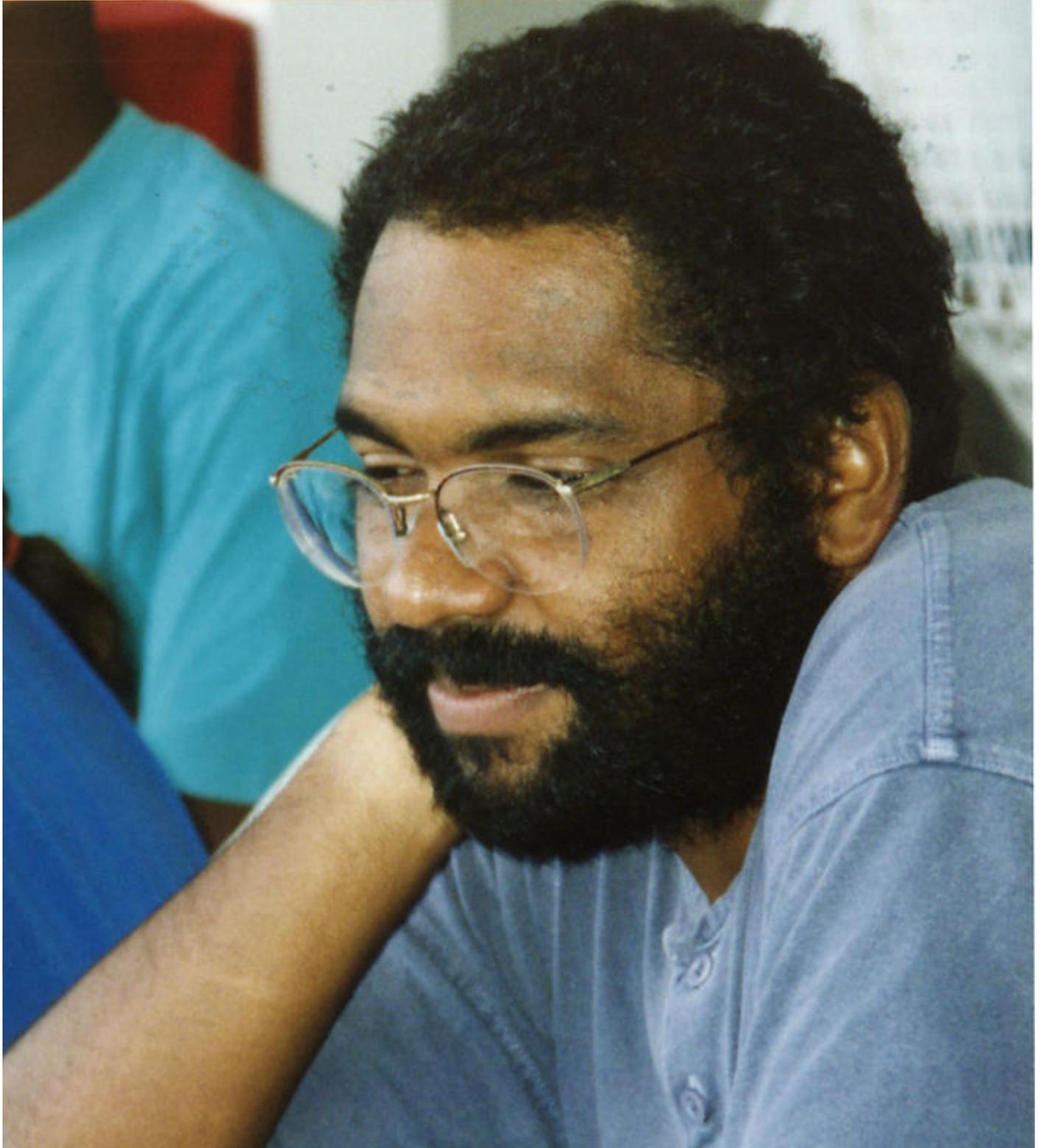


BOMB Magazine — David Scott by Stuart Hall

By **Stuart Hall**, bombmagazine.org

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David Scott. Photo by Annie Paul. Courtesy of the photographer.

