simply, it was because the ties that bound this uneducated soldier to French civilization were of the slenderest. He saw what was under his nose so well because he saw no further. Toussaint's failure was the failure of enlightenment, not of darkness (288).

This failure of enlightenment can be rendered as a concrete manifestation of a racialized colonial situation whose specificity rather mystified terms like "modernity" tend to occlude.

How exactly? In Haiti's colonial situation, the actualization of ideas of fraternity and equality was bound to be abrogated. Toussaint's point of departure was already a result, his *origin* a *historical consequence*, marred with contradictions such as the impossibility of, say, extending that equality to whites who have presided over a social formation predicated on the brutalization and exploitation of Blacks. Toussaint's attempt to do so was bound to backfire, as his universalism was on this point abstract and unable to see how compromised its realization was in a thoroughly racialized social order emerging out of a colonial situation. The unmediated "application" of any universal principle, or form, was bound to founder. The social presuppositions that could make it actual in the metropolis were not in place in the colony. At the same time, however, Toussaint was clearsighted enough to understand the need to extend some recognition to those with the education and skills needed for a viable reconstruction of the island's economy that permanently barred slavery, while beset by imperialists seeking its restoration.

These are the contradictions of the dialectic of enlightenment in a particular colonial situation. James shows readers how these singularly played out in it: abstract and utopian ideas of liberty and equality were incompletely actualized; but, as ideas, these gained further determination. This absence of social and materialist presuppositions for an effective actualization of them was conjoined by Toussaint's all too common lack of distanced nearness to the European civilization he

[26] James partakes in, and takes as read, a Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution in which the radical egalitarianism of the "*sans culottes*" was eventually stumped out by Jacobin rule (cf. Soboul 1988, 15–55).

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looked up to, and the political aloofness that proved to be so decisive in his fall. In the opening lines of the chapter titled "The War of Independence" the tragic trope is quickly deployed and recast apropos of this particular question: "The Defeat of Toussaint in the war of independence and his imprisonment and death in Europe are universally looked upon as a tragedy. They contain authentic elements of the tragic in that even at the height of the war Toussaint strove to maintain the French connection as necessary to Haiti and its long and difficult climb to civilization. Convinced that slavery could never be restored in San Domingo, he was equally convinced that a population of slaves recently landed from Africa could not attain to civilization by 'governing alone'" (289).

Toussaint's tragedy is thus framed as a tragedy stemming from a colonial situation and the difficulty of a new beginning in it, one that needs to reckon with the legacies of the past, including the plantation and the need for the technical know-how of the former masters, which as James makes abundantly clear was intrinsic to Toussaint's attitude toward the whites. James is cautious to avoid seeing this tragedy (as Scott does) as exemplary of the decontextualized idea of the tragic. Unequivocally, he writes:

> His unrealistic attitude to the former masters, at home and abroad, sprang not from any abstract humanitarianism or loyalty, but from a recognition that they alone had what San Domingo society needed. […] If he was convinced that San Domingo would decay without the benefits of the French connection, he was equally certain that slavery could never be restored. Between these two certainties, he, in whom penetrating vision and prompt decision had become second nature, became the embodiment of vacillation. His allegiance to the French Revolution and all it opened out for mankind in general and the people of San Domingo in particular, this had made him what he was. But this in the end ruined him. […] Toussaint was attempting the impossible—the impossible that was for him the only reality that mattered (290–1).

Toussaint's tragic predicament is historical and political. It has "historical actuality," which at once "explains his mistakes and atones for them" (291, 292). Toussaint had to act in a situation where he had an unequal position and in a playing field that was asymmetrically constituted against him. Recognizing this predicament is central to the political realism staged in James's political history of the Haitian revolution. This is one of the book's many contributions to political literacy; another is the avowal of how the imperatives of the political situation mediate, albeit never entirely prefigure, the different scenes of action in it. Political action is always constrained by the situation that mediates it.

