

The Haitian Revolution: Liberalism or Radical Universalism?

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“If the historical facts about freedom can be ripped out of the narratives told by the victors and salvaged for our own time, then the project of universal freedom does not need to be discarded but, rather, redeemed and reconstituted on a different basis.”

Susan Buck-Morss²

The Haitian Revolution of 1791 – 1804 led to the establishment of Haiti as the world’s first independent Black Republic. The twelve-year revolutionary war of independence in the French colony of Saint-Domingue was by turns a slave rebellion, an anti-colonial war, and a race war. It shocked the Western world, reshaped the debates about slavery, accelerated the abolitionist movement, precipitated rebellions in neighboring territories, and intensified both repression and anti-slavery sentiment on both sides of the Atlantic.³ The Haitian Revolution must thus be accounted for as a world-historical event of paramount significance. In this paper I will argue for the merits of recuperating the radical universalism of the Haitian Revolution, and suggest some of the productive capacities and the limitations of ascribing to the Haitian Revolution the values of Enlightenment liberalism.⁴ I will suggest that the Haitian Revolution should be understood by paying attention to the manner in which it impinges upon certain explanatory categories – a capitalist world-system (and the fundamental importance of plantation slavery to its development), anti-colonial agency, resistance, and struggle – and that liberal ideas of negative freedom do not

adequately explain the radical *positive* freedom the Haitian Revolution sought to instantiate.

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The Haitian Revolution has always been an ideological battleground in which contenders have conjured with the inheritance of Atlantic slavery. For long, especially within the UK, the US and France, the revolution was denigrated as unregenerate and barbarous, but from the 1930s onwards, sparked by C.L.R. James's classic account of the revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, progressive accounts of the Revolution by a host of predominantly Caribbean, American (especially African American), and African artists and intellectuals have sought to metamorphose and appropriate this spectacular corner of black revolutionary history.

Nick Nesbitt's recent work has argued that the Haitian Revolution constitutes the most extraordinary material event of a Spinozian radical Enlightenment, which he has contrasted with the limitations of the British, American and French revolutions:

“If the English, French, and American bourgeois revolutions all served to create the structural conditions for the protection of individual liberties of choice and property, the particularity of the Haitian Revolution was to redress the imbalance they had introduced between equality and liberty in favor of the latter.”⁵

Arguing that the Haitian Revolution, unlike the French Revolution, “demonstrated human freedom precisely in [its] unique transformation of the empirical subject”,⁶ Nesbitt's work poses fundamental questions about the relationship between the

Haitian Revolution and the Enlightenment – and by implication liberalism – contending that, “[t]he Haitian Revolution demonstrates not only the falsity of any monological understanding of the Enlightenment but also, paradoxically, its truth.”⁷

However, the approach advocated by Nesbitt, in which the Haitian Revolution is granted an enduring political value by virtue of its radical universalism, remains a minority perspective. On this question of the event’s radical universalism, J. Michael Dash has observed that within the sphere of the Caribbean literary imagination,

“ ... despite the existence of C.L.R. James’s The Black Jacobins, Haiti’s symbolic presence [...] has never been understood in terms of radical universalism. Rather it is the discourse of mysterious singularity and heroic uniqueness that has prevailed.”⁸

Dash finds that far more frequently the meaning of the Haitian Revolution has been co-opted by, “those who fatalistically view Haiti in terms of the sigh of history and the fated failure of the antics of megalomaniac generals, or worse yet those who succumb to the Naipaulean nightmare of black savagery.”⁹

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The ideological challenge of the Haitian Revolution

It has been argued that the West’s continuing failure to acknowledge the true significance of the Haitian Revolution has been due to what Michel-Rolph Trouillot has described as being the “unthinkable” nature of the most successful slave revolt in history.¹⁰ Trouillot emphasizes that the widely shared late eighteenth and early nineteenth century contention that,

“enslaved Africans and their descendants could not envision freedom – let alone formulate strategies for gaining and securing such freedom – was based not so much on empirical evidence as on an ontology, an implicit organization of the world and its inhabitants.”¹¹

Susan Buck-Morss has developed Trouillot’s notion of ‘unthinkability’ that results in a ‘silencing of the past’ by drawing attention to the fact that it is necessary to distinguish between two silences when it comes to the Haitian Revolution – the past one and the present one.¹² Buck-Morss is of the same mind as Trouillot in noting the difficulties eighteenth and nineteenth century men and women had in thinking about the Haitian Revolution in nonracial terms and as an expression of the fundamental equality of humanity, but she also argues that,

“today, when the Haitian slave revolution might be more thinkable, it is more invisible, due to the construction of disciplinary discourses through which knowledge of the past has been inherited.”¹³