The vision and hopes of a new beginning that accompanied the formation of new nations after World War II have largely collapsed. In many places, “anticolonial utopias have gradually withered into postcolonial nightmares.” For some time now, David Scott has been puzzling about where critical inquiry goes next. Scott, founder-editor of the leading Caribbean postcolonial journal, *Jacobin*, is a Jamaican, teaching anthropology at Columbia and has worked in and written about Sri Lanka and the Caribbean. His earlier book, *Refashioning Futures* (1999), examined what would be the conditions for critical reflection and inquiry “after post-coloniality.” In a radical expansion of that argument, his new book, *Conscripts of Modernity*, proposes not that we give better answers to the old questions, but that the questions themselves are no longer relevant—because they belong to a different “problem space” and need to be radically refashioned. Since our questions about the present depend on how the historical past is constructed in relation to them, we need to narrate the relation of past to present differently in order to highlight different aspects. For example, not the “romance” of how an enslaved past became, through struggle, a realm of perfect freedom—the preferred story of another moment in time—but the more tragic tale of how the descendants of slaves became the “conscripts of modernity.” These and related issues—the preconditions of a new postcolonial critique—are explored through a radical rereading of *The Black Jacobins*, C. L. R. James’s classic account of the only successful Caribbean slave rebellion, the Haitian Revolution of the 1790s, a seminal work that James first published in 1938 and (Scott argues) significantly revised in 1963.

Stuart Hall David, your book *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* is written in the shadow of what you call the exhaustion and collapse of “the social and political hopes that went into the anti-colonial imaginary and postcolonial making of national sovereignties.” What do you think went wrong, fundamentally, with that project?

David Scott Stuart, here’s one way of answering your question. I was born in 1958 in Jamaica. And since Independence came in 1962 I am part of the first generation to grow up more or less entirely inside the New Nation. I have no personal experience of colonialism. I have no memory of the Union Jack coming down, no sense of an ending and a new beginning. I live, therefore, not so much the contrast between the colonial and the postcolonial as the early internal struggle over the kind of nation it would be. The 1970s was my generation’s short decade of hope and expectation and longing. Whether you were a Rastafarian (as I was for a while in high school), or whether you were part of Michael Manley’s democratic socialist People’s National Party or the

communist Worker's Party of Jamaica (or, as I was, on the fringes of both), you lived inside a surging momentum (well, maybe not *surging*) for radical social change. The 1980s brings this lurching to a close with the assassination of Walter Rodney in January 1980; the defeat of Michael Manley in October of the same year; and the implosion of the Grenada Revolution in 1983. I am old enough to have believed in the 1970s, but I am also young enough to be skeptical of the mythology of the narrative of emancipation and to be able to cast an impassive eye on its rhetorical structure. This is the generational vantage from which I come at *Conscripts of Modernity*.

But you've asked me what went wrong with that project of radical national sovereignty. I should say, to begin with, that *Conscripts of Modernity* is not concerned with figuring out or contributing to the discussion of "what went wrong" (and I repeat this throughout the book). But okay, true, the disenchantment you detect stems from a sharp sense that the project didn't simply run out of steam, but was, in fundamental ways, *wrong-headed*. I think this is what you are (perhaps *have been* for a while) trying to get me to face up to, to admit. So yes. And there are, needless to say, many dimensions to the "failure" of the postcolonial project - imperialism, globalization and so on. But one dimension about which I have written in the case of Jamaica has to do with the dream of cultural-political *consensus* dreamt by the brown middle-class leadership of the liberal nationalists and the Marxist-Leninist left alike. With differing degrees of doctrinal emphasis, both the liberals and the left *imagined* a postcolonial state which could impose a single standard of moral and civilizational value, a single idiom of rationality, and a single horizon of ends toward which the population as a whole was obliged to head. *E pluribus Unum*: out of many, one. Difference—the loud, ragged, edgy, difference of the popular articulated in the Jamaican 1960s by the outlawry of the rude boy and in the conscious 1970s by Rastafari—was a fundamental threat to the brown middle-class consensus, and had, consequently, to be managed, to be overcome, to be ordered, expelled, repressed rather than enabled, sheltered, engaged and accommodated. Certainly one way of telling the story of contemporary Jamaica, increasingly volatile and frequently ungovernable, is to say that no one now has any confidence in that dream. Not the new black middle class who are accumulating political power, and doubtlessly not the black poor who are using all the loopholes of the fractured and corrupt state and the weak and globalized economy to make do. And that old brown middle class, now declining in moral authority, swings between urgent demands for a more no-nonsense and authoritarian policing and plaintively bewailing the collapse of civil society.

SH You are critical of what you call the narrative of “revolutionary romance.” What was the character of that narrative and what in your view are the problems with it?

