The black jakobin

by C. L. R. James · Language: EN

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Overview

The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution" by C. L. R. James is a seminal work of history, first published in 1938, that chronicles the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). James, a Trinidadian historian, journalist, and Marxist theorist, meticulously details the only successful slave revolt in human history, which led to the establishment of the independent nation of Haiti. The book centers on the figure of Toussaint Louverture, a former slave who rose to become a brilliant military strategist and political leader, guiding the enslaved people of Saint-Domingue (modern-day Haiti) to victory against the formidable colonial powers of France, Spain, and Britain.

James's work is not merely a historical account but a profound analysis of colonialism, slavery, and the dynamics of revolutionary struggle. He argues that the Haitian Revolution was a direct consequence of the brutal plantation system and the inherent contradictions of European Enlightenment ideals, which championed liberty while perpetuating slavery. The book highlights the agency of the enslaved people, portraying them not as passive victims but as active participants who forged their own destiny through immense sacrifice and strategic brilliance. James draws parallels between the Haitian revolutionaries and the Jacobins of the French Revolution, emphasizing their shared commitment to radical change and universal human rights, even as the French Republic struggled to reconcile its ideals with its colonial practices.

"The Black Jacobins" remains a foundational text for understanding the intersections of race, class, and power in the Atlantic world. It challenges Eurocentric narratives of history by placing the Haitian Revolution at the center of global revolutionary movements and demonstrating the profound impact of black agency on world history. The book's enduring relevance lies in its powerful assertion of the capacity for liberation and self-determination against overwhelming odds, offering timeless lessons on the nature of imperialism, resistance, and the complex legacies of revolutionary change.

Key Takeaways

- The Haitian Revolution stands as the only successful slave revolt in history, demonstrating the profound capacity for self-liberation against overwhelming odds.
- Toussaint Louverture was a military genius and political leader whose strategic brilliance was instrumental in securing Haitian independence.

• European Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality often coexisted hypocritically with the brutal realities of colonial slavery.

• The success of the Haitian Revolution was a direct result of the collective agency and sustained struggle of the enslaved people, not merely the actions of a few leaders.

• Imperial powers like France, Spain, and Britain were ultimately defeated by the determination and unity of the Haitian revolutionaries.

• The book challenges Eurocentric historical narratives by highlighting the central role of black people in shaping global revolutionary movements.

• Revolutionary movements, even those fighting for universal ideals, can be fraught with internal divisions and external betrayals.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: The Property

San Domingo, the French colony, is depicted as the wealthiest and most productive in the Caribbean, generating immense profits from sugar, coffee, and indigo plantations. This chapter details the brutal system of chattel slavery that underpinned this prosperity, describing the horrific conditions, relentless labor, and high mortality rates among the enslaved African population. James emphasizes how the colony's economic success was built entirely on the systematic dehumanization and exploitation of hundreds of thousands of Africans. He outlines the vast wealth accumulated by French merchants and planters, highlighting the strategic importance of San Domingo to the French economy and its role in fueling European capitalism. The chapter sets the stage by illustrating the inherent contradictions and explosive tensions within this highly stratified and oppressive society, making the eventual revolution seem not just possible, but inevitable given the extreme exploitation and the sheer number of enslaved people.

Chapter 2: The Owners

This chapter explores the complex social hierarchy of white society in San Domingo, distinguishing between the 'grand blancs' (wealthy plantation owners and merchants) and the 'petit blancs' (artisans, small farmers, and overseers). It details their conflicting economic interests and political aspirations, particularly their desire for greater autonomy from metropolitan France, while sharing a common commitment to maintaining slavery. The chapter also introduces the 'mulattoes' or free people of color, many of whom were wealthy and educated, yet denied equal rights due to racial prejudice. Their struggle for recognition, exemplified by the ill-fated rebellion of Vincent Ogé, highlights the deep-seated racial tensions and the hypocrisy of colonial society, foreshadowing broader conflicts.

