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Differing Approaches to Change: Toussaint and Dessalines in *Toussaint Louverture*

In the play *Toussaint Louverture*, C.L.R. James gives a fictional retelling of the Haitian Revolution. The story recounts how the slaves were able to overthrow the French colonial rule that was oppressing and exploiting them. James makes it clear that the slaves are the most important characters in the play due to the fact that their efforts are the reason the revolution was able to succeed. However, there are two main leaders of the revolution who also play important parts, Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, referred to in the play as “Toussaint” and “Dessalines,” respectively. In this paper, I will argue that the character of Dessalines assists in the fruition of the revolution by thinking outside of the colonialist system and adhering to Marxist philosophy, while the character of Toussaint aids the revolution by making changes within the colonialist system and its ideology. I will do this through examining Karl Marx and Frederick Engels’s “Manifesto of the Communist Party” and the introduction to Ernst Bloch’s book, *The Principle of Hope*. I will also argue that both these approaches to creating change were crucial to the telling of the story of how the Haitian Revolution was “the only successful slave revolt in history,” as put by C.L.R. James.

In the play, Dessalines acts as Toussaint’s counterpart. Where Toussaint is reasonable, Dessalines is rash. Where Toussaint is compromising, Dessalines is stubborn. Where Toussaint is civil, Dessalines is wild. The contrast between the two characters can be seen all throughout the play. The very first time that they appear, in Act 1, Scene 2, Dessalines is described as “almost naked” and he is consistently wearing less clothing than everyone else (James 55). This can also be seen in Act 1, Scene 3, when most of the characters, such as Macoya, Jean-Francois, Boukman, and Jeannot, are dressed in the magnificent garments taken during their plunder. Meanwhile, Dessalines remains half naked, “except for a red sash in which are stuck two large gold-mounted pistols” (James 57). The fact that Dessalines is not enticed by much material plunder shows that he stays true to his original cause and is not distracted by riches like some of the other leaders of the revolution. It also shows his deep connection to his roots. While the others seemingly forget their backgrounds by putting on the clothes of their oppressors and thus symbolically taking on the values of their oppressors, Dessalines stays true to himself. He does not try to be anything he is not. On the other hand, the play does not say much about what Toussaint wears. Whether he wears plundered finery, standard clothing of the time, or is also half naked like Dessalines is never explicitly mentioned. However, even though the reader does not get insight into Toussaint’s appearance, the fact that James chooses to highlight the half nakedness of Dessalines connects Dessalines back to the cause of the slaves more so than Toussaint.

The first lines they each utter in the play also gives insight into the nature of their characters. When addressing the slaves, Toussaint says, “. . . we are not afraid to fight. But before we kill let us make a petition and go one day to the Colonial Assembly. We’ll tell them –” (James 55). He is promptly cut off by Dessalines, who exclaims, “No petition – we have to fight! Not tomorrow but today – now! . . . If we kill the whites we are free” (James 55). While Toussaint wants to take the diplomatic approach and negotiate terms with the Colonial Assembly, Dessalines is simply ready to kill all the white people. He does not want to discuss anything with the Colonial Assembly, he wants immediate action. Later, in Act 2, Scene 1, the differing views of Toussaint and Dessalines are conveyed again through their dialogue. Toussaint says, “freedom is not everything . . . We have no education . . . Those few of us who are Christians follow the French religion. We must stay with France as long as she does not seek to restore slavery” (James 94). Dessalines replies, “Education – religion – Toussaint, always the white man’s religion, the white man’s education . . . For every white man a Negro is only fit to be a slave” (James 94). This exchange between the two characters demonstrates the primary difference in their values. While Toussaint is interested in abolishing slavery through an alliance with the French, Dessalines does not trust white people at all. He would rather establish a completely separate and independent state. Overall, the dialogue, appearances, and even implied actions of the characters of Toussaint and Dessalines express their differing ideals and approaches to the slave revolt.

It is clear that both Dessalines and Toussaint are invested in the revolution, but Dessalines goes about instigating it in a very different way than Toussaint does. The values of Dessalines as seen through his dialogue and appearance show that he takes a Marxist approach, while Toussaint does not. Dessalines adheres to Marx and Engels’s theory in the “Manifesto of the Communist Party.” In this text, Marx and Engels write,

“The Communists are distinguished from the other working class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality . . . they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole” (Marx 33).

Dessalines clearly embodies this Communist mission through the fact that he fights for the freedom of all slaves, not just some. He is therefore concerned about the “interests of the movement as a whole.” He does not even entertain the idea of alliances with any other countries, because he is true only to his cause of the Haitian Revolution and to establishing an independent state free of all slavery. By contrast, Toussaint is always trying to negotiate with the French, British, and Americans. In Act 1, Scene 4, Toussaint is speaking with M. Bullet and General Maitland, the Commander of the English Expedition. Bullet says, “The Colonial Assembly is seeking help from the British . . . those mulattoes and blacks who join us will have their freedom and equal political and social rights with the whites” (James 72). Toussaint then points out that M. Bullet is suggesting the restoration of slavery, to which General Maitland replies, “Not for all the blacks, Colonel Louverture . . . You and your soldiers and any whom you care to name, the friends and relations of your officers, all will be free” (James 72). Although Toussaint does not accept the offer of help from the British, and also clearly says that he is fighting for freedom for not just some, but all slaves, he does entertain Maitland and Bullet for a long time and hears out all that they have to say. Dessalines would never even think to negotiate with these men or to listen to them. As he says in Act 2, Scene 1, “Don’t trust France, don’t trust any of these whites” (James 91). In this way, Dessalines cares more than Toussaint about the “common interests of the entire proletariat,” which in this case is all the slaves, not just some of them (Marx 33). This is one way in which his values are more in line with Marxism than Toussaint’s.