It is in this context identified by Buck-Morss, that the continuing denial of the Haitian Revolution within mainstream Western political and cultural discussion must be placed. The 2007 bicentenary celebrations of the British abolition of the slave trade are a case in point. Amidst the jubilation and national self-congratulation, the historical fact that a population of former slaves had risen up, fought an anti-colonial war against the French, British, and Spanish, outlawed slavery, and successfully declared the independence of their black republic in the Caribbean well before any of the imperial nations had committed themselves to ending slavery was, in large and conveniently silenced. Even the connection between British abolitionism and the liberal imperialism of today, was overlooked, save for a number of radical commentators.¹⁴

Thus it remains the case, that despite a growing historiography, the ideological impact of the Haitian Revolution has not been absorbed into the mainstreams of public knowledge and consciousness in Europe and North America.¹⁵ Whereas the American and French Revolutions are firmly fixed in establishment thinking as pivotal events shaping the Atlantic and modern world, the important advances made in the Haitian Revolution are erased. To paraphrase the great Martinican poet and statesman Aimé Césaire, to forget this is to take refuge in an odious and racist hypocrisy that underpins our global economic and political world order today.¹⁶ Certainly the American Revolution promoted the ideas of sovereignty and republicanism, thereby helping to bring down the French monarchy, and the French Revolution destabilized empire and slavery throughout the Americas. *Yet only the Haitian Revolution marked a watershed in the history of the development of universal human rights.*¹⁷ As Laurent Dubois explains, the Haitian Revolution was:

“the most concrete expression of the idea that the rights proclaimed in France’s 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen were indeed universal. They could not be quarantined in Europe [...] If we live in a world in which democracy is meant to exclude no one, it is no small part because of the actions of those slaves in Saint Domingue who insisted that human rights were theirs too.”¹⁸

Furthermore, as Nesbitt reminds us, in universalizing the unfulfilled promise of the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution led to the founding of a state in which “positive rights applied to all citizens, without exception”,¹⁹ hence:

“The construction of a society without slavery, one of *universal* and *unqualified* human right to freedom, properly stands out as Haiti’s unique

contribution to humanity.”²⁰

Thus it follows, that for radical and progressive individuals and groups, one of the major attractions of recuperating the narrative of the Haitian Revolution has been the profound challenge the event, properly understood, presents to the notion that the values of universal human rights are exclusively Western, liberal values. Could one then contend that for the Northern nations to acknowledge the Haitian Revolution and its implications would require the dismantling of entire canons of knowledge, a rethinking of the limits of liberalism, and the abandonment of belief in the West’s invention of the discourse of human rights?

However, the slippery aspect of the ideology of Haitian Revolution is perhaps most apparent in the extraordinary diversity of competing recuperations of its principal leader, Toussaint Louverture. In recuperations that span literary and visual arts, music, popular culture, and political discourse and rhetoric, Toussaint Louverture has proved a remarkably protean figure. Toussaint has variously been figured as a tragic hero (most commonly either Greek or Shakespearean), a beacon of anti-racism, a standard bearer for anti-colonial struggle the world over, a symbol of anti-Napoleon sentiment, an embodiment of black power, a human rights martyr, and a precursor to a host of other anti-imperialists and black leaders including Fidel Castro, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Patrice Lumumba.

The many varying political applications of the figure of Toussaint Louverture thus highlight Toussaint’s, and the Revolution’s, iconic flexibility. Even France, on the two hundredth anniversary of Toussaint’s death, sought to canonize him as a French national hero, lighting a flame in the memory of both Toussaint and the martyring of

millions of slaves, in ceremonies attended by the then French President, Jacques Chirac.²¹

Conclusion

Although the Haitian Revolution was uniquely successful as a slave-led revolution that within the century triggered the abolition of slavery everywhere in the Atlantic World, its limitations must be recognized. Independence was achieved, but not the liberation of the people. In its wake came the new obstacle of neocolonial interference, a domestic culture of political authoritarianism buttressed by militarism, the reemergence of color prejudice, and the destabilizing consequences of periods of foreign occupation.²² Despite this, the work of Peter Hallward reminds us why it should be honored for its aspirations and achievement:

“Of the three great revolutions that began in the final decades of the eighteenth century – American, French and Haitian – only the third forced the unconditional application of the principle that inspired each one: affirmation of the natural, inalienable rights of all human beings. Only in Haiti was the declaration of human freedom universally consistent. Only in Haiti was this declaration sustained *at all costs*, in direct opposition to the social order and economic logic of the day. Only in Haiti were the consequences of this declaration – the end of slavery, of colonialism, of racial inequality – upheld in terms that directly embraced the world as a whole. The declaration of Haitian independence thereby dealt the myth of white supremacy a mortal and thus unforgivable blow.”²³

The Haitian Revolution tested and superseded the ontological and political

assumptions of the most radical writers and intellectuals of the Enlightenment, and it constituted a powerful example of black capability that challenged the prevailing racist discourses of the time, and inspired enslaved populations across the Americas: within a month of the August 1791 uprising on the northern plains of Saint-Domingue, slaves in Jamaica were singing songs that celebrated the outbreak of the slave rebellion, and by 1805 in Brazil, African soldiers were wearing medallion portraits of Jean Jacques Dessalines.²⁴ The Haitian Revolution also fostered and sought to export its revolutionary anti-imperialism into continental Latin America, much as the Cuban Revolution would do one and half centuries later: Alexandre Pétion, the third President of Haiti, gave encouragement and assistance to the cause of Venezuelan independence and anti-slavery, coming to the aid of Simón Bolívar and Francisco de Miranda in their hour of need.²⁵

Today Haiti lacks a legitimate government and is ravaged by grinding poverty and economic deprivation. Foreign political manipulation continues to be instrumental to the disfunctioning of Haitian civil society. Its status as a failing nation-state is portrayed as interminable because inherent in its people. It is in this context that it is imperative to restore the voices of its Revolution still resounding today, “as founders in a long struggle for dignity and freedom that remains incomplete.”²⁶

Notes

¹ I should like to thank Deborah Toner for inviting me to participate in this workshop.

² Susan Buck-Morss, Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History. (Pittsburgh, PA.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 74-5.

³ The best study of the impact of the Haitian Revolution on the politics of the Atlantic World, on slave resistance, on liberation struggles throughout the Americas, and on the Revolution's demographic impact on the wider Caribbean, is: David Patrick Geggus, ed., The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2001). The works that best contextualise the Haitian Revolution in the history of Atlantic slavery are: Robin Blackburn, The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492–1800 (London: Verso, 1997), Robin Blackburn, The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776–1848 (London: Verso, 1988) and Robin Blackburn, The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights (London: Verso, 2011). The most up-to-date scholarly history of the revolution is: Laurent Dubois, Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2004). The most complete bibliography of works on the Haitian Revolution is: Bob Corbett, Bibliography on the Haitian Revolution (1995 [cited]; available from <http://hartford-hwp.com/archives/43a/099.html>).

⁴ Arguing for the radical universalism of the Haitian Revolution I am seeking to build up on the work of: Nick Nesbitt, Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 2008), Susan Buck-Morss, Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History (Pittsburgh, PA.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), and Doris L. Garraway, “‘Légitime Défense’: Universalism and Nationalism in the Discourse of the Haitian Revolution”, in Doris L. Garraway (ed.), Tree of Liberty: Cultural Legacies of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 63–88.

⁵ Nick Nesbitt, Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment. 18–19.

⁶ Ibid. 12.

⁷ Ibid. 25.

⁸ J. Michael Dash, “Haïti Chimère: Revolutionary Universalism and Its Caribbean Context”, in: Martin Munro & Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw (eds.), Reinterpreting the Haitian Revolution and Its Cultural Aftershocks, (Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 17.

⁹ Ibid. 17. Elsewhere, contrary to Dash, I argue that the writers of the negritude movement in particular created a body of writing on the Haitian Revolution that should be considered for its quality of radical universalism and that if they sought to represent figures or episodes of “mysterious” or “heroic uniqueness” that emerged in the unfolding of the Haitian Revolution, it was only in order to vindicate the actuality of black agency in colonial history. See: Philip Kaisary, *The Literary Impact of the Haitian Revolution* (PhD thesis: Warwick University, 2008).

¹⁰ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1995).

¹¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1995). 73.

¹² Susan Buck-Morss, Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History, (Pittsburgh, PA.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 50.

¹³ Ibid. 50.

¹⁴ Richard Gott, "Britain's Vote to End Its Slave Trade Was a Precursor to Today's Liberal Imperialism," The Guardian, 17 January 2007. Available from:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/jan/17/comment.politics2>.

One of the legacies of the 1807 Slave Trade Act was encouraging Britain’s enduring taste for sanctimonious and hypocritical imperialist interventionism: hence the British navy was given the task of patrolling the Atlantic in order to prevent the continuing

trade in slaves from Africa to Brazil, Cuba, and the US, whilst Britain continued to profit from the trade in Asia. A document that makes clear some of the connections between the colonial project that accompanied 19th century British abolitionism and Britain's foreign policy of liberal imperialism that has resulted in the unravelling tragedies in Afghanistan and Iraq today is Tony Blair's HMS Albion speech: Tony Blair, Our Nation's Future - Defence. Hms Albion Lecture. 11 January 2007.

Available from <http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page10735.asp>.

¹⁵ The main contributions to the recent historiography include:

Laurent Dubois, Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), Laurent Dubois, A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), David Geggus, Haitian Revolutionary Studies, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), David Geggus and Norman Fiering, (eds.), The World of the Haitian Revolution, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), Jeremy Popkin, (ed.), Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Revolution, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), and Jeremy Popkin, You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2010). Also, David Brion Davis devotes a chapter to the French and Haitian Revolutions in: David Brion Davis, Inhuman Bondage: the Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and Robin Blackburn devotes significant attention to the Haitian Revolution in: Robin Blackburn, The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights, (London / New York: Verso, 2011).

¹⁶ Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, [1955] 2000). 31.

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- ¹⁷ Robin Blackburn, Of