Chapter 3: The San Domingo Masses

James focuses on the enslaved African population, the vast majority of San Domingo's inhabitants, detailing their diverse origins, cultures, and the shared experience of brutal exploitation. The chapter describes the inhumane conditions of slavery, the methods of control employed by the planters, and the constant, varied forms of resistance, including marronage (runaway slaves), poisoning, and small-scale revolts. It emphasizes the inherent revolutionary potential of the enslaved masses, their resilience, and their deep-seated desire for freedom. This chapter argues that the sheer scale of their suffering and their collective spirit made a large-scale uprising not just possible, but a historical certainty, setting the stage for the August 1791 slave revolt.

Chapter 4: The French Revolution

This chapter examines the profound impact of the French Revolution (1789) on San Domingo. The ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, while inspiring, were interpreted differently by each social group in the colony. The grand blancs saw an opportunity for greater self-governance, the petit blancs for social leveling among whites, and the free people of color for equal rights. James highlights how the revolutionary fervor in France, particularly the debates in the National Assembly, created political instability and opened cracks in the colonial system. The metropolitan government's vacillation on colonial policy, torn between revolutionary principles and economic interests, further fueled the unrest in San Domingo.

Chapter 5: And the Colonial Question

James delves into the debates within the French National Assembly concerning the colonies and slavery. He exposes the hypocrisy of French revolutionaries who championed liberty at home but hesitated to extend it to the enslaved, fearing economic losses. The influence of the 'Amis des Noirs' (Friends of the Blacks) is discussed, noting their limited advocacy for the rights of free people of color rather than immediate abolition. The powerful colonial lobby successfully resisted radical changes. The chapter details the decree of May 15, 1791, granting rights to some free people of color, and how this partial measure, far from resolving tensions, ignited further conflict and contributed to the outbreak of the massive slave revolt in August 1791.

Chapter 6: The Rise of Toussaint L'Ouverture

This chapter details the outbreak of the great slave revolt in August 1791 in the Northern Province of San Domingo, led by figures like Boukman, Jean-François, and Biassou. It describes the initial chaos, violence, and the burning of plantations. Toussaint L'Ouverture, initially a coachman and healer, gradually emerges as a key figure. James traces Toussaint's rise from a subordinate role to a disciplined military strategist and political leader. His early actions, including his alliance with the Spanish against the French, demonstrate his tactical genius and his commitment to securing freedom for his people, laying the groundwork for his future dominance.

Chapter 7: The Black Commissioners

The arrival of French Commissioners Sonthonax and Polverel, sent to restore order and enforce the rights of free people of color, is the focus of this chapter. They faced staunch opposition from white colonists and were forced to increasingly rely on black forces. Driven by military necessity to secure support against invading Spanish and British forces, Sonthonax made the momentous decision to declare general emancipation for all enslaved people in August 1793. This act, later ratified by the French Convention, fundamentally transformed the nature of the conflict, aligning the formerly enslaved with the French Republic and marking a crucial turning point in the revolution.

Chapter 8: The English Invasion

This chapter details the invasion of San Domingo by British forces, who sought to exploit the colony's instability, restore slavery, and seize its immense wealth for the British Empire. The conflict became a complex multi-sided war involving French Republicans (now allied with the formerly enslaved), Spanish (allied with Toussaint and other black leaders), and the British. James describes the British initial successes, their occupation of key ports, and the devastating impact of tropical diseases, particularly yellow fever, which decimated their ranks. The chapter highlights the strategic challenges faced by the British and their eventual bogging down in a costly and ultimately futile campaign.

Chapter 9: Spanish Policy

James explores Toussaint L'Ouverture's strategic alliance with the Spanish, who provided arms and recognition to the black leaders in their fight against the French. Toussaint's military campaigns under Spanish command are detailed, showcasing his growing power and reputation as a formidable general. The chapter highlights the shift in French policy under the National Convention, which officially abolished slavery in 1794. Recognizing this as the true path to black freedom, Toussaint made the pivotal decision to switch allegiance from the Spanish to the French Republic, uniting his forces with the French to expel the remaining foreign invaders and consolidate the gains of emancipation.

Chapter 10: The Expulsion of the English

Following his alliance with the French Republic, Toussaint L'Ouverture launched brilliant military campaigns against the British and Spanish forces still occupying parts of San Domingo. This chapter details his strategic genius in uniting the black forces and systematically driving out the foreign invaders. The British, weakened by disease, heavy losses, and Toussaint's relentless pressure, were ultimately forced to withdraw from the colony in 1798. This decisive victory solidified Toussaint's position as the dominant military and political figure in San Domingo, effectively securing the freedom of the formerly enslaved and paving the way for his autonomous rule.

