

The Participatory and Deliberative Democracy Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association

“Maroon Democracy” and Le Morne Brabant

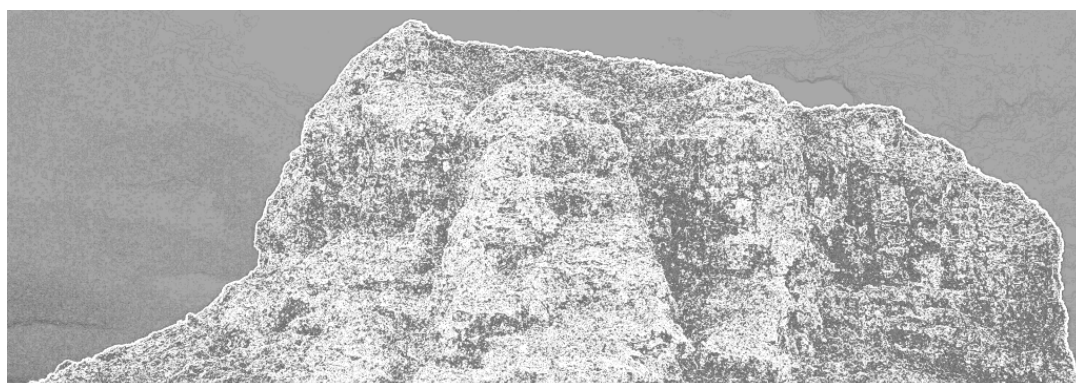
20 SEP
2021

[ADD A COMMENT](#)

AGORA

Democracy Beyond the West

By Jean-Paul Gagnon



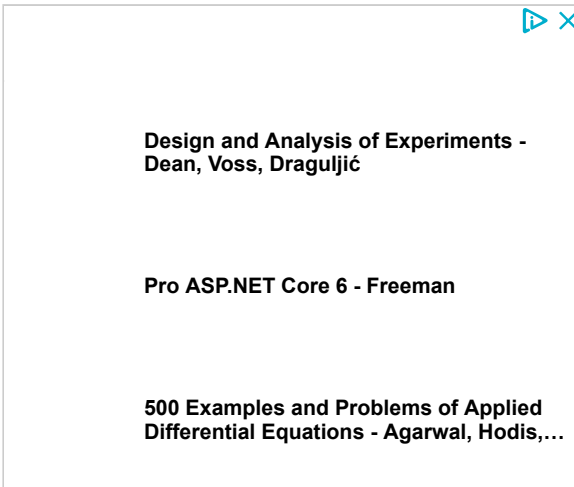
They found companionship, these two women, in spite of their distant origins. In their whispered creole, muffled by the virile leaves, flowers and fruits that adorned their tropical nightscape (was nature with them, too?), they negotiated the next steps of their escape. As it was this night, of all nights, that they chose to run from the French sugar plantation that bought them from Arab slavers. And because it was this night, of all nights, that they would chase the promise of an emancipated place protected by a mountain, of a democratic garden, of a society made by others like them – by the stolen.

The concept of “maroon democracy” is inspired by the story of 18th and early 19th century enslaved peoples held captive on islands like Mauritius, then a French plantation colony and now a French tourism neocolony. A “maroon”, or *marron* in French, holds three meanings: (1) it designates a person stranded in a difficult place without hope for escape (so, to be marooned); (2) it means a person of purple-brown, or chestnut, skin colour; and (3) it means “black people” who have escaped slavery, including their descendants.

The democracy of the maroons is characterized by a multiethnic, multilingual people that have escaped slavery to establish a self-sustaining and autonomous community. Its first, of two, distinctions is political: the democracy of the maroons is a tenuous place that defies slavery; it is a symbol of rebellion against forceful authoritarianism; it is a defensive position to protect those who freed themselves, and it holds the promise that those persons who make up that community can both self and collectively determine their futures.

