

The Dragon and the Hydra

A Historical Study of Organizational Methods

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“You have fifteen, twenty, fifty years of civil wars and people’s struggles to go through, not only to change the conditions but in order to change yourselves and make yourselves fit for political rule.” – Karl Marx addressing the IWMA, the body that would later become the First International.

Marx’s words hit close to home. I’ve been involved in such movements for forty years, a product – originally – of the Black Liberation Movement of the 1960s, and subsequently being held as a political prisoner in the U.S. since 1972. Over that period, I’ve participated in a number of mass and party formations. It never fails to amaze me how much energy and time is dedicated towards establishing various groups’ claims to being the so-called vanguard of some struggle for justice, when in the end most of these exercises turn out to be sterile, when they don’t degenerate into fratricidal conflicts.

Furthermore, I’d hazard it to say, that the entire history of Marxist Leninist social change has known few other methods, leading me to further say that a sober analysis of that history points to a struggle for supremacy – not only over the bourgeois ruling class, but also against the working class and all other oppressed people; against any and all formations either of the latter pull together that escape their control. Thus, their mantra of doing everything to seize power for the working class and oppressed is a farce.

If there has ever been a Marxist Leninist Vanguard party who has found itself in power and did not subsequently follow that script, I’m not aware of it. While arguments can always be found to rationalize why it was/is necessary to resort to such measures, and many such arguments do make sense – initially – a closer look always seems to force adherents to fall back on the mantra of the flawed individual(s) who did not hold true to Democratic Centralism’s (DC) principles, which are themselves wide open to interpretation and manipulation, in order to seize the initiative in a struggle for domination – as opposed to trying to make a “concrete analysis of concrete conditions,” as V.I. Lenin instructed.

At the same time, history has shown that such ruthless methods are effective: if the objectives of those who used the DC methods were simply to seize power, then their record during the 20th century was impressive. It has proved itself as brutally efficient and capable of outdoing anything the bourgeois forces are capable of.

Nevertheless, in the end those who gained power using DC method have always ended up using it to defeat the aspirations of the workers and oppressed, and subsequently install the users of it as a new oppressive ruling class.

How could it be expected to produce any other outcome? DC concentrates more power in the hands of a relative few than any mechanisms the masses the former purport to be serving can muster: a recipe that’s bound to conflict with the vagaries of flawed humans.

Stan Goff, in his masterful *Full Spectrum Disorder* (2004, Softskull Press), believes that DC as practiced by Lenin and his Bolsheviks did have a democratic basis, whereby an open and intense democratic struggle was carried out in order to arrive at positions and policies. Then all the party workers would move in a decentralized, free wheeling manner to make possible the implementation of those decisions (in the teeth of czarist repression), which ultimately had the effect of centralizing their combined efforts, only later to change their methods. This led to a more all around centralization and very little democracy, if any. Without a doubt, any number of other Marxist/Leninist/Maoist (style) groups have had similar experiences.

Yet, if the clear historical tendency is to always gravitate towards less democratic and more oppressive forms of control, then quite frankly for one to say their use of historical materialism is leading them to formulate correct liberation ideas, theories and plans by using DC is ludicrous!

The Contemporary Situation

Here we are at the beginning of the 21st century, facing a global crisis unknown heretofore in the entire history of humankind. The threats to our collective existence are so multidimensional, it would take many other works to detail them all. Consequently, I'll limit myself to those that I believe are paramount to helping us break out of self-imposed mental roadblocks that hinder our efforts to move forward.

The main threat to humankind, the flora and fauna and our entire biosphere, is capitalist imperialism: a totally out of control, predatory, global system of accumulation and oppression that's on a collision course with the limitations of our planet: daily devouring children, women, people of color, the poor, workers of all stripes, wildlife and the environment in pursuit of profits.

All of our problems primarily rest on the artificial divisions that have been engendered between the oppressed for hundreds of years: divisions based on gender, race, ethnicity, culture, geography, sexual preferences, age and otherwise. These divisions have been fostered, historically, by those who have sought to use them in their pursuit of power and material gain.

Under imperialism, the overwhelming majority of our planet's humans are, ultimately, workers. Thus, Marx's address to the IWMA still holds true today. Albeit, he underestimated the degree of opposition the workers would face and the length of time it would take for them to overcome all of the obstacles in their path.

Marx, superb analyst that he was, due to the Eurocentric predilections that entrapped him, overlooked or dismissed important workers struggles that fell outside of Europe; or he at least failed to study them with the same intensity that he devoted to those European situations upon which he (primarily) based his otherwise well-based analysis. That set in motion other willful neglecting of formulating a proper evaluation of these 'other' struggles up until today even. A thorough study, evaluation, adaptation (wherever applicable) and understanding of some of these workers struggles will help us move forward in our struggle against imperialism. There, we'll find proven, workable alternatives to the flawed DC forms of organizing: ones that mirror Stan Goff's analysis of the strengths of the early Bolsheviks' use of that form.