Chapter 11: The Haitian Constitution

This chapter focuses on Toussaint L'Ouverture's consolidation of power and his efforts to rebuild the war-torn colony. In 1801, he promulgated a new constitution for San Domingo, which declared him Governor-General for life and permanently abolished slavery. While nominally acknowledging French sovereignty, this constitution asserted significant autonomy for the colony, reflecting Toussaint's vision for a self-governing, prosperous black state. James analyzes the constitution as a bold political statement, demonstrating Toussaint's ambition and his determination to secure the revolution's gains, even as it revealed his increasingly authoritarian tendencies in governing the new society.

Chapter 12: The Black Consul

James examines Toussaint L'Ouverture's administration of San Domingo, where he sought to restore the economy through a system of forced labor on plantations. While not slavery, this system was highly coercive and unpopular with the former slaves, creating internal tensions. Toussaint engaged in complex diplomatic relations with the United States and Great Britain, further asserting San Domingo's de facto independence. His growing power and increasingly autonomous actions, particularly the 1801 constitution, deeply alarmed Napoleon Bonaparte, who viewed Toussaint's rule as a direct challenge to French imperial authority and a threat to his plans for a revived colonial empire.

Chapter 13: The Expedition of Leclerc

This chapter details Napoleon Bonaparte's decisive response to Toussaint's autonomy: the dispatch of a massive expeditionary force under his brother-in-law, General Charles Leclerc, to San Domingo. The secret objective was to restore French control and re-establish slavery. James describes the initial landing of the overwhelming French army and the fierce, but ultimately outmatched, resistance put up by Toussaint's forces. The chapter highlights the strategic brilliance of Leclerc's initial campaign and the defection of some of Toussaint's key generals, such as Christophe and Dessalines, who were pressured into submission, leading to Toussaint's eventual capture through treachery.

Chapter 14: The War of Independence

Following Toussaint L'Ouverture's capture and deportation to France, where he died in prison, the war for independence reignited with renewed ferocity. This chapter describes how the black generals and the population realized Napoleon's true intention to restore slavery, sparking a brutal and uncompromising struggle. Led by figures like Dessalines, Christophe, and Pétion, the former slaves fought with desperate determination. The chapter also highlights the devastating impact of yellow fever, which decimated the French army, killing General Leclerc himself, and ultimately turned the tide decisively in favor of the Haitian revolutionaries, paving the way for complete independence.

Chapter 15: The Struggle for Power

This chapter details the final phase of the Haitian Revolution, culminating in the complete defeat of the French forces and the declaration of Haitian independence by Jean-Jacques Dessalines on January 1, 1804. James then explores the immediate aftermath, including the internal struggles for power among the black generals. Dessalines, as the first head of state, became emperor but faced challenges from his rivals and the populace, leading to his assassination in 1806. The chapter describes the subsequent division of Haiti into northern and southern states under Christophe and Pétion, respectively, highlighting the complex and often violent path of post-revolutionary nation-building.

Chapter 16: The Black Jacobins

In this reflective chapter, James analyzes the legacy of the Haitian Revolution and its leaders, particularly Toussaint L'Ouverture. He draws parallels between Toussaint and the Jacobins of the French Revolution, examining his revolutionary vision, his strategic genius, and the authoritarian aspects of his leadership. James emphasizes the agency of the enslaved masses in driving the revolution, arguing that Toussaint, despite his brilliance, was ultimately a product of their collective will for freedom. This chapter serves as a profound meditation on the nature of revolution, leadership, and the historical forces that shaped the unique trajectory of Haiti.

Chapter 17: The End of the Revolution

James concludes by examining the long-term impact and legacy of the Haitian Revolution. He discusses the international isolation of Haiti, its economic struggles, and the continued interference from European powers and the United States, which sought to punish the world's first independent black republic. The chapter connects the Haitian experience to broader themes of colonialism, race, and class struggle, asserting its profound significance as the only successful slave revolt in history. James argues that the Haitian Revolution served as an inspiration for future anti-colonial movements and remains a powerful testament to the human desire for freedom and self-determination.