The “Manifesto of the Communist Party” also states, “The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all other proletarian parties: formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat” (Marx 33). Dessalines’s intentions are in line with those outlined here as well. This can be seen Act 2, Scene 1, when Dessalines says, “A country of blacks and a black king – let the people see it. They will say: ‘This is our country.’ Nobody will be able to take it away again” (James 91). Dessalines wants to form all the slaves and black people into a class to overthrow the French colonialists who have oppressed them. In this case, the colonialists are the “bourgeois supremacy” that Marx refers to. Dessalines also clearly advocates for “conquest of political power by the proletariat” because he wants an independent country of blacks which are ruled by one of their own, thus giving them political power. He does not want another outside ruler implemented by the bourgeois. Even in his last lines, Dessalines brings up this concept. He says, “Haiti is no colony, but free and independent. Haiti, the first free and independent Negro sate in the new world” (James 132). The idea of an independent state that has been able to overthrow colonialist rule is always on his mind, which shows the similarities in the way he thinks with the way Marx and Engels thought. Toussaint, however, is less engrained in the idea that the slaves and other black people should have to have their own state separate from all white people. He tries multiple times to negotiate with other countries, including with the French, who are the ones who have exploited and oppressed black people for so long. Although he also wants freedom for slaves, he is less adamant that the way in which they get it must be by themselves, with no help from other countries.

Not only are Dessalines’s views in line with Marxism as explained by Marx and Engels, but they are also in line with Ernst Bloch’s explanation of Marxist philosophy in his introduction to his book, *The Principle of Hope*. Bloch writes, “Marxist philosophy is that of the future, therefore also of the future in the past” (Bloch 4). Dessalines is certainly future oriented. In Act 3, Scene 5, he gives a call to action. He declares, “To arms, friends! No rest, no sleep till we drive every Frenchman into the sea. From this minute San Domingo is a free country – no . . . The old name the island had before these Europeans came to bring slavery and degradation. Haiti!” (James 132). These lines show that he is focused on the future, much like Bloch says Marxist philosophy is. It is also important that he brings up the past, specifically the “old name the island had.” Although he has plans for the future, he still keeps the atrocities of the past in his mind, motivating his actions. This directly connects to Bloch’s reading of Marxism in that it is a philosophy of the “future in the past.” Bloch also talks about the idea of envisioning a utopia, a society completely different from the current system. He writes,

“A central task in this part is the *discovery and unmistakable notation of the ‘Not-Yet-Conscious’*. That is: a relatively still Unconscious disposed towards its other side, forwards rather than backwards. Towards the side of something new that is dawning up, that has never been conscious before, not, for example, something forgotten” (Bloch 5).

Bloch builds upon this point, saying that looking to the future, to what is not yet conscious, can assist in change. Dessalines is able to envision an alternate society, a utopia of an independent state ruled by and made up of black people. He has the ability to come up with an idea of a society unlike any that has come before. In this way, he has this unique quality that Bloch touches on, something that Marxist philosophy emphasizes, which is the ability to conceptualize and discover a utopia through thinking about the future. Toussaint does imagine the freedom of all slaves, but he is unable to do it in the way that Bloch describes.

Although Toussaint and Dessalines take very different approaches to the revolution, both of their attitudes towards change are vital to the success of the revolution and to telling the story put forth in the play. Their contrasting attributes and ideas actually complement each other. Without Toussaint, Dessalines might have made more decisions without fully thinking them through, like simply killing white people without even hearing what they have to say first. This is evidenced by his constant verbalization of his distrust towards white people. Without Dessalines, however, the revolution might have completely failed because there would be no one to continue it after Toussaint died in jail. Even if someone else took up the cause, none of the other characters were as passionate and driven as Dessalines. The two characters and their approaches are therefore both necessary to the story. They are completely intertwined, which can be seen through the fact that they first appear in the play together in Act 1, Scene 2, and the fact that their last lines refer to each other. Toussaint’s last line is, “Oh Dessalines! Dessalines! You were right after all!” (James 128). One of Dessalines’s last lines is, “Haiti, the first free and independent Negro state in the new world. Toussaint died for it” (James 132). Both characters constantly have the other in mind. Clearly, despite their contrast, Dessalines and Toussaint and their differing approaches are extremely important to the story of the Haitian Revolution and its success. Whether it is through Dessalines adhering to Marxist philosophy, or through Toussaint negotiating within the existing colonialist system, both their methods are critical.

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