

## Socialism with Haitian Characteristics

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### Abstract

This work argues that following the Haitian Revolution, which is a revolt against slavery and mercantilist capitalism, the founder of the country, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, attempted to synthesize three forms of system and social integration on the island in order to constitute the nation of Haiti: the mercantilist and liberal capitalism of the Affranchis, petit-bourgeois blacks and mulatto elites, respectively; and the Lakouism, communism, of the African majority on the island. In this sense, Dessalines, represented the first embodiment of Kojève's end of history Hegelian thesis, and defined Haiti's socialism, what Mocombe calls libertarian communism, with its Haitian characteristics.

**Keywords:** ideological domination, phenomenological structuralism, embourgeoisement, Black Underclass, grandon, mulatto elites, Haitian Revolution, Bois Caiman, Affranchis

### 1. Introduction

Haiti's socialist and communist orientations have always been associated with popular figures such as Jacques Roumain, René Salomon, and Jean Bertrand Aristide, and, for the most part, offers a European version of Marxism synthesized, as in the case of the latter two figures, with either Black nationalism or liberation theology, respectively. In this work, I argue that Haiti's first form of socialism or communism is grounded in the reactionary efforts of the founder of the country, Dessalines. Following the Haitian Revolution, which is a revolt against slavery and mercantilist/liberal capitalism, the founder of the country, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, attempted to synthesize three forms of system and social integration on the island in order to constitute the nation of Haiti: the mercantilist and liberal capitalism of the Affranchis, petit-bourgeois blacks and mulatto elites, respectively; and the Lakouism, communism, of the African majority on the island (Du Bois, 2004, 2012; Mocombe, 2016, 2023; Casimir, 2020). Hence, Dessalines attempted to mediate between, and synthesize, two diametrically opposing forms of system and social integration: the Catholic/Protestant Ethic and the spirit of capitalism of the mulatto elites and creole petit-bourgeois blacks who adopted the worldview (via the systemicity of liberalism and mercantilism) of their former colonial masters; and the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism of the African majority who synthesized their ethos with that of the Taino natives via the lakou system (Du Bois, 2004, 2012; Mocombe, 2016, 2023; Casimir, 2020). While the former two social classes, mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks, sought to integrate Haiti into the global capitalist world-system under the hegemony of the European powers of the nineteenth century via either mercantile (protectionist capitalism) or liberal (free-trade) capitalism, Dessalines (reactively) attempted to constitute the Haitian nation as a Black empire within the enframing ideology of the two aforementioned distinct forms of social and system integration of the social actors on the island (Casimir, 2020; Mocombe, 2016, 2023). In this sense, Dessalines, represented the first embodiment of Kojève's end of history Hegelian thesis, and defined socialism, libertarian communism, with its Haitian characteristics (Mocombe, 2016; 2024).

## 2. Background of the Problem

When the Haitian Revolution commences in 1791, there are three distinct groups vying for control of the island under two forms of system and social integration, the whites (*blancs*); free people of color and mulattoes (*Affranchis*), and the enslaved and escaped (maroon) Africans of the island (Du Bois, 2004, 2012; Mocombe, 2016, 2023; Casimir, 2020). The latter, over sixty-seven percent of the population, were not a structurally differentiated other. They had their own practical consciousness, what Mocombe (2016) calls the “Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism,” by which they went about recursively (re)organizing and reproducing the material resource framework via the lakou system (Lakouism). The former two, free blacks and *gens de couleur* (*Affranchis*), were interpellated, embourgeoised, and differentiated by the language, communicative discourse, mode of production, ideology, and ideological apparatuses of the West and shared the same European practical consciousness, the Catholic/Protestant Ethic and the spirit of capitalism social class language game, as the whites. The latter, integrated via the liberalism or mercantilism of the spirit of capitalism, social class language game stood against the libertarian communism of the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism social class language game of the majority of the Africans who were interpellated and ounganified/manboified by the language, communicative discourse, mode of production, ideology, and ideological apparatuses of *oungan yo*, *manbo yo*, *gangan yo*, and *granmoun yo* (James, 1986; Fick, 1990; Du Bois, 2004, 2012; Ramsey, 2014; Mocombe, 2016, 2023).