DS As I’ve just said, I am very much a child of this narrative of revolutionary romance. So if I am critical of it I think of this criticism as part of an effort to think against what I find in myself, to wonder out loud about my own absorption of a certain story of who we are, where we are, how we got here and where we might be headed. So “critical” yes—but not, I hope, in a purely destructive way. This is why I am at pains throughout *Conscripts of Modernity* to repeat that the issue for me is not that the narrative or revolutionary romance got its history wrong. I want, strenuously, to give up this way of reading history and conducting criticism. I can’t re-occupy the space of experience, vision and expectation from which C. L. R. James conceived and wrote *The Black Jacobins*, and from which he judged the normative ends he aimed at.

Perhaps the clearest—because most programmatic—statement of the narrative of *anti-colonial* revolutionary romance is Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. I talked about it, remember, in *Refashioning Futures*. The narrative or revolutionary romance has a fairly recognizable structure, momentum and direction. It typically begins with a dark age of oppression and domination. This is followed by the emergence of the great struggle against that oppression and domination, and the gradual building of that struggle as it goes through ups and downs, temporary breakthroughs and set-backs, but moving steadily and assuredly toward the final overcoming, the final emancipation. In this narrative, then, the end is virtually guaranteed at the beginning in a *teleological* fashion. The path may not be entirely uninterrupted and untroubled, but the direction is clear, and the end, however far, is undoubted. James’s *Black Jacobins* has much the same overall structure, but it is not, of course, an explicitly programmatic book. Rather, it is an historical narrative, the unfolding and dramatic story of a very famous event, the Haitian Revolution, and a very famous individual, Toussaint L’Ouverture. Moreover, James’s revolutionary narrative also embodies the myth of the hero; the hero (that great 19th-century figure) embodies the forward historical movement and drives the narrative out of the dark and into the light. In George Steiner’s elegant and memorable phrase: “Salvation descends upon the bruised spirit and the hero steps towards grace out of the shadow of damnation.”

So that roughly is the shape of it. Now, I want to evade simply saying that the problem with this narrative is that its ends are incoherent, or that it is essentialist or epistemologically naive. I want to explore something else about the narrative of

revolutionary romance, namely the way the past and its relation to the present is constructed so as to *ensure* the narrative resolution of an already predicted future. As I've said, revolutionary romance presupposes a horizon of overcoming, of emancipation, and pictures a past and present that secures its plausibility, indeed its inevitability. But let's say that we live in a present in which that revolutionary horizon of overcoming evaporates as a future we can aspire to? In my view that way of narrating the connection between past and future loses its critical force. I think we in fact live in such a present. And consequently I think that we need a narrative that connects past, present, and future in other ways than does the revolutionary romance.



Stuart Hall. Photo by Clinton Hurton. Courtesy of Annie Paul.

