

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN  
Department of History  
Semester 2, 1984-85

History 378

The French Revolution

Prof. Goldberg

I. Books for the Course

a. Required paperbacks:

Norman Hampson -- Social History of the French Revolution  
Jacques Godechot -- The Counter-Revolution  
Albert Soboul -- The Sans-Culottes  
Denis Woronoff -- The Bourgeois Republic; from Thermidor to Brumaire  
C.L.R. James -- the Black Jacobins

b. Optional paperback:

We have asked the bookstore to stock a small supply of J.M. Thompson's Leaders of the French Revolution. A distinguished historian of the Revolution, Thompson wrote especially well about the lives of those militants who became most influential or notorious. If you want to draw closer to those great actors in the revolutionary drama than through the events themselves, you will find this collection of biographical studies well worth the effort.

II. The Course Requirements

a. Mid-term examination:

This test will fall on Monday, March 4. The questions will be based on:  
1) the lectures since the beginning of the term; and 2) the following chapters from the required paperbacks,

Hampson, chapters 1 through 5  
Godechot, Chapters 2, 4, 5, and 9

Coming as it does after only six weeks, this examination will cover a relatively small proportion of the wide-ranging history on our agenda. Thus, we won't distribute study questions in advance, as we habitually do for the Final. But we can tell you in advance that we will pose two questions (neither of them on an obscure or trivial topic but rather on an obvious and important theme); we will then ask you to answer one of those two questions.

In your grade for the course, the mid-term will contribute 20%.

b. Final examination:

The questions for the Final will be based on: 1) the lectures since the mid-term; and 2) the following books, or chapters of books, from the required list,

Hampson, chapters 6 through 9  
 Soboul, the entire volume  
 Godechot, chapters 11 and 12  
 Woronoff, the entire volume

About a week before the scheduled Final, we will distribute a set of study questions, from which we will choose the ones for the actual exam; and among those questions we select you will have a reasonable choice.

In your grade for the course, the Final will contribute 50%.

c. Written essay:

You will be required to submit, no later than Monday, April 8, a reflective essay on the critical teachings of The Black Jacobins by C.L.R. James. We're not talking about an elaborate research paper, but rather a concise, well-argued essay about the meaning and implications of some theme in Black Jacobins, which you consider especially important and revealing.

If you are taking the course for three credits, then you can meet this requirement by submitting an interpretative paper, some 6 or 7 pages in length, which deals with one concrete aspect of James's analysis.

If you are taking the course for 4 credits, then you can meet this requirement by submitting a somewhat longer, more complex paper: some 9 or 10 pages in length; linking the theme (or themes) under consideration to James's brilliant insight into the making (and breaking) of 3rd World revolutions.

Whether you are taking the course for 3 credits or four, the written essay will count for 30% in your overall grade.

You should begin reading the James volume at once: so that you can absorb and reflect upon its fascinating but richly-detailed history. Remember that until the mid-term, the required reading for the course will be relatively limited, but that it will become considerably more extensive over the last half of the semester. Thus, you will be wise and prudent if you prepare your written essay during the earlier part of the semester, when you should have more time for careful, serious work. In that way, you will have no trouble in submitting a well-written essay on or before the deadline date of April eighth.

The Black Jacobins is a brilliant and classic work: the impassioned history of the first great national liberation struggle in the 3rd world; an unsparing exposé of the ways of colonialism and racism; a profound reflection about the transforming impact of revolutionary action on long-suffering masses. In no way has James simplified the infinite complexity of the insurrection in San Domingo. Thus, you will have to read Black Jacobins with care and close attention: noting the conflict of rival ambitions and interests at play in the revolutionary drama; noting the limitation of "liberty, equality, fraternity" when applied to the colonial issue; noting the pathos of development in a "liberated" Haiti where no other economic model was available except the old plantation system....

When you compose your essay, you shouldn't try to summarize the book. Even if it were possible to compress an intelligible summary within the confines of a short essay, the exercise would be unimaginative and fruitless. Instead, you should address a problem or theme which you consider especially compelling and relevant. Thus, at the very beginning of your essay, you should clearly state the precise subject of your reflections and its particular significance. In choosing your topic, you can fix your attention on any aspect of the West Indian revolution which engages your sensibility. But as you read James, you will find that certain themes burn with a special intensity. For example,

a) the emergence and qualities of Toussaint as a revolutionary leader; b) the ambiguous relationship of Toussaint with the black masses, on the one hand, and the white power structure, on the other; c) the contradiction, at the heart of the French Revolution, between the universal ideals of liberty and equality, and the bourgeois defense of private property; d) the workings of the old colonial system (the "Black Code" of 1685, the slave as property, the West Indian planters and French merchants as beneficiaries, etc.); e) the de-stabilizing effect of the French Revolution on that colonial system; f) the ambiguous status and political role of the mulattoes (very much like the petty bourgeoisie in modern Western societies); g) the ends and means of the liberal Republic, the radical (or Jacobin) Republic, and the Bonapartist Empire, as revealed in their policy toward the insurrection in San Domingo; h) the full significance of the penetrating insight by James into "revolutionary violence" (p. 141): "When the masses turn (as they will one day) and try to end the tyranny of centuries, not only the tyrants but all 'civilization' holds up its hand in horror and clamors for 'order' to be restored. If a revolution causes high overhead expenses, most of them it inherits from the greed of reactionaries and the cowardice of the so-called moderates. Long before abolition the mischief had been done in the French colonies and it was not abolition but the refusal to abolish which had done it."; i) the impact of revolutionary ideology on the exploited, long-passive slaves, and their transformation into insurgent, insistent masses through the process of revolution; j) the crisis of development after independence (Toussaint's failure to expropriate big property and his imposition of wage-labor, etc.).

Do you see the point? That from the pages of James's book scores of significant, intensely relevant themes impose themselves upon us. Choose any topic which galvanizes your intellectual interest and social concerns. Then, organize your thoughts around that subject: so that you can deepen your understanding of this first, electrifying West Indian revolution, more than a century and a half before Castro.

You are not required to base your paper on any source except The Black Jacobins. But some of you may have the time and the interest to dig more deeply into the subject. The bibliography on the abolition of slavery in the West Indies, and its economic and social consequences is very copious. Consider just this handful of excellent titles: George Tyson, ed., Toussaint L'Ouverture; David Nicholls, From Dessalines to Duvalier; Matt Lundahl, Peasants and Poverty: A Study of Haiti; William Green, British Slave Emancipation; Vera Rubin and A. Tuden, Comparative Perspectives on Slavery in New World Plantation Societies.

### III. A Final Word, before the Fete Begins

Almost 200 years have elapsed since the great mass upheaval in the 1790's. But you would be light years off the mark if you thought that the French Revolution belonged to a past long gone and dead; or that the roar of its political thunder had faded into silence. For the spectre of popular insurrection, which had haunted the propertied elites throughout the 19th century, remains powerfully intimidating, in this age of 3rd world revolutions, to the conservative ideologues of 1985. Thus, the French Revolution is no less an arena of ideological conflict today than it was in its immediate aftermath: so that the doctrinaires of inequality attack the intervention of the masses as a reign of anarchy and a threat to civilization itself; so that the strategists of the contemporary counter-revolution identify the "terror of '93" as a kind of preface to the goulag, and Robespierre as a kind of trial run for Stalin; so that the defenders of bourgeois order would expunge from the record any possible justification for revolution in the 1790's, as though the propertied elites should have formed a common front against "la canaille". You may be sure that we will confront this offensive head-on; that we will examine its charges in the glaring light of documentary record; and that in so doing, we will say our say about the enduring lessons and value of the French Revolution.