Following the Revolution, between 1804 and 1806, the purposive-rationality of the enslaved and maroon Africans would become a part of the *modus operandi* of the Haitian nation-state until October 17, 1806 when Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the founding father of the Haitian nation, was assassinated by Alexandre Pétion and Henri Christophe. At which point, the purposive-rationality of the *Affranchis* with their emphasis on integration into the mercantilist and free-trade (liberal) dialectical logic of the global capitalist world-system, capitalist wealth, French culture, religion, and language became dominant at the expense of the African linguistic system, Kreyol; Vodou ideology; its ideological apparatuses; and modes of production, subsistence agriculture, husbandry, and *komes*, of the African masses on the island who took to the mountains and provinces, where they exercised their Lakou system, communal living, following the death of Dessalines (Fick, 1990; Nicholls, 1979; Du Bois, 2004, 2012; Mocombe, 2016, 2023; Casimir, 2020). This is not to say that Dessalines completely sided with the purposive-rationality or practical consciousness of the African masses who sought to recursively reproduce their Vodou Ethic and spirit of communism, i.e., subsistence agriculture, husbandry, and *komes* (commerce), practical consciousness on the island via the lakou system. The argument here is that via his nationalization project, he attempted (in a reactive sense, i.e., reacting to the socioeconomic infighting between the different groups on the island) to balance the purposive-rationality, liberal and mercantilist capitalism, of his *grandon* class of former generals and slave drivers, i.e., the creole blacks, who yearned to become wealthy landowners and masters like the whites and racist mulatto elites amidst the desires of the African masses seeking to reproduce their subsistence agriculture, husbandry, and *komes*. In a reactionary sense, Dessalines sought to synthesize the three political/economic systems of the three groups to his detriment and that of the Africans who sought to exercise the Lakou system despite policies (land, labor, and agricultural policies) put in place by the two bourgeoisies of the *Affranchis* class to undermine it (Du Bois, 2012). In this sense, Dessalines would come to define Haiti’s socialism, libertarian communism, with its Haitian characteristics.

## 3. Theory and Method

For this argument of a Dessalinian socialist constitution of Haitian society, I use the distinction Mocombe (2016) draws between the form of system and social integration of the Africans, the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism, as it stood against the Catholic/Protestant Ethic and the spirit of capitalism of the *Affranchis*. Against the Catholic/Protestant Ethic and the spirit of capitalism of the *Affranchis* with its emphasis on individualism, personal wealth, and capitalist exploitative labor and production, the Africans sought balance, harmony, and subsistence living through their Vodou way of life (Du Bois, 2004, 2012; Mocombe, 2016, 2023). Following the Haitian Revolution, the majority of the Africans, given their refusal to work on plantations or agribusinesses (the *corvée* system of mercantilism), migrated to the provinces and the mountains, abodes of formerly established “maroon republics,” and established a “counter-plantation system” (Jean Casimir’s term) based on husbandry, subsistence agriculture, and *komes*, i.e., the trade and sell of agricultural goods for income to purchase manufactured products and services (Du Bois, 2012; Casimir, 2020). The mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois free blacks, a Francophile neocolonial oligarchy, countered this counter-plantation system through their control of the ports, export trade, and the political apparatuses of the state, which increased their wealth through the taxation of the goods of the African peasants. As Laurent Du Bois (2012), building on Casimir’s counter-plantation thesis, observed of the process, the former enslaved Africans, [t]ook over the land they had once worked as slaves, creating small farms where they raised livestock and grew crops to feed themselves and sell in local markets. On these small farms, they did all the things that had been denied to them under slavery: they built families, practiced their religion, and worked for themselves... Haiti’s rural population

effectively undid the plantation model. By combining subsistence agriculture with the production of some crops for export, [*komes*,] they created a system that guaranteed them a better life, materially and socially, than that available to most other people of African descent in the Americas throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But they did not succeed in establishing that system in the country as a whole. In the face of most Haitians' unwillingness to work the plantations, Haiti's ruling groups retreated but did not surrender. Ceding, to some extent, control of the land, they took charge of the ports and the export trade. And they took control of the state, heavily taxing the goods produced by the small-scale farmers and thereby reinforcing the economic divisions between the haves and the have-nots (p. 6).