Best Quotes

“The San Domingo revolution was the only successful slave revolt in history.”

Introduction

This line, often found early in the book, establishes the unique and monumental achievement of the Haitian Revolution. It immediately highlights the central argument that this was an unparalleled event in human history, challenging the prevailing narratives of colonial power and racial inferiority by demonstrating the capacity of enslaved people to achieve their own liberation.

“The blacks were fighting for the rights of man, the whites for the rights of property.”

This powerful statement encapsulates the fundamental ideological conflict of the Haitian Revolution. It reveals the hypocrisy of the French colonists who, while claiming the universal 'rights of man' from their own revolution, vehemently denied these rights to their enslaved workforce, prioritizing their economic interests and property over human freedom and dignity.

“Toussaint Louverture, a slave, became a general, a governor, a statesman, and a martyr.”

This concise summary traces the extraordinary trajectory of Toussaint Louverture, from his origins in bondage to his rise as the preeminent leader of the revolution. It underscores his remarkable personal transformation and his pivotal role in shaping the destiny of Haiti, while also acknowledging his tragic end as a prisoner of Napoleon.

“The history of the San Domingo revolution is not a side-show of the French Revolution, but a part of its very essence.”

Part I: The Property

James argues here that the Haitian Revolution was not merely a peripheral event but a crucial extension and test of the ideals of the French Revolution. He asserts that the struggle for liberty and equality in San Domingo revealed the true implications and contradictions of revolutionary principles, making it central to understanding the broader revolutionary era.

“The greatest black man in history.”

This phrase is frequently used by James to describe Toussaint Louverture, reflecting his profound admiration for Toussaint's military genius, political acumen, and moral leadership. It positions Toussaint as a figure of immense historical significance, not just within the context of the revolution but on a global scale, challenging Eurocentric historical narratives.

“The revolution was not made by the leaders; the leaders were made by the revolution.”

This Marxist-inflected statement emphasizes the collective agency of the enslaved masses. James argues that while figures like Toussaint were crucial, their leadership emerged from and was shaped by the broader revolutionary movement of the people. It highlights the spontaneous and organic nature of the uprising, driven by the desire for freedom.

“They were not fighting for the rights of man, but for the rights of white men.”

This quote critiques the inherent racism and hypocrisy of the French colonists and many French revolutionaries. It exposes how the universalist rhetoric of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution was selectively applied, denying basic human rights to people of color while fiercely defending the privileges and property of white Europeans.

“The black Jacobins were the most advanced revolutionaries of their time.”

Conclusion

This line directly connects the Haitian revolutionaries to the radical Jacobin faction of the French Revolution, but elevates them further. James argues that by fighting for universal emancipation and self-determination against overwhelming odds, the black revolutionaries pushed the boundaries of revolutionary thought and action beyond their European counterparts.

Questions & Answers

What is 'The Black Jacobins' about?

'The Black Jacobins' is a historical account and analysis of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), the only successful slave revolt in history. C. L. R. James meticulously details the social, economic, and political conditions in the French colony of San Domingo, the rise of its enslaved population, and the leadership of figures like Toussaint Louverture, culminating in the establishment of the independent nation of Haiti. The book also explores the revolution's connections to the French Revolution and its broader implications for colonialism, race, and class.

Who was Toussaint Louverture?

Toussaint Louverture was the most prominent leader of the Haitian Revolution. Born into slavery in San Domingo, he rose to become a brilliant military strategist, a skilled politician, and the de facto ruler of the colony. He led the enslaved people to freedom, defeated European powers (French, Spanish, British), and laid the groundwork for Haiti's independence. His complex leadership involved navigating alliances and betrayals, ultimately leading to his capture by Napoleon's forces and death in a French prison, making him a martyr for the cause of freedom.

What was the significance of the Haitian Revolution?

The Haitian Revolution holds immense significance as the only successful slave revolt in history, leading to the establishment of the first free black republic and the second independent nation in the Americas. It demonstrated the capacity of enslaved people to liberate themselves and govern, challenging racist ideologies and inspiring anti-slavery movements worldwide. It also forced European powers to confront the contradictions of their Enlightenment ideals and the economic realities of colonialism, profoundly impacting the course of global history.

How did the French Revolution influence events in San Domingo?