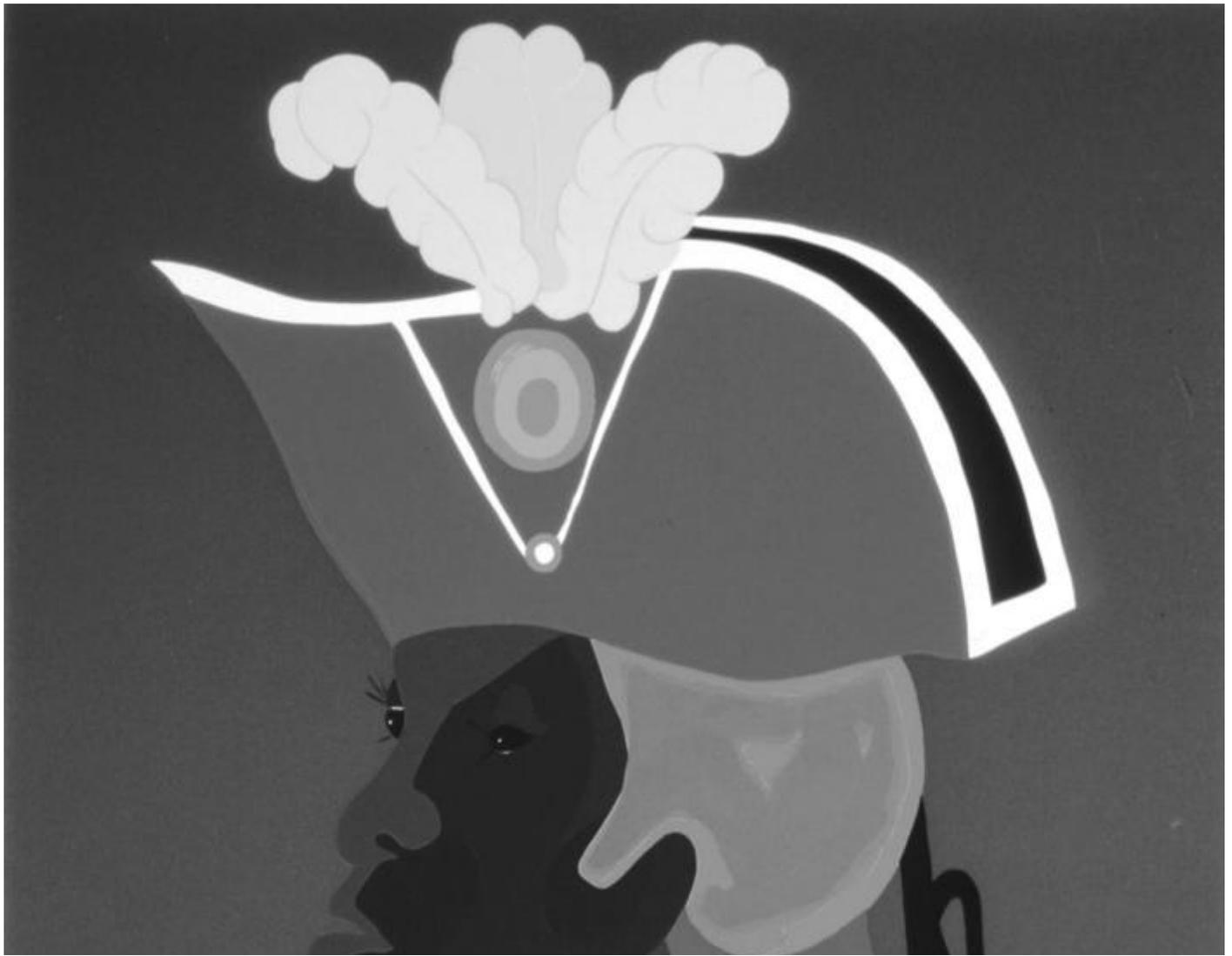
SH A central concern of the book is with how to narrate the connections between past, present and future—in other words, with *narrative*. Driven partly by C. L. R. James’s concern, in *The Black Jacobins*, with Toussaint L’Ouverture’s “tragic dilemma” and (in Aristotelian terms) his “tragic flaw,” you affirm that *tragedy*, not romance, offers a “reorienting of our understanding of the politics and ethics of the postcolonial present.”

What sort of “tragic narrative” is this and what is the nature of the “reorientation” which a tragic perspective offers?

DS Yes, as I was saying earlier, narrative is indeed my preoccupation in *Conscripts*, especially the kinds of explanations and expectations that are built into what Hayden White famously called the “content of the form” of narrative. And the formal dimension that interests me is *emplotment*, the plotting of a story such that it reads as a story of a *particular* kind. Romance, I said, tends toward teleology and totalization. There is a single and singular end of resolution toward which the story of conflict moves with an inexorable momentum: Wrong is made Right, Dark gives way to Light, Evil to Good, and so on. Tragedy, by contrast, offers no such consolations. The moral conflict is such that good and evil are not so cleanly separate, are often embodied in the same individual (remember Hegel’s famous reading of the *Antigone*), and therefore the one cannot give way seamlessly to the other in a final triumphant resolution. In tragedy, therefore, while insight might indeed come at last to the tragic hero, it will typically be too late to avoid the conflict working toward catastrophe. In my view this is enormously important for reconceiving the point of an historically informed criticism, and in particular for emplotting a relation between past, present and future. Tragedy reorients us *away* from any assumption that that relation can be organized as a steadily rising curve, it orients us away from the assumption that the future can be guaranteed by the pasts accumulated in the present. And because action in tragedy is not guaranteed in this way by a progressive dialectical resolution, it is more willing to honor our openness to contingency, our vulnerability to luck and chance; it is more willing to recognize the frailty of will, and the dark underside of mastery, the reversibility of all achievements.