Back to the Future

First off, let me state that I'm not an anarchist. Yet, a lot of what you'll read here is gonna look a whole lot like anarchism! To that I will only quote an unknown ancient, who after racking his brain to formulate answers to vexing problems, only later to discover that those who had come along before him had already expounded on what he thought were his intellectual inventions, is supposed to have blurted, "confound those ancients, they've stolen all of our best ideas."

Therefore, to the anarchist reader, what follows cannot properly be termed anarchism, simply because the practitioners themselves never knew that word, nor were they in contact with people of that view, as anarchism is a European ideology and these parties – for the most part – were Africans and Amerindians with very limited input by a small number of outcast Europeans.

Further, all of the struggles here written about had pretty much taken off and gained success prior to that concept's spread – under its classical anarchist thinkers and practitioners.

Still, the affinity between anarchism and the following is not rejected; on the contrary, it's welcomed as a sister set of ideas, beliefs and concepts – as long as the anarchists understand that they stand on equal footing, in a spirit of inter-communal self determination.

Historical overview

The following is a short outline of various workers struggles against early European imperialism, as practiced in Suriname, Jamaica, a number of southern areas of what is today the U.S., and finally Haiti. I'll outline how workers who had been enslaved fought longer than Marx's, "fifteen, twenty, fifty years of civil wars and peoples struggles..." in order to ultimately be able to exercise their own forms of self-determination and 'political rule.' And although all of them were as stratified as we are today, they were still able to democratically derive methods and policies that were collectively pursued by decentralized formations of their own making. And once winning their freedom from the various imperialist powers, unlike the later states ruled by Marxist vanguard formations, they never again relinquished their worker's-based autonomy, until this day, with one exception (Haiti) which deserves special attention.

Afterwards, I hope that you do your own in depth research and study, because to most people the bulk of this history will be unfamiliar. Then you can decide whether such organizational forms and methods would be useful to us in our struggle to save ourselves and the planet.

Suriname

"We must slay the Hydra." That was the Dutch imperialists' main concern in Suriname from their earliest days there.

(Hydra: In Greek mythology, a many headed monster whose heads regrew when struck off. It was finally killed by Hercules. Also the largest and longest constellation in the sky, but with no particular bright star.)

On the northern coast of South America, this tropical country borders Guyana and French Guyana and fronts the Caribbean Sea, with Brazil to its south. Geographically above one-third, again, as large as Cuba.

The first European interlopers to visit the area were the British, which were followed by the Dutch. Always it changed hands between them, but the Dutch were the main imperial power to occupy the country from the mid 1600s, up until the 1970s. All during that period, the overwhelming majority of the indigenous Amerindian populations were either suppressed, forced to flee to less hospitable areas, or exterminated.

The Dutch at that time were one of the world's major imperial powers, vying alongside of the British, Spanish, Danish, Portuguese and the French for control of North and South America, the Caribbean and other places in the world.

The Dutch West Indies Company was one of the first, and a major corporation in the world. And in Suriname, it launched plantation-based production of cash crops on a large scale, using enslaved workers imported from different parts of Africa. Added to that were a number of other

plantations run by other European ‘entrepreneurs,’ along with their overseers, shop-keepers, militias, artisans, administrators, bureaucrats and sailors, and a small percentage of (mostly) poor white women who had been exiled from Europe.

Compared to the enslaved Africans and the suppressed Amerindians, one could compare everyone else – but the small number of plantation operating entrepreneurs and administrators – with what we today recognize as the technologically-advanced countries’ labor aristocracy and petty bourgeoisie with those elements being fully dependent for their livelihood and protection of their persons and property, from the enslaved workers and remaining indigenous people, on the Dutch military, militias, the imperial court and the big mercantilists.

I made those comparisons because we all too often fail to point out that the enslaved Africans were transported across the Atlantic to assume the role of workers, and just about everyone else associated with their plight were also – first and foremost – other workers, similar to our plight today. And the issue of race did not – could not – change that basic fact! So keep that in mind as we develop this work.

Amongst the Africans were many different ethnic groups from different areas of the continent, all speaking different languages and with many varied religious and cultural practices. To give an idea of the stratification of these Africans, the fact that they all had dark skins meant next to nothing to them in terms of solidarity. Where they originally came from everybody had dark skin: friends and enemies alike! Further, it was the practice of the plantation owners to try to purchase workers from different backgrounds in order to keep them divided as much as possible. And because the work was so brutal and the food was so inadequate, most plantations were really death camps, where the African workers were literally worked to death in a few years, only to be replaced with newly-imported enslaved workers, who would also go on to make handsome profits for the owners. Thus, the turnover itself was a powerful check on the formation of any solidarity between the enslaved workers.