CONCRETE UNIVERSAL

So: is there really a singular Enlightenment whose dialectical formulation escapes the capsizals of meaning—from one to many, from many to one—criticized in others? Read literally, the idea of "a singular enlightenment" suggests that the Enlightenment is one and unique. Interpreted more literarily, however, it could be read as evoking ambiguity, which is clearly disclosed by the presence of an indefinite article preceding the adjective "singular": a formulation that conjoins the indefiniteness of the article with an adjective that connotes uniqueness in ways that reintroduces the definiteness the indefinite article is supposed to negate (cf. Jameson 2002). Or as that formidable anti-Hegelian, Søren Kierkegaard, tersely put it: "The single individual can mean the most unique of all, and the single individual can mean everyone" (1998, 115). A singular Enlightenment, *mutatis mutandis*, can mean both unique and anywhere. But once understood dialectically, the idea of a singular enlightenment must be conceptualized as part of a triad that encompasses universal, particular, and singular.

The stakes of this formulation are best grasped in terms of the contradictions that constitute concept formation. To make more precise the two meanings of singular invoked, one needs to briefly turn to Hegel's account of concept formation, where Hegel shows that the individual is the singular moment in a concept that is nevertheless mediated by the particular and the universal. Indeed, in his dialectical account, the three moments are thus inextricably connected, and one can think of the concept (*Begriff*) as the comprehensive unity of the universal, particular, and singular (2018, 43–173; cf. 2010, 508ff.). Translated into the present discussion, this amounts to saying that the concept of Enlightenment is a universal concept that consists of a comprehensive unity of universality (as a concept: Enlightenment), the particular (a specification of the concept: that is, French Enlightenment, Enlightenment in a colonial situation), and singular (the individual, or unique instantiation: Haiti).[27]

Stated somewhat differently, to interpret the formulation "a singular enlightenment" as one moment of the triad—at once universal, particular, singular—requires interpreting the Enlightenment as shot through by material processes that call for theoretical and historical reconstructions, as it eventuated in often connected histories where it acquired or lost determination. This is a historical-material process that once grasped conceptually is best understood in terms of dialectical contradictions, that is how both the singular and the particular at once modify and constitute the universal. That is, in a nutshell, the dialectic of enlightenment insisted upon throughout this article.

What, then, are the lessons of James's account of the Haitian Revolution read, as I have tried to do in this essay, as an actualization of the dialectic of enlightenment as the non-identical unity of these three moments? Briefly juxtaposing James with Adorno, two exiled "contrapuntal" intellectuals, sheds light on this question. There are striking affinities between the philosophical

[27] A singular that nevertheless became central to the whole hemisphere: for every Jefferson who recoiled, there were others who found inspiration in it. Compare Granados (2016).

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histories of modernity as the "self-destruction of reason" found in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) and that formulated in James's brilliant *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* ([1953] 2001); but there are also crucial differences in their construction of "negative universal history."[28] As Enzo Traverso has shown, while Adorno's formulation of the dialectic of enlightenment accorded centrality to the unfolding of blind domination, one whose movement can be arrested by way of immanent critique, the West Indian James conceived of it in more robust political terms—the dialectic of enlightenment as driven by historical conflicts and struggles. Its ultimate fate would be risked and actualized in history through collective action. One central episode in this vast plot is the then-forgotten Haitian Revolution, with its incomplete and non-identical actualization of universal freedom in both the progress it represented and the defeats it confronted.

Universals, to be sure, are not empty vessels waiting to be filled. The universal is indeed "inherently divisive" because it is never "neutral" or "empty," as it is unfortunately often conceptualized; but rather, qua determinate negation, it is always embodied in a particular at the expense of other contents.[29] Once dialectically understood, universality is always concrete. Any universal always has a particular point of departure that is its content. Its initial formulation is always subject to contestation as it becomes actualized and loses and gains determinations' it may then become a sedimented meaning. There is, accordingly, as little sense in nominalist listings of this or that universal. Instead, each actualization embodies a non-identical effort to grasp and shape, determine, and form, the universal in particular instances whose singularity is constitutive of its core, even if irreducible to it. Particulars are not exemplifications or stages of the universal, or aspects of it; otherwise, these would be mere particularities (Adorno 1997, 174–5). Rather than particular cases or instances of the universal concept of Enlightenment, each actualization, as Slavoj Žižek (1999) has lucidly formulated it, constitutes "a desperate attempt to hammer out a position with regard to the very universality of this concept: each time, the universal concept is 'disturbed' in a specific way—disavowed, turned around, thrown off by the excessive emphasis on one of its poles" (102). Žižek moreover emphasized how this is "a process or a sequence of particular attempts that do not simply exemplify the neutral universal notion but struggle with it, give a specific twist to it—the Universal is thus fully engaged in the process of its particular exemplification; that is to say, these particular cases in a way decide the fate of the universal notion itself" (Žižek 1999, 102).