Hence, in refutation to this counter-plantation-system grounded in "the Vodou ethic and the spirit of communism" (Mocombe's term), the *Affranchis* sought to continue the plantation-system of their former colonial slavemasters, which was grounded in the Catholic/Protestant Ethic and the spirit of capitalism of the colonial economy, via a liberal or mercantilist capitalism of the *corvée* system. Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1804-1806), the father of the country, conversely, sought to constitute the Haitian nation-state by mediating between and balancing the liberal and mercantilist desires of the *Affranchis* on the one hand, which he sought to implement via the state; and the purposive-rationality for landownership, husbandry, subsistence agriculture, and *komes* of the Vodou leadership of the African masses who wanted no part of a system that resembled slavery or Louverture's *corvée* system, on the other hand, which he sought to implement via land redistribution. In this sense, Dessalines's effort was the first attempt to synthesize socialism/communism and capitalism in the Kojèveian sense.

#### 4. Discussion

Dessalines, out of sociopolitical expediency, i.e., responding to the racial animus, economic disparities, and sociopolitical tensions of the groups (creole blacks, mulattoes/whites, and Africans) remaining on the island post-independence, sought to constitute the new nation-state within these two opposing structuring structures relying on the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism, with its emphasis on balance, harmony, and equality, of the African majority to curb the individualistic (economic) greed of the *Affranchis*. As such in his 1805 constitution he proceeded to divide the land, through his nationalization project, equitably among all those who fought in the Revolution; disallowed white landownership (with the exception of the Polish and other whites who fought with his army during the Revolution) on the island; renounced everything that was French for systems grounded in the experiences of the people of the island; and renounced white supremacy for a Pan-African discourse that would have Haiti become the land for and of blacks (Fick, 1990; Nicholls, 1979; Du Bois, 2012; Mocombe, 2016, 2023). It is not enough, however, to view Dessalines's discourse and discursive practices along the inverted black-nationalist and pan-Africanist lines of Marcus Garvey, Malcolm-X, Henry Highland Garnet, Martin Robinson Delaney, and W.E.B. Du Bois as highlighted by Susan Buck-Morss (2009) and David Nicholls (1979). To do so, would make his position a structurally differentiated dialectical (racial) response to enslavement, i.e., a racial "other" seeking to recursively reorganize and reproduce the Catholic/Protestant Ethic and the spirit of capitalism in a national/racial position of his own. My position here is that his response was "enframed" by the structuring logic, Vodou Ethic and spirit of communism social class language game, of the masses and their Vodou leadership on the one hand and that of the *Affranchis* on the other, which he sought to synthesize in constituting the Haitian nation-state (Mocombe, 2016, 2023). As such, his movement was a Kojèveian sociopolitical economic project, which sought to synthesize the liberal and mercantilist desires of the *Affranchis* with the libertarian communal wants of the Africans. As Dessalines declared, "the sons of the colonists' have taken advantage of my poor blacks. Be on your guard, negroes and mulattoes, we have all fought against the whites; the properties which we have conquered by the spilling of our blood belong to us all; I intend that they be divided with equity" (Dessalines quoted in Nicholls, 1979, p. 38).

This statement of Dessalines's was not only rhetorical, but it was also practical. In order to commence his nationalization project, Dessalines, whether sincerely or for his own political interests given his infighting with the mulattoes and creole blacks, which he tried to offset with the purposive-rationality of the Africans, following the Revolution, did not seek to solely recursively reorganize and reproduce the Catholic/Protestant Ethic and the spirit of capitalism of the *Affranchis*, but was also mindful of the desires of the Africans. As Leslie G. Desmangles highlights, [d]uring the first three years after independence (1804-1807) under Jean-Jacques Dessalines's administration, Haiti was united economically and politically... At the outset of his administration, Dessalines... divided the citizens of the country into two categories, the laborers and the soldiers. Fearing the return of the French army, Dessalines... organized all those who had actively participated in the war of independence into an army of 25,000 men... Those who had been on the plantations during the war continued as laborers and cultivated the large acreages the government had annexed from the white planters... The newly militarized agriculture... produced largely sugar, cotton, and coffee, which mulatto overseers divided according to certain state-established criteria... The overseers were to transmit one-half of the crops to the state: one half of this was used for export, and the other half paid the rent on the land. Another quarter of the total crop yield was

retained for the workers' salaries, and the remaining quarter paid the salary of the plantation overseers (1992, pp. 38-39).

These efforts were also balanced by his attempt at land reform, which sought to redistribute the remaining land of the island equitably amongst the *Affranchis* and African majority where both would be allowed to do as they pleased (Du Bois, 2004, 2012; Mocombe, 2016).