Be that as it may, almost from the first importation of enslaved Africans, there developed a tradition of flight from slavery: Africans ran away to the forests, swamps and highlands. These fugitives came to be known as Bosch Creoles: Dutch for Bush Creoles, or “born in the forest” and later bush negroes, who we’ll call Maroons throughout our study, as a generic name that has come to be used as an accepted way to describe fugitive, enslaved people throughout the western hemisphere.

Throughout the western hemisphere, we witness these collective Maroons developing and using a very effective form of decentralized organizing that not only served to help them defeat their former enslavers, but has helped them remain autonomous from all unwanted overseers for hundreds of years – until our time.

It must be recalled that the Suriname Africans were from many different backgrounds, so when they would come together as Maroons that would have to be factored in. They had to organize using democratic methods, and the glue that held them together was their collective focus on defeating their enslavers’ attempts to control them; *that* centralized their efforts.

There remained, however, one class of their communities who did not fit into that category: those Africans who did not flee, but were forced by maroon raiders to leave the plantations. They did not enjoy a say in their communities’ affairs until they had proven themselves.

But as a general rule, individuals and small groups would flee the plantations to join the Maroons, and on occasions large conspiracies were organized that saw the enslaved workers

preparing the ground work for maroon guerrillas to raid plantations and liberate scores at a time.

This example exhibits decisions arrived at by truly democratic means, and then carried out in a centralized manner, all done by otherwise decentralized groups. Long before our later Bolsheviks!

Over a 150 year period, the various Maroon communities of Suriname would wage a guerrilla war with the Dutch and English slavers to remain free. Today in Suriname their direct descendants still occupy the areas their ancestors fought on, and most of them have never suffered under slavery – even before the U.S. signed its own Declaration of Independence in 1776.

Even as this is written they remain autonomous from the government of Suriname – which gained its independence from the Netherlands – whose Dutch ancestors we’re discussing in 1975. In fact, the descendants of the early Maroons were again forced to fight another guerilla war against the newly-independent government in 1980: a successful effort on the part of the Maroons to maintain their autonomy and control over the lands they’ve historically occupied.

Their decentralized methods had their drawbacks. Their enemies in the imperialist camp were able to manipulate various Maroon communities into signing ‘treaties’ that gave those communities their freedom from enslavement and land to use – in exchange for them cooperating in the hunting down and capturing of other fugitives. By doing that, the enslavers could avoid the all but useless wars designed to capture or kill the skillful Maroon guerrillas, and everyone on the Maroon communities fell in that category: at the drop of a hat, the women and children in those communities could pack their belongings and escape to pre-arranged and built-up alternative settlements, while the men (and some women) busied themselves in fighting rear guard actions against the pursuing colonial soldiers.

It turns out, however, that although the treaties did solve some of the imperialist’s problems, the Suriname Maroons never really fulfilled their obligations to help the imperialists hunt and capture other Maroons. A narrative of the Dutch forces’ generations-long wars designed to either capture or kill the Boni Maroons is instructive in that regard (see *The Boni Maroon Wars in Suriname*).

By the mid-18th century, the Dutch had been forced by over a century of Maroon guerilla warfare to sign treaties with three of the most powerful Maroon communities: the Ndjuka, Saramaka and the Matawai. All of these Maroon communities had evolved over generations from fugitive African – from any different backgrounds – into new ethnicities which adopted the already mentioned names. Most importantly, they had soundly defeated all of the imperialist forces fielded to capture or kill them, while continuing to expand their numbers and offer an ever-growing threat to the Dutch colony.

The treaties came with yearly ‘gifts’ of all kinds that the Dutch would deliver to the Maroons: textiles, pots and pans, guns, powder, axes, knives, mirrors, nails, liquor and just about anything agreed upon during the periodic sit-downs between the parties. The underlying objectives of the imperialists were to both rid themselves of a dangerous enemy and turn them into valuable allies.

Yet once it became known to the still enslaved African workers that they could no longer rely on the Ndjuka, Saramaka and Matawai for refuge and protection, they began to seek out smaller Maroon concentrations. In the early 1700s, one of those small groups was headed by an African named Asikan Silvester. Born into this group was a child called Boni. His mother was a fugitive African and his father either African or Amerindian. Subsequently, the group chose Boni to be its new head, after Asikan became too old to serve in that position. This group of Maroons would eventually become known to the Dutch as a new center of resistance, and for the next two

generations Boni would lead them, and they would be known to history as the Boni Maroons – becoming an ethnicity. Thus, the Boni Maroons just replicated what the imperialists thought they were suppressing by the signing of the treaties with the other Maroons. Consequently, they would not sign any more treaties with either the Boni's or any other Maroons – up until the end of the slave period.