The dynamic of maroon democracy has occurred many times historically. But here I wish to focus on the mountain known as *Le Morne Brabant*, located in the southwest corner of the island of Mauritius. Its geographic features offer narrow passage which made it possible for its maroon inhabitants to defend themselves from recapture by those persons who deigned to “own them”.

Advertisements



**Design and Analysis of Experiments -
Dean, Voss, Draguljić**

Pro ASP.NET Core 6 - Freeman

**500 Examples and Problems of Applied
Differential Equations - Agarwal, Hodis,...**

REPORT THIS AD

Legend has it that after slavery was banned in 1835, a company of colonists wished to inform the maroons atop *Le Morne* of their rights to freedom—they could “come down now”. This approach of many officious looking people, soldiers included, is said to have alarmed the maroons who, in fear of being recaptured, decided instead to jump to their deaths.

In this act we are reminded of “maroon democracy’s” second distinction, which is that it can be transitory. For example, some of the freed in *Le Morne* relied on its democracy for safe harbour before finding passage by sea to more favourable locations. Others found their freedom by jumping off *Le Morne’s* western cliff-face and creating what would come to be known as the “valley of bones”.



Le Morne Brabant’s western cliff face & the “valley of bones”

The mountain was and remains, as Anne Eichmann writes, “a symbol of agency, strength and liberation” for people who had escaped slavery. Today, *Le Morne* is embroiled in a difficult political situation where the descendents of the maroons are feeling pressured to give up yet more of their inherited lands to hotel and tourism developers. At the same time, historians, allied with UNESCO, are working to ensure that the maroons, both historical and present, are kept within the heart of the story informing this World Heritage site.

Eichmann is definitive: “resistance”, she writes, is “the key phrase summing up the importance of the mountain [...] it is a symbol for the fight against slavery and discrimination”. It is, in short, a “unique landscape in which marooning is celebrated to the ultimate fact of defiance”.

I believe *Le Morne* speaks to us today in the same mission. It is speaking to those of us who have been captured by “bad” work, a broad category of labour which includes modern slavery. It should be no surprise to you to read here that many people – perhaps most – are born into, or are forced into, deeply unequal supercapitalistic structures that make a pursuit of life outside of hierarchical and authoritarian workplaces simply unrealistic.

And that’s a pragmatic statement: it is from many good studies in, for example, anthropology (e.g. Bruff & Tansel), political economy (e.g. Clua-Losada & Ribera-Almandoz), sociology (e.g.

Siu & Jin) and ethnography (e.g. Sobre-Denton) that we know there are many people whose experiences of work range from “illegal slave conditions” all the way through to “an unhappy arrangement” with few chances of finding a just escape.

So “maroon democracy” is also an enabling concept for those of us looking to the modern promise of escape from authoritarian neoliberalism.

That many maroons in Mauritius today are captives of “bad” work is an irony that wounds. Many of the descendants of the maroons on that island must now give up their time to work as underpaid cleaners, groundskeepers, cooks, and so forth, so that they can support themselves and their own and, importantly, protect their lands. But they’re doing so also enriches the very corporations that covet their property and the future prospect of building yet more hotels on them.

Maroons today, like their ancestors, like so many of us, are in pursuit of a more egalitarian life. A fairer life without the need to take up bad work or to make meek in front of authoritarian bosses. But what is less clear now than it was then is where our guarded mountain of emancipation is to be found—where is our own *Morne Brabant*? Perhaps some answers can be found in Erik Olin Wright’s real utopias.

In the end, to enact “maroon democracy” today we will need to create our own route to escape, to create our own vertiginous and guarded place for a life to be lived like the maroons of old. They defied their bosses on fertile grounds that were bordered by cliffsides shaped by the wind. Grounds which seem to know their purpose as they slope southwest and away from the rest of the island, almost willing its self-freed people to lift, like birds, and take to the total liberty of the unmanned sea.