This synthesis, large plantations under state ownership with equitable distribution of crops as wage with redistribution of land amongst soldiers and laborers for private use, which I have identified elsewhere as Haitian socialism (libertarian communism), Dessalines attempted to utilize to balance the capitalist greed of the *Affranchis* (Mocombe, 2016). Via the *lakou* system the Africans recursively reorganize(d) and reproduce(d) the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism as a form of system and social integration for total liberty and equality, against the Protestant Ethic and the spirit of capitalism of the *Affranchis* and mulattoes seeking to interpellate and integrate them into the inequality of the latter system via the *corvee* system. The *lakou* is a community of people and houses organized and gathered around a common yard under the directions of an *oungan*, *manbo*, or family elder that promoted and promotes an egalitarian existence rooted in the Vodou science/religion and ancestor worship, land ownership arrangements, and working the soil (Du Bois, 2004, 2012; Mocombe, 2016). Within the *lakou* system, each individual or nuclear family owned/own their own land, through which they provided/provide for basic necessities by growing food and raising livestock for their own consumption and for sale in local markets. They also grew and grow export crops, such as coffee, in order to purchase imported consumer goods such as clothes and tools. The libertarian communism of the *lakou* thus divided power in a way that allowed rural residents to live and work as they wished (through land and garden ownership to provide for their own subsistence), while preventing the consolidation of wealth, and therefore control and inhibitor of equality, in the hands of any one person within the community through a set of customs and secret societies of the Vodou religion that regulate(d) land ownership, land transfers, family relationships, and community affairs. Communal assistance and exchange, via food sharing, harvesting, house building, religious life, and ancestral worship, under the leadership of women also characterized and characterizes *lakou* life. In essence, the purpose of *lakou* life was and is to promote communal sharing, total liberty, and equality (libertarianism and egalitarianism), via land ownership and self-sufficiency, for all without distinctions and economic differentiation within a libertarian communist state.

The Vodou Ethic and the spirit of capitalism of the Africans diametrically opposed the liberal/mercantilist system of the *Affranchis*, which they inherited from the French. The latter sought *embourgeoisement* either through a mercantilism that emphasized protectionism of Haiti's agricultural products produced by the majority of Dessalines's generals, or liberal free trade of those products by the majority of the mulattoes who controlled the ports and the export and import trade. The former, Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism of the Africans, sought balance, harmony, and subsistence living. Dessalines, out of practical necessity given the sociopolitical and economic tensions of the groups on the island, sought to synthesize the two positions via the nation-state.

In other words, at the base of the *lakou* system emanating from the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism are communal sharing or exchange and agricultural production at the family level for subsistence living, trade, and independence so that the individual can live free and equal to all. This must be balanced against the (over) accumulation of wealth by any one member of the *lakous*, which may cause inequality and curtail liberty. To prevent the latter, Dessalines's *corvee* system maintained the plantation agricultural through state control and distribution of its products, while seeking to redistribute the remaining land amongst the populist for their individual and or communal usage. Hence the synthesis of the two systems wherein the Africans would be able to constitute their *lakou* system, and the *Affranchis* would be able to maintain their agribusinesses and land on a smaller scale, and freely trade their products locally or internationally without impeding on the production and sales of the products of the state-controlled *corvee* system.

This constitution of Haiti did not, and would not, sit well with the *Affranchis* who desired their pre-war status and wealth, which tied them to the global capitalist world-system. Instead of focusing on military fortification of the island, national production, food security, and agricultural production for local consumption as Dessalines attempted to do with his equitable redistribution of land among the population, the *Affranchis* assassinated him over his land and economic reform proposals, and the masses of Africans fled to the mountainsides. With the death of Dessalines in 1806, the majority of the productive land was divided among the mulatto elites, who took over their fathers' land and estates, and the black commanding officers of the revolution. They kept intact the export based economic arrangements which existed under colonialism and Toussaint's regime with the mulatto elites — because of their status as mulattoes — serving as the middle persons (merchants) between the nation-state and outside merchants. What emerged in Haiti, following the Revolution and the death of Dessalines, was the same colonial class structure under the leadership of the *Affranchis* and their adversarial partnership with an emerging foreign white and mulatto merchant class, which assisted in the acquisition of