The French Revolution profoundly influenced San Domingo by proclaiming the 'Rights of Man,' which, despite being initially denied to people of color, ignited hopes and demands for freedom among the enslaved and free mulatto populations. The political instability in France, with its shifting governments and decrees regarding slavery, created opportunities for the revolutionaries to advance their cause. The ideals of liberty and equality, though hypocritically applied by many French colonists, provided a powerful ideological framework for the Haitian struggle.

Why is the book titled 'The Black Jacobins'?

The title 'The Black Jacobins' draws a parallel between the radical faction of the French Revolution (the Jacobins) and the enslaved revolutionaries of San Domingo. James argues that the black leaders, particularly Toussaint Louverture, embodied and even surpassed the revolutionary fervor and commitment to universal liberty that the French Jacobins espoused. By fighting for the complete abolition of slavery and self-determination, the 'Black Jacobins' pushed the boundaries of revolutionary ideals further than their European counterparts.

What role did Napoleon Bonaparte play in the Haitian Revolution?

Napoleon Bonaparte played a decisive and ultimately destructive role. After consolidating power in France, he sought to restore slavery in San Domingo and reassert French colonial control, viewing the colony as vital to his imperial ambitions. He dispatched a massive expeditionary force under his brother-in-law, General Leclerc, to crush the revolution and capture Toussaint Louverture. This act of betrayal and aggression ultimately solidified the revolutionaries' resolve for complete independence, leading to a brutal war that France eventually lost.

What was the condition of slaves in San Domingo before the revolution?

Before the revolution, San Domingo was the wealthiest French colony, built on an extremely brutal system of chattel slavery. Enslaved Africans and their descendants endured horrific conditions, including relentless labor on sugar and coffee plantations, severe corporal punishment, high mortality rates, and systematic dehumanization. The French Code Noir, while theoretically offering some protections, was rarely enforced, leading to a society characterized by extreme violence, exploitation, and racial hierarchy, which fueled deep-seated resentment and a desire for freedom.

How did Toussaint Louverture rise to power?

Toussaint Louverture's rise to power was gradual and strategic. Initially a literate and respected slave, he joined the slave revolt in 1791, quickly demonstrating military acumen and organizational skills. He built a disciplined army, forged alliances with the Spanish against the French, and later switched allegiance to the French Republic when it abolished slavery. Through a combination of military victories, political maneuvering, and diplomatic skill, he outmaneuvered rival leaders and European powers, consolidating control over the colony and becoming its de facto governor.

What challenges did the revolutionaries face after achieving independence?

After achieving independence, Haiti faced immense challenges. It was isolated internationally, as European powers and the United States feared the precedent of a successful slave revolt. France demanded crippling indemnities, which burdened the Haitian economy for over a century. Internally, the new nation struggled with political instability, economic reconstruction after years of war, and the legacy of slavery. Leaders like Dessalines and Christophe attempted to establish strong, centralized states, but often resorted to authoritarian methods, reflecting the difficult circumstances of nation-building.

What is C. L. R. James's main argument in the book?

James's main argument is that the Haitian Revolution was a profound and unique historical event, driven by the agency and revolutionary consciousness of the enslaved people themselves, not merely by external forces. He asserts that the black revolutionaries, particularly Toussaint Louverture, were not only capable leaders but also advanced proponents of universal liberty, pushing the ideals of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution to their logical conclusion. James also argues that the revolution exposed the inherent racism and hypocrisy of European colonialism and capitalism.

How does James portray the role of race and class in the revolution?

James portrays race and class as inextricably linked and central to the revolution. He shows how the rigid racial hierarchy of San Domingo, with white planters at the top, free mulattoes in the middle, and enslaved blacks at the bottom, fueled the conflict. He argues that the struggle for freedom was fundamentally a class struggle against the planter aristocracy, but one deeply complicated by racial oppression. The revolution ultimately transcended racial divisions to some extent, uniting different groups under the banner of liberty, though internal class tensions persisted.

What was the impact of the Haitian Revolution on other slave societies?