It is precisely in that sense that the formulation of Black Jacobins constitutes a concrete universal. James acknowledges the centrality of the ideology of rights, citizenship, and emancipation emanating from Paris, and already present among the planter class, including both whites and free-colored, prior to the slave uprising that triggered the revolution in Haiti. Even so, he understands the abstract nature of that universal and how it finally become actualized as a concrete universality already foreshadowed in Toussaint's invocation of liberty and equality, free labor, and end to "the age of fanaticism," while deploying *citizen* as the category of interpellation conjoining rights and duties (205–6). James noted that, in Haiti, universal equality had to be formulated in terms of recognition of citizens as Black in the 1804 declaration of independence and the 1805 constitution.[30] Hence, *Black* Jacobins. But James was too fine a dialectician for him not to intuit the limits of the concrete universal or arrest the universal to this moment. Built in this formulation are also the limits of this actualization of the Enlightenment in a colonial situation that is best captured by highlighting the second term: Black *Jacobins.*

Part of Toussaint's failure, then, has to do with the imperatives of the colonial situation and how those led him to seek to restore the plantation economy, an imperative that given the absence of an alternative to plantation agriculture post-independent Haitian state builders, Alexandre Pétion and Jean-Pierre Boyer, the first two presidents of independent Haiti, ended up yielding to; but that the Haitian peasantry resisted as part of a "counter-plantation" small-holding economy that shunned market-dependence. "When [the peasantry] had to choose between a higher income and direct control of the labor process," writes historical anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "it chose control," even while such control was never such, as independent Haiti became a "republic for the merchants" (1990, 74).[31]

Yet, in a post-colonial situation located in a region characterized by the persistence of the plantation, a socio-economic structure that was a virtual society within colonial social formations, Jacobin state-building was bound to flounder in the absence of its social presuppositions. That is why for James the plantation is at once "the most civilizing as well as the most demoralizing influence in West Indian development," and what makes West Indian history "unique" (392), as a history of capitalism and underdevelopment, with many Haitians eventually becoming *braceros* (exploited seasonal workers) in Cuban sugar plantations.

[28] It is to Edward Said's credit to have drawn attention to the affinities between the two (1994, 63). These are developed by Traverso (2016, 166–74). One fundamental difference between the two is that unlike Adorno, in *The Black Jacobins* James stages an enlightenment history that inscribes the Haitian Revolution in a negative universal history, which is *both* conceptual and narrative, proposing the inheritance of a transatlantic shared revolutionary heritage that is also world historical (cf. Forsdick and Høgsbjerg 2017a, 87–191).

[29] Compare Balibar (2016, 138–44) and Žižek (1999, 100–3).

[30] For a subtle interpretation of the universality involved in this pronouncement, see Getachew (2016, 835).

[31] For a larger discussion, drawing on Haitian sources, see Dubois (2012, 104–15). Dubois, however, tends to idealize the "counter-plantation" economy, as does Getachew (2016), who apropos of it writes about "practices of peasant republicanism," as if these amounted to even a modicum of genuine collective autonomy in the otherwise dire predicaments of the revolution and its aftermath (838).

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Another thinker who clearly saw the stakes involved in actualizing the Enlightenment in colonial situations was Aimé Césaire (1981), whose account of Toussaint's failure could be considered both a complement and a corrective of James', not least for the dialectical categories at work in it:

> The struggle of Toussaint Louverture was the struggle for the transformation of a formal right into an actual right, the struggle for the recognition of men; and that is why it fits and inscribes the revolts of the black slaves of Saint Domingue within the history of universal civilization. If there is a negative side to this figure—something unavoidable given the situation—it resides in him having more attachment to deducting the existence of his people from an abstract universal, than grasping the singularity of his people to promote universality." […] This is why the Mediator deserves the name given to him to by his compatriots today: the Precursor (344).

Toussaint is cast as both mediator and precursor of a concrete actualization of genuine freedom, equality, and fraternity that has proven as elusive in the Caribbean as it has in the North Atlantic world constantly besetting it.

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The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human participants.

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