Boni – for his part – would lead his group to aggressively wage war on the imperialists until his death in his mid-sixties.

Yet even while the Boni's became the main fighting force amongst all of those Maroons who were still at war with the Dutch, they still observed and respected the democratic wishes of any fugitives or Maroon groups they dealt with; never trying to centralize all control in their hands. Although they were past masters in the use of coordinated guerilla campaigns amongst all of the decentralized groups – during which a unified command was essential – they still never demanded that everyone integrate themselves into the Boni community; or put themselves directly under Boni outside of when participating in agreed-upon guerilla campaigns and during raids. Thus, the Dutch recorded their knowledge of the frequent coming together of the decentralized fighters of Kormantin Kodjo, Chief Puja, Boni and Baron during large campaigns, while separating and remaining decentralized and autonomous otherwise.

Unlike the 'treaty Maroons,' they never became dependent upon the imperialists for anything, instead relying on their raiding capabilities to capture guns, powder, cannons, and other useful items. Moreover, they had perfected methods of large-scale open field agriculture that allowed them to raise harvest and store more food than they could consume – along with more farm animals than they could use to supplement their diets.

Dutch soldiers recorded discovering Boni and related Maroon fields that took them an hour one way and 30 minutes the other way to mark off for destruction, along with so many domesticated chickens they had to slaughter the excess after feasting on them for days. They and their Maroon foes always noted how much better the Maroons were fed, and how much better physical specimens the Maroons showed themselves to be. It became a prime motivator of the Dutch-led troops to hunt for and locate Maroon food stores and farm animals in order to supplement their own poor diets.

During the Dutch's final major campaign in the second Boni war, an expeditionary force of 1600 Dutch regulars and European mercenaries, accompanied by thousands more Colonial soldiers and enslaved African workers and 'free negro rangers' was also unsuccessful, causing the commander to return to Europe with less than a dozen of his force he'd led to Suriname; and to die himself within a year.

From then until the ending of slavery, the Dutch relied on treachery, trying to manipulate the various treaties and (still) fighting Maroons against each other. And although they did succeed in getting a younger, less-experienced generation of treaty Maroons to assassinate Boni, Chief Puja and Kormantin Kodjo (who were old men, who had turned over their leadership to younger maroons), the other fighting Maroons continued to exercise their autonomy until slavery was abolished. And today the Boni Maroons still live autonomously in Suriname proper, where there's more than 70 thousand direct descendants of the 'bush negroes.'

The Dutch imperialists tried their best to slay the Hydra! They failed. Was it because the Maroons decentralized formations prevented the Dutch from concentrating their superior resources against any one centralized leadership – any bright star? I think so.

Have the various bush negroe ethnicities been able to maintain their autonomy over hundreds of years, against all oppressive forces, through their refusal to allow themselves to be subjected by any broad centralizing forces? I think so again.

Jamaica

Across the Caribbean from Suriname – in Jamaica – from as early as the 1650s there developed similar decentralized Maroon communities, only there they were fighting against the local enslavers of the British Empire. After generations of unsuccessful campaigns by the British against the Maroon guerrillas, they too hit upon the necessity of trying to divide the fighting Maroons from their main source of new recruits: the enslaved African workers. So the British offered the Maroons ‘treaties’ similar to those in Suriname.

To force the British to adopt such methods, the Maroons fought tenaciously, skillfully and bravely for over 100 years! And even though there (also) we witness a number of decentralized groups, they roughly became to be recognized as the Windward and Leeward Maroons: the former located in the eastern (windward) end of Jamaica, and the latter on the westward (leeward) side. And history records the most noted Maroon of the Windwards as an African womyn named Granny Nanny – who even had a town named after her in the Maroon’s liberated territory. Indeed, Nanny Town became the center of the resistance to British plantation imperialism in Jamaica, the headquarters from which the Maroon bands almost succeeded in driving all of the imperialists from the island altogether – even though British soldiers captured and burned Nanny Town on a number of occasions.

The dominant personality amongst the Leewards was an African man named Kodjo. History records Kodjo as leading a tightly controlled and centralized operation. When the Windwards had to make a trek across the island during one fierce suppression effort, seeking the Leewards help, even Kodjo could not force them to abandon their autonomy.

Telling, it was Granny Nanny who led a segment of decentralized Windwards to resist signing the treaties the longest. She went as far as to have the British envoys killed on more than one occasion, and only submitted after Kodjo and all of the male Maroon heads had capitulated.

After that, these Maroons were used to help the British hunt and capture new runaways, as well as suppress revolts amongst the still enslaved African workers; although they fiercely clung to the freedom and autonomy they and their ancestors had fought for!