The Haitian Revolution had a profound and multifaceted impact on other slave societies. It served as a beacon of hope and inspiration for enslaved people across the Americas, demonstrating that freedom was achievable. This, in turn, terrified slaveholders and colonial powers, leading to increased repression and stricter slave codes in places like the American South and the British Caribbean. However, it also contributed to the growing abolitionist movement by highlighting the inherent instability and moral bankruptcy of slavery, ultimately accelerating its demise in many regions.

Spoiler: What was the fate of Toussaint Louverture?

Spoiler: Toussaint Louverture was captured by Napoleon's forces in 1802 through an act of deception. Despite having negotiated a peace treaty with the French, he was seized and deported to France, where he was imprisoned in the Fort de Joux in the Jura mountains. He died there in April 1803, likely from pneumonia, malnutrition, or a combination of harsh conditions and neglect. His death, however, did not quell the revolution; instead, it galvanized his generals, particularly Dessalines, to fight for complete independence, which was achieved in 1804.

How does James use primary sources in his historical account?

James extensively uses primary sources, including official French government documents, military dispatches, personal letters, and contemporary accounts from both French and Haitian perspectives. He critically analyzes these sources to reconstruct events, understand motivations, and challenge conventional historical narratives. His meticulous research allows him to present a

detailed and nuanced picture of the revolution, often highlighting the voices and actions of the enslaved people themselves, which were frequently overlooked or distorted in earlier histories.

What lessons can contemporary readers draw from 'The Black Jacobins'?

Contemporary readers can draw several lessons from 'The Black Jacobins'. It offers a powerful testament to the human capacity for resistance against oppression and the transformative potential of revolutionary struggle. It highlights the enduring relevance of self-determination and the fight against colonialism and racial injustice. The book also provides insights into the complexities of leadership, the role of the masses in historical change, and the often-hypocritical nature of power, urging readers to critically examine narratives of freedom and equality in their own time.

Who were some other important leaders of the Haitian Revolution besides Toussaint?

Besides Toussaint Louverture, key leaders included Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Toussaint's most trusted general and the first emperor of independent Haiti; Henri Christophe, another general who later became king of northern Haiti; and Alexandre Pétion, a mulatto general who became president of southern Haiti. Other significant figures included André Rigaud, a mulatto leader who initially rivaled Toussaint, and early rebel leaders like Boukman Dutty and Cécile Fatiman, who played crucial roles in initiating the 1791 slave uprising.

What was the role of the mulatto population in the revolution?

The mulatto (gens de couleur) population played a complex and often contradictory role. As free people of color, they occupied an intermediate position, owning property and slaves but facing legal discrimination from white colonists. Initially, they sought equal rights with whites, aligning with the French Revolution's ideals. However, their interests often diverged from the enslaved black population. While some mulatto leaders, like Pétion, eventually joined forces with black generals for independence, their early struggles often reflected their desire for status within the existing racial hierarchy rather than universal emancipation.

How did the British and Spanish intervene in the revolution?

Both the British and Spanish intervened in the Haitian Revolution, primarily to exploit the chaos and gain control of the lucrative colony. The Spanish, initially allied with the rebelling slaves and Toussaint Louverture, sought to weaken French power. The British, fearing the spread of slave revolts to their own Caribbean colonies, launched a major invasion, aiming to conquer San Domingo and restore slavery. Both powers ultimately failed, suffering heavy losses from disease and the fierce resistance of Toussaint's armies, demonstrating the strength of the black revolutionaries.

What was the economic importance of San Domingo to France?

San Domingo was France's most valuable colony and the wealthiest sugar-producing colony in the world. Its vast plantations, worked by hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans,

generated immense wealth for France, accounting for a significant portion of its overseas trade and contributing substantially to the French economy. The colony's prosperity was built entirely on the brutal exploitation of slave labor, making its loss a devastating economic blow to France and a major factor in Napoleon's determination to restore slavery.

What is the lasting legacy of the Haitian Revolution according to James?

According to James, the lasting legacy of the Haitian Revolution is its unparalleled demonstration of the capacity of oppressed people to achieve freedom and self-determination. It stands as a powerful symbol of black liberation and anti-colonial struggle, inspiring movements worldwide. It also exposed the inherent contradictions of European Enlightenment ideals when confronted with the realities of slavery and colonialism. The revolution fundamentally altered the course of history, proving that universal human rights could not be selectively applied and that freedom, once tasted, could not be denied.