So for these reasons tragedy seems to me an especially appropriate mode of emplotment for an historical moment in which the guarantee of former futures has waned, in which the great narratives of emancipation have become, at best, enfeebled. As I say in *Conscripts*, I think we live in tragic times less because of the heaps of catastrophes growing around us (political disasters like Iraq, Palestine or Darfur, or “acts of God” such as Hurricane Ivan’s devastation of Grenada), than because of the out-of-jointness between our former languages of opposition, hope, and change, and the world they were meant to criticize. In my view it is this reorientation that C. L. R. James so insightfully if, still, so tentatively, points us to by inserting those eight fresh paragraphs on tragedy in the last chapter of the 1963 second edition of *The Black Jacobins*.

But I am saying something else, too, which is that our colonial/postcolonial modernities are tragic in a specific sense—in the sense that led to what James called Toussaint’s tragic *dilemma*. James doesn’t do a particularly good job of sorting out the problem of Aristotle’s somewhat obscure idea of *hamartia* or “tragic flaw” (the impression one has of those eight paragraphs is that they were written in a concentrated burst), but he is insisting, I think, that we should *not* take Toussaint’s “errors” as stemming from some moral lapse or an egregious impoverishment of character, like an infatuation with Europe. It is true that Toussaint had an ambiguous relation to Europe’s seeming cultural benediction. But to belabor this is to lose sight of something else, namely that Toussaint’s dilemma was a constituent aspect of the modernity into which he was born and which had made him the subject/object of modern colonial power he was. The choice before him—either a return to slavery or a future without France—were sides of a single colonial modernity he had not chosen, but *within* which it was his fate to choose. The greatness of Toussaint for James is that he negotiated this dilemma without precedent to guide him, with nothing but his instinct to follow. He failed—if you like. But have we, postcolonials, succeeded? This is the profound question, it seems to me, James leaves us with.





Jacob Lawrence, General Toussaint L'Ouverture, 1986, silkscreen on paper, 28 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Copyright © 2004 Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence/Artists Rights Society

Photo by: Small Axe

SH One way of conceiving the failure of the anti-colonial project is in terms of a project which offered the wrong answers to the right questions. But you insist that it is not the answers, but the *questions*, which we need to change. Can you expand on your concept of “problem-space,” and how this applies to James’s *The Black Jacobins*, which is the “occasion” of your book?

DS The idea of a “problem-space” grows I think out of my reading of R. G. Collingwood and Quentin Skinner, though in the background of it you can certainly discern the trace of Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin and Foucault. Essentially, I am after a way of grappling with “context” that avoids a narrow sociology or historicism in which you get a lot of backdrop but little sense of the way these shape the discursive and non-discursive action with which you are interested. And I am looking for a way of side-stepping the anti-essentialist presentism that reads the past as a naive or mistaken version of the present.

Now, a “problem-space” (and obviously I’m severely compressing here) is first of all a conjunctural space, a historically constituted discursive space. This discursive conjuncture is defined by a complex of questions and answers—or better, a complex of statements, propositions, resolutions and arguments offered in answer to largely implicit questions or problems. Or to put this another way, these statements and so on are moves in a field or space of argument, and to understand them requires reconstructing that space of problems that elicited them. Of course, Quentin Skinner has done much to give this idea a new lease on life, but he is largely interested in reconstructing the past in relation to the present. I have wanted this idea to do an additional labor. I have wanted it to help us determine not only what the questions were that an author in a particular problem-space was responding to, but whether these questions continue in our new conjuncture to be questions worth responding to.

Like many West Indians of my generation, I have been reading C. L. R. James’s *Black Jacobins* over and over for many years. I know many of its passages by heart. For some reason, I’m not sure why, I decided to teach it while I was visiting at Johns Hopkins University in 1998–99. I think it was partly as a way of better acquainting myself with the now large literature on James’s work that has emerged in the past decade.

Refashioning Futures, which is where I started to think about the idea of a problem-space, was not yet out, but finished and in-press. I found myself reading *The Black Jacobins* differently. I found myself wondering about the distance that separated James and me; I found myself looking back at James looking toward me and thinking that I inhabit as a dead-end present the postcolonial future he lived as a fervent expectation and hope. Remember too that I have been doing a series of interviews with Caribbean intellectuals born in the 1920s, ’30s and ’40s (I of course did one with you, the first one, which appeared in the first issue of *Small Axe*). In them I am looking back at these intellectuals looking forward and trying to get a feel for the cognitive and ideological world of questions out of which they fashioned their expectations and hopes.