In fact, over a generation later their descendents would again engage the British in the Trelawny War in the middle of the 1790s, during which a mere 267 Maroon guerillas fought thousands of British soldiers, local militia and enslaved Africans to a complete stand still. They, however, were also tricked and placed on boats to be deported to Canada – and later to Africa after accepting a truce.

Even so, from then until our time, the descendents of those remaining Maroon communities in Jamaica still continue to occupy the lands they fought on, and they’ve never recognized any overlords; neither the later British or black governments!

The United States

It's ironic that those of us who live in the U.S. continue to neglect to thoroughly study and critique the wealth of documented history about the anti-imperialist and anti-expansionist struggles that have occurred here since the Europeans first started colonizing this area, other than the well-known Native American suppression and genocide.

Like the volumes of works written about the Civil Rights, Black Liberation struggle of the 1960s and 1970s, the early Labor Movement, Womyn's Suffrage Movement, Abolitionist Movement and Reconstruction period, there's a mountain of other revolutionary material we can learn from. And not surprisingly, that information concerns the struggles of enslaved workers on these shores prior to the abolition of chattel slavery. In fact, it mirrors the already mentioned struggles in Suriname and Jamaica, with the important distinction that it encompasses multi-racial aspects – more so than either of the former cases. Namely, in the U.S. – until the abolition of slavery – Africans, Amerindians and Europeans (in some areas) allied themselves to fight against the imperialist and expansionist powers. That phenomenon was also evident in the Caribbean and South America, but due to the large percentages of enslaved Africans, compared to enslaved Amerindians and Europeans, most of those struggles were primarily between the enslaved Africans and the European imperialists.

Thus today in the U.S., such emotionally charged epithets as hillbilly and poor white trash are totally divorced from their historical roots. The first people to be labeled as such were the descendants of the indentured European workers, who had escaped that status and allied themselves with both the Amerindian and Africans who had also escaped from slavery or servitude, all of whom combined into Maroon communities in areas that are now a part of the United States.

Initially, the derogatory 'poor white trash' label was reserved for the rebellious, unexploitable and non-conformist early Europeans who the colonial and imperial elites could neither control, nor use, to increase their power; thus the 'trash' label. And later the hillbilly label and imagery were used to similarly isolate those runaways who moved into the southern Appalachian mountains to also escape their former indentured status. Both segments were staunch enemies of the imperialists and colonists, who many times allied with Africans and Amerindians, also fugitives from enslavement. At times, these three groups formed tri-racial Maroon communities. At other times, they were firmly allied, though living separately – except in the case of the Amerindians and Africans who mixed freely.

Consequently, from the 17th century until the abolition of slavery in the U.S., there were also Maroon communities in areas stretching from the pine barrens of New Jersey, down the east coast to Florida, and in the Appalachian mountains and later to migrate to Mexico's northern border regions. The best known (but little studied) ones were those that occupied the dismal swamp of Virginia and North Carolina and the Seminoles of Florida, which contrary to popular belief have never been an Amerindian tribe, but instead – from their beginnings – an ethnic group made up of Africans and Amerindians who came together to form the ethnicity: just like the Boni Maroons were formed in Suriname.

All of this replicated the decentralized organizing forms of the Maroons in Suriname and Jamaica. And although their political histories fall short of them winning and maintaining the degree of autonomy achieved in Suriname or Jamaica, the descendants of the Seminoles in Mexico and the U.S. still fiercely guard their communities against the Mexican and U.S. governments: in Florida they're recognized as a semi-autonomous tribe, and the Africans (Seminole negroes) in

Oklahoma, Texas and Mexico also distinguish themselves from their neighbors – while calling Blacks in the U.S. ‘state negroes.’ According to New Afrikan nationalist cadre from the U.S. who have worked around them, the African Seminoles never considered themselves citizens of the U.S. like African-Americans do.

Finally, the legendary history and present posture of the people of the Southern Appalachians – in still refusing to fully integrate into the fabric of the U.S. – rests more on a forgotten history of their ancestors’ struggle to remain free from any servitude or domination, than they or we understand. Instead, we’ve adopted the bourgeoisie myth about them being hopelessly backwards and ultra-racist, although in reality true hillbilly culture and practice is really isolationist and independent, reflecting the autonomist spirit of their ancestors.

Haiti

The history of Haiti provides an excellent laboratory in which to test my thesis.

What would become the country of Haiti was once known as San Domingo or Saint Domingo, the western part of the island of Hispanola in the Caribbean. Today the country of the Dominican Republic occupies the larger eastern part of the island.

There, between 1791 and 1804, we witness one of the most titanic struggles ever engaged in between (enslaved) workers and their overlords. It is through an examination of the events surrounding that struggle that we can clearly measure the strengths and weaknesses of our dragon and hydra: centralized and decentralized forces of change. Here is a much neglected goldmine of historical contribution to our search for historical lessons – on par with the great French revolution of 1789.

For generations prior to the French revolution – that set the stage for the Haitian revolt two years later – Maroon guerrillas and communities had been operating throughout the entire island of Hispanola. And later many of their descendents would distinguish themselves amongst the multitudes of the little-known heroic figures of those times. Most notably, the intrepid Mackandal, in the pre-revolutionary period (CA 1750s), organized and led a select group of African Maroons and enslaved plantation workers in a conspiracy designed to overthrow the French and colonial powers by massive and bewildering use of a vast array of poisons: against individuals, livestock, supplies, water and any African workers who were believed to be sympathetic to, or in league with, the French.

After years of terrorizing the island, Mackandal slipped up and was betrayed and subsequently burnt at the stake, fatally crippling his tightly organized, centralized movement.

By that time, in just about all of the areas, original Amerindians had been exterminated, only to be replaced by an endless supply of enslaved Africans. The latter produced so much sugar and other agriculture crops that San Domingo became the crown jewel of the French empire and the backbone of the French economy. So Mackandal’s terror campaigns were quickly pushed to the back of the exploiters’ minds.

But within two years of the outbreak of the French revolution, and the subsequent turmoil caused by it in that colonial possession, a new generation stepped into Mackandal’s shoes.

One dark night, a large assembly of the colony’s Africans met at a secret ceremony; both enslaved workers and Maroon guerrillas met on a mountain outside of town. They represented thousands of other Africans – both on the many plantations and in the fugitive communities in

the mountains. The ceremony and last minute plans were being overseen by Boukman and an enslaved female – they were both Vodun (Voodoo) spiritual leaders. There was no need to haggle over any last minute plans. They knew better than Karl Marx’s (later) “wage slaves” that “they had nothing to lose but their chains.” And the horrible treatment that their ‘masters’ heaped on them added a sense of desperation for them to kill or be killed once they revolted!

Yet, Boukman and the female offered more inspiration than centralized leadership. And when the revolt was launched shortly thereafter, it was led by scores of decentralized bands of African workers, Maroon guerrilla groups –who were all joined shortly thereafter by separate Mulatto-led groups.

Before the well-known Toussaint L’Ouverture came on the stage, the Haitian revolution was being led by figures that the decentralized groups propelled forward: the Maroons Jean Francois, Bissou and Lamour Derance, and the rebel-enslaved workers Romaine the Prophetess and Hyacinthe the fearless leader of the battle of Croix des Bouquets. And the Mulattos had a number of their own independent groups and distinguished leaders plus there was also a small segment of whites who were in league with the anti-slavery wing of the French Jacobins, and who loosely allied themselves with one rebel group or another.

Within two years of the beginning of the French revolution, and continuing for twelve harrowing years, the Haitian revolutionaries would go on to militarily engage and defeat first their colonial enslavers, and afterwards a succession of armies fielded by Spain and England, as well as a traitorous Mulatto army, and finally tens of thousands of Napoleon Bonaparte’s veteran French ‘revolutionary’ troops.

The victorious Africans would go on to found the country of Haiti in 1803/1804; the only country in world history established by formerly enslaved workers.

What better example could we use to weigh Marx’s words about the “workers” engaging in, “fifteen, twenty, fifty years of civil wars and peoples struggles... in order to change yourself and make yourself fit for political rule?” (ref. cited)

The Marxist giant, C.L.R. James, who penned the classic *Black Jacobins* (1963, Random House) dissects that struggle. In it, James compares the Haitian revolutionary army led by Toussaint and later Jean Jacques Dessalines and Henry Christophe with the later Russian Bolshevik party: “[Toussaint and]...his Black army generals filling the political role of the Bolshevik party” (James, 283). This brilliantly led, tightly organized and courageous army represents my dragon here. And James’ book does much to rescue them from the shadows of history from our study. They are the ones who would surface as the most notable elements, while scores of the decentralized receded to the background.

So on first reading about them, you would think that this centralized dragon was the revolutionaries’ best weapon. But, the European empire builders of France, England, Spain – and the U.S. wannabes – were not going to give up, even though they all had been defeated, or were afraid to directly intervene (in the case of the U.S.).

As it turned out, however, with Toussaint – backed by the ‘revolutionary’ army – assuming the governance of the island, the imperialists pressured and maneuvered him into a position where he and his (dragon) army began to impose intolerable conditions on the revolutionary masses of workers. And, “in the north around Plaisance, Limbe, Dondon, the vanguard [masses] of the revolution was not satisfied with the new regime” (James, 275–276).

And astonishingly, in the teeth of Napoleon’s renewed threats and the hostile machinations of the British and Americans, “Toussaint submits, along with his generals” (James, 325–327).

Thus, at one swell swoop, these leaders had been forced to play the role of neo-colonial compradors, our dragon had been corralled, hand-cuffed and chained, and they subsequently then set out to use the 'revolutionary army' to deliver the masses back into slavery! Simply because Napoleon feared them, his secret plan was to place all of Haiti's Africans into chattel slavery, and he sent his brother in law and (eventually) sixty thousand more French troops to accomplish his aims.

Recognizing the weaknesses of the dragon forces, and the true intentions of the French "[Lamour] Derance and the petty chieftains, North, South and West, each in his own district summoned Blacks to revolt" (James, 327).

So, here we see the hydra doing battle with the (now) traitorous dragon and the French imperialists.

"It is a recurrent tale this (Dessalines and his generals hunt down these 'Brigands'). Once more, the masses had shown greater political understanding than their leaders" (James 338-339 and footnote 39). Our formerly heroic revolutionary army had been reduced to suppressing the revolutionary masses and forcing the latter into, "...fighting Black generals [who were] trying to crush the 'Brigands' for the French," [propelling our hydra back to center stage]. "The little local leaders...beat off [their and the French] attacks...causing the French to be more open to yellow fever" (James, 346-347).

Consequently, we witness the decentralized hydra elements launching the revolution, being displaced by Toussaint's army – the dragon – only to resume their leadership roles during a crisis that saw the dragon capitulate to the French, thus showing itself as the most indispensable weapon the revolutionaries developed.

Later, as is well-known, Toussaint was kidnapped and taken to France where he later died in prison, opening the way for his chief lieutenant Jean Jacques Dessalines to (again) switch back to the rebels' side, rally the revolutionary army to also switch back to the masses' side, and along with the hydra forces go on to totally annihilate the remaining French forces on the island and declare independence and appoint himself the new country's emperor.

An excellent soldier, Dessalines showed himself to be a cruel tyrant over the Haitian people. Thus, he was assassinated by them within a few years of assuming power.

He was replaced by another general from the dragon forces: Henry Christophe, who was appointed president in 1807, but by 1811 had declared himself king. He too would be killed by his own people in 1829.

Thus, we can clearly see how Haiti's dragon forces played a very ambivalent role in the rebel fight for independence: They started out as tenacious and brilliant fighters against all of the European imperial and colonial elements, and the traitors amongst the Mulatto's, who were all but bent on keeping the enslaved Africans underfoot. During the course of the revolutionary struggle, they all opportunistically switched to the French imperialist's side, and went on to attempt to drown the still revolutionary masses and their decentralized group in blood; hoping that way the French would allow them to serve as a new elite class of African policemen against a re-enslaved African worker's class.

Failing to suppress the rebels, the dragon forces rejoined the hydra elements and lent their weight to totally defeating the French, only to once again turn against the revolutionary masses by establishing themselves as a dictatorial and exploitative African elite.

For its part, the decentralized hydra forces never veered from their objectives of winning as much freedom from servitude and oppression as possible. From the pre-revolutionary times of

Mackandal, up through the 1791–1804 Haitian revolutionary war, and even down to our time, they’ve continued to struggle towards those ends. And it’s highly instructive to know that in addition to fighting the French during their revolution, they were also under attack by Toussaint’s dragon forces, who displayed hatred and fear of everything from their refusal to relinquish their maroon/decentralized organizational formations, to their practice of their traditional Vodun (Voodoo) spiritual systems, the latter which did a great deal to inspire their soldiers to martyr themselves for the cause of freedom. And the treacherous attacks carried out on them by Christophe and Dessalines – even while both sides were allied against the imperialists – were early signs that the dragon forces were ultimately concerned with power for its own sake.

Then, after being pushed to the side after the French were driven out, the decentralized hydra elements were forced to – again – go underground and eventually morph into semi-secret Vodun societies that until today remain a little recognized or understood autonomous element amongst the oppressed Haitians. Wade Davis’ classic *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, as well as *Voodoo in Haiti*, by Alfred Metraux (1972, Shocken Books), paints a fascinating picture of how these decentralized elements went from centuries of being Maroon guerrillas, to revolutionary fighters, later to be forced underground only to surface as today’s Bizango, Zobop, Bossu, Macandal, Voltigeurs and other semi-secret Vodun societies, thereby constituting a major segment of Haitian society that no domestic or foreign oppressors have ever been able to eradicate; although the dictator “Papa Doc” Duvalier was able to manipulate some of them by integrating them into dreaded “ton ton macoute” secret police.

And in another Stan Goff book, *Sex and War*, he tells us, “there are Maroons in Haiti again, with the wave of repression sweeping the country in the wake of the last U.S.-crafted coup d’état (February 29, 2004)... twice in 2004 I visited one of these Maroon communities in the Central Plateau” (8).

And it’s hardly the case that we must restrict our study of the strengths and weaknesses of centralized and decentralized groups as I have. What about the history of how decentralized forces defeated Napoleon’s army in Spain; how decentralized forces have defeated every known invader in the border regions of what is today Afghanistan and Pakistan, and how decentralized insurgents are today defeating the U.S. and her allies in Iraq?

Some Parting Words from a Farsighted Marxist

C.L.R. James penned *The Black Jacobins* many years before he would later crystallize his theories about the ideas here. Yet on this in the *Introduction to Marxism for Our Times: C.L.R. James on Revolutionary Organization*, edited by Martin Glaberman (1999, University Press of Mississippi) we learn, “in 1948 James wrote what was eventually published as ‘Notes on Dialectics.’” This was a study of working class organization in light of dialectics and marked the ultimate break with Trotskyism, the rejection of the vanguard party. The importance of this break and the theoretical validation of the James viewpoint was demonstrated eight years later in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and later the French revolt of 1968, the Czech spring of 1968, and the solidarity movement in Poland in 1980...On the one hand, no group of the left or of the right was in any way prepared to accept the possibility of proletarian revolution in totalitarian dictatorships of Eastern Europe or in a democratic country such as France. All of their assumptions proved false: that the working class needed a party to lead it in revolution; that the working class needed a

press and a network of communication; that what was needed was some crisis in the society such as a depression or a war. With none of these factors in place, the workers of Hungary in forty-eight hours took over all of the means of production in that society, created a form of dual power, forced the Community Party to re-organize under another name, and was crushed by nothing in Hungarian society but by an invasion of Soviet tanks.”

[And in his own words] “James wrote: ‘Now if the party is the knowing of the proletariat, then the coming of age of the proletariat can the abolition of the party. That is our universal, stated in its boldest and most abstract form...The party as we know it must disappear. It is disappearing. It will disappear as the state will disappear. The whole laboring population becomes the state. That is the disappearance of the state. It can have no other meaning. It withers away by expanding to such a degree that it is transformed into its opposite. And the party does the same... for if the party does not wither away, the state never will’” (C.L.R. James, *Notes on Dialectics*, London: Allison and Busby, 1980 175–76).

“On the other hand, even after the fact, the left could not deal with events that demolished their theories of the necessity of a vanguard party, and proceeded to ignore the movements in Hungary, in France and in Poland – movements which Marx or Lenin would have pounced on to study and to hone and bring up to date their revolutionary theories” (Glaberman’s *Introduction to Marxism for Our Times*).

Conclusion

It’s clear that today’s center of gravity, the aspects on which all else is dependent and rests is the shared (global) consciousness of the multitudes of the earth’s workers and oppressed peoples, that their lives are daily becoming more and more intolerable, hence, solidifying them ideologically around the necessity for revolutionary change (like our earlier Maroons were solidified around the need to escape enslavement), and the ability of these multitudes to communicate with each other and share ideas and methods about the best ways to proceed towards that goal.

Therefore, the global hardships brought about by today’s imperialists and their voracious accumulation of wealth, and their destruction of the environment and cultures will propel the multitudes to use any and all means to bring about the needed changes –or perish. And modern means of communications will provide them with the means to both update and imitate the earlier hydra’s strengths, avoid its weaknesses –while guarding against the tendency of the dragons to concentrate oppressive power in its hands.

Thus, since both the shared needs and necessity for change is already present, along with the tools to communicate, then our final consideration is whether or not these masses must centralize their organizing (not to be confused with the obvious need to coordinate their efforts!). To that I answer with an emphatic, ‘no!’ and further, I contend that such centralization will only make it easier for our oppressors to identify and level repression upon us –prolonging the crisis our generation must deal with.

The historical records of our dragon hydra are clear. The choice is yours as to which you will choose.

Recommended Books

The Boni Maroon Wars in Suriname by Wim S.M. Hoogbergen (1997, Academic Publishers)

Voodoo in Haiti by Alfred Metraux (1972, Schocken Books)

The Serpent and the Rainbow by Wade Davis (1985 Simon & Schuster)

Hidden Americans: Maroons of Virginia and the Carolinas by Hugo Prosper Leaming (1995, Garland Publishing)

The Black Jacobins by C.L.R. James (1963, Random House)

Full Spectrum Disorder by Stan Goff (2004, Softskull Press)

Sex and War by Stan Goff (2006, Stan Goff). PDF available at <http://www.insurgentamerican.net/download/StanGoff/Sex-n-War.pdf>

Marxism for Our Times: C.L.R. James on Revolutionary Organization edited by Martin Glaberman (1999, University Press of Mississippi)

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Russell Maroon Shoatz
The Dragon and the Hydra
A Historical Study of Organizational Methods

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