manufactured goods, petit-bourgeois blacks who converted their plantations into agribusinesses, and the Africans in the provinces and mountains whose products were heavily taxed by the emerging nation-state under the leadership of the Affranchis (Pierre-Louis, 2000; Du Bois, 2012; Mocombe, 2016). The continuous sociopolitical economic struggle between the mulatto merchant/professional class and the black landowning managerial classes for control of the state and its apparatuses in order to determine its mercantilist or liberal orientation, at the expense of the African masses in the provinces and mountains whose children they arm and use against each other as they migrate to Port-au-Prince amidst American neoliberal policies seeking to displace the masses for tourism, agro and textile industries, and athletics (basketball and soccer) continues to be a hindrance for the constitution of a sovereign Haitian nation-state. The former two, interpellated and embourgeoised in Western ideological apparatuses, seek to constitute Haiti, with the aid of whites (France, Canada, and America), as an export-oriented periphery state within the capitalist world-system under American hegemony against the desires of the masses of Africans in the provinces and mountains seeking to maintain their *komes*, subsistence agriculture, and husbandry, which are deemed informal. The *grandon* class, composed of educated professionals, former drug dealers, entertainers, and police officers attack the former Affranchis class, which is now a comprador bourgeoisie (composed of Arab merchants) seeking to build, own, and manage hotels and assembly factories producing electronics and clothing for the US market, under the moniker the children of Dessalines against the children of Pétion in the name of the African masses of the island, the majority of whom are peasant farmers interpellated and ounganified by the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism. Instead of focusing on infrastructure (artificial lakes, potable water, food security, mache — modern market spaces for *komes*, universities, and state-owned companies for the peasant class to sell, etc.) to augment national agriculture and the productive forces of the latter group, who constitute eighty-five percent of the population, the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks emphasize job creation through foreign direct investment in tourism, postmodern identity politics, agro and textile industries, privatization of public services, infrastructure for an export-oriented economy similar to the one they had under slavery, and the constitution of a political economic bourgeoisie in control of the state apparatuses. However, their inabilities — given the voting power of the majority — to constitute two dominant rotating political parties to implement the neoliberal desires of their former colonial slavemasters, leaves Haiti in perpetual turmoil. As in slavery, the African masses continue to fight, against their interpellation, embourgeoisement, and differentiation as wage-earners in the tourism trade and textile factories of the Catholic/Protestant Ethic and spirit of capitalism of these two power elites seeking equality of opportunity, recognition, and distribution with whites at their expense, for the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism of *oungan yo*, *manbo yo*, and *granmoun yo* of Bois Caiman, i.e., the originating moments of the Haitian Revolution.

## 5. Conclusion

If implemented by all subsequent leaders post Dessalines, libertarian communism would be governed politically as the Africans did prior to the advents of Islam and Christianity on the continent (Dessalines crowned himself emperor for life of the nation). Traditional West African political structures were constituted around “a hierarchical bureaucracy of kings who were regarded as being invested by divine right, ruling in accordance with the will of the ancestors and some omnipotent power. The kings had their own councils and advisers, or ministers of state, who supervised military affairs, external affairs, the treasury, justice, courts, etc. The various subordinate districts within the kingdoms had their rulers, and the villages had their headmen” (Harris, 1998, p. 52). In the constitution of the contemporary Haitian nation-state via the balance between state control of certain resources and their equitable distribution with the vertical integration of the lakou system as enframed by the libertarian communism of the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism, in place of the king would be the president (emperor as in the case of Dessalines)/council of elders (parliament) ruling in accordance with the will of the ancestors and the people. The president/council of elders would have their own councils and advisers, or ministers of state, who supervised military affairs, external affairs, the treasury, justice, courts, etc. He/she would be appointed for life by the representative body, parliament, of the various communes and communal sections within the nation-state. This parliament would constitute a political body replaced every seven years by lot, like the American jury system, from each lakou, which would be governed by its headperson as determined by the will of the ancestors and the people of the lakous, of the communes and communal sections. Once again, the intent of this political structure, regardless of its form, would be to maintain the balance between individual liberties and egalitarianism, state libertarian communism, which is at the heart of the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism and lakou life, and capitalist greed. So in essence any political form would suffice so long as they maintained the balance between liberty and equality as prescribed by the communal idealism of the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism. As of the writing of this paper, however, an imbalance dominates Haitian society given the triumph of capitalism under the hegemony of the West, America, the Haitian bourgeois elites, and the professional managerial class.

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