So I found myself reading James differently, attending more carefully to his allusions to the world in which he lived and from which he derived his preoccupations, and I became riveted by the Preface to the first edition which closes with that passage which is imprinted in my memory: “Tranquillity today is either innate, the philistine, or to be acquired only by the deliberate doping of the personality. It was in a seaside suburb that could be heard most clearly and insistently the booming of Franco’s heavy artillery, the rattle of Stalin’s firing squads, and the fierce shrill turmoil of the revolutionary movement striving for clarity and influence. This book is of it, with something of the

fever and the fret. Nor does the writer regret it. The book is the history of a revolution and written under different circumstances it would have been a different, but not necessarily a better book.” I suddenly realized that what James was doing was laying out some of the political and discursive conditions that constituted the problem-space in which he apprehended and approached the story of Toussaint L’Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution. But he was also doing more than this, he was saying that *other* conditions might produce another problem-space in which a different—though not necessarily a better—book might be written. This is not just James’s vanity (however vain he might well have been). It is a complicated insight into the whole craft of writing the past in—and *for*—the present. And while I was thinking about this insight of James’s I began to look more carefully at the first edition of *The Black Jacobins*, which hardly anybody reads because it is difficult to get hold of and I discovered to my utter astonishment that the passages on tragedy that open the last chapter of the second edition were not there. James had added them in the context of re-issuing the book in 1963. In other words, James does more than alert us in the Preface to the matter of conjunctures and problem-spaces, he was also suggests, again, in however tentative a way, what the narrative direction might be in changed, and in effect, non-revolutionary circumstances.



David Scott and Stuart Hall. Photo by Annie Paul. Courtesy of the photographer.

SH What is the thrust of your argument that it is *modernity* and “the paradoxes of colonial enlightenment,” rather than the legacies of slavery and what you call “an Africa-centered or subaltern moral and cultural story,” which provides the fundamental conditions for understanding the present?

DS This is a helpful and important question. Let me say first off that I don’t want to be read as seeking to diminish the significance of slavery and its post-emancipation legacy for understanding the relation between the colonial past and our postcolonial present.

What I want to do, rather, is *re-position* slavery, and in doing so alter somewhat the critical *conceptual* labor “the question of slavery” performs for us in our interpretive work today.

In this regard what has interested me is the “resistance” narrative in which the story of New World slavery is now conventionally cast (at least by those historians who are worth arguing with, who themselves altered an earlier casting of that story). Within the resistance narrative (including more recently the resistance narratives of modernity, that is, the subaltern or alternative modernities narrative), the story of slavery is typically told in a certain way. Slavery is pictured largely as a structure of *negating* or *repressive* power, a power that denied the slave agency, humanity, dignity, not to mention rights and resources of various sorts. Now, I am not disputing that characterization *per se*. Indeed I am only underlining the fact that it is a characterization, and that *as such*, as a *characterization*, it bears scrutiny for the conceptual labor it produces inside the narratives which deploy it. What I have tried to argue is that that characterization functions partly to enable, on the one hand, the criticism of a racist and colonialist story of the passivity of the black slave or the merciful civilization that slavery bestowed, and on the other, the telling of a powerful story (a powerfully and admirably *humanist* story, I should say) of survival, agency, resistance and overcoming. And as such it has been a generative element in certain anti-colonial and liberationist accounts of the relation between the slave past, the post-slavery present and an imagined truly emancipated future. *The Black Jacobins* is, in many respects, the great inaugurator of this story. But what if the horizon (of new nationhood, or socialism) toward which that story of overcoming urged—in which a denied past is linked to an entitled future—has faded? What if that past no longer serves to guarantee the opening of an emancipated future? If it is no longer clear what such an emancipated future might be, is it clear what role the story of that past is to play (short, that is, of merely asserting that it is true)? Or to put it another way, in terms of the idea of a problem-space of questions and answers I talked about earlier, what if the present had become so altered that the question the hoped-for future asked the past to answer no longer yielded the old persuasive force? How else might slavery be questioned?

I think that *The Black Jacobins* offers us a very tantalizing hint, one that has everything to do with *modernity*. I mean if you compare the story of slavery told in the body of the text (which belongs to 1938) to the one told in the appendix, “From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro” (which belongs to 1963), a very interesting contrast comes into view. Whereas the earlier story belongs to the familiar resistance narrative of slavery-as-

repressive-power (remember the great first chapter, “The Property”), the later story underlines something else, namely, the power that *produced* the subjects of a distinctive civilization—a power, in other words, that didn’t only negate (“demoralize” is the word James uses here) the humanity of the slave, but contributed to structuring and shaping the conditions of a particular form of humanity. For James, of course, that productive power—a power that shapes aptitudes, dispositions, conditions of learning and so on—is emphatically *modern* (you have yourself, Stuart, in several places, underlined this about James’s view). The colonial slave on an eighteenth century sugar plantation was a modern subject, the subject of modern technologies of subjectification and domination, and a subject of modern desire and expectation. To my mind thinking through the deadend present we live in requires less a story of what we have been excluded from than a story of our desire for *that* inclusion.

SH I am struck by the impact of Foucault’s work on your thinking—though, of course, he wrote and thought little about the non-European world. I see this in, for example, the emphasis on “the history of the present”; the idea that the Enlightenment and the French Revolution mark the decisive shift between the past and modernity itself; the shift of emphasis from continuities to ruptures and discontinuities; the concern with modernity as a kind of “fate”; the resistance to the idea of history as total oppression vs. total liberation; the idea of thought taking place within historically specific epistemes, and so on. Would you like to reflect further on the “gains” and “losses” of Foucault’s impact on your problematic?

DS This is a complicated question. Yes, to be sure, Michel Foucault has exercised a large influence on my work, and in just the areas you mention. I must say, though, that I am not overwhelmed by the fact that Foucault wrote little or nothing about the non-European world. This is partly because I think his interrogation of modernity, Europe’s modernity, has to have implications for how we think of the transformations that modernity produced in the worlds it colonized. It is also, and perhaps more importantly, because I think of Foucault’s work less as a series of ethnographies, stories of a particular past of madness, of medicine, of knowledge, of punishment, than as a congeries of theoretical attitudes, *an attitude to thinking*. I think of his work the same way I think of Marx’s or Wittgenstein’s or Nietzsche’s—or yours. It is the ethos of inquiry, the voice, most of all that I find so instructive, so compelling.

Perhaps my perspective on it is somewhat clouded, but I think of the influence of Foucault as less pervasive in this book, *Conscripts of Modernity*, than, say, in my earlier one, *Refashioning Futures*. I think of this book as being much more aware of the limits of Foucault's thought for my preoccupations, or at least of the need to supplement him in various ways. I suppose this is debatable, but take, for example, the Foucauldian idea of a "history of the present" with which *Conscripts* is concerned. This very fertile idea has been a great resource for criticizing the banal social-historical affirmation that all histories are written *in*— or from the perspective of—some determinate present. Foucault's idea is more radical than this. He is asserting that histories of the past ought to be *interventions* in the present, strategic interrogations of the present's norms as a way of helping us to glimpse the possibilities for an alternative future. But beyond identifying the large contours of our modernity, Foucault gave little thought to the details of the present these histories were meant to illuminate. Part of the reason for this I think is that he presumed a present (of high modernity) shaped to a large degree by Marx and Freud. But if we are ourselves (now three decades since *Discipline and Punish* introduced the idea of a history of the present) living through a particular rupture within the modern, or even with the modern in some respects, we need to unpack the idea of a "history of the present" so that we can specify more clearly what present it is that any reconstructed past is meant to illuminate. In this instance, Foucault requires some supplementation, and this is one of the things I try to do in *Conscripts* with the various work of Reinhart Koselleck, Hayden White, Collingwood, and Skinner.

More trenchantly perhaps, I am aware of the limits of Foucauldian genealogy in producing a *politics* properly speaking, politics understood as the affirmative settlement (however provisional) of the shape and boundaries of a community. I like William Connolly's idea that genealogy is best understood as a mode of ethicality, that is, a way of being responsive to the drive or inclination to closure in any political ordering, and helps us sustain a de-familiarizing and pluralizing ethos. But ethicality alone won't produce politics and therefore, once again Foucault has to be supplemented.

But *Conscripts of Modernity* is not meant to provide the outline of a new politics. I don't want it to be read that way at all. I think of it rather as trying to develop that dimension of *Refashioning Futures* which was concerned with the question of history in relation to the present, of trying to get clearer in my mind what to do with the inherited anti-colonial narratives of revolutionary romance. There was another dimension of *Refashioning Futures*, namely a concern with precisely this question of politics, and I see the work that I am trying to sketch out now as aiming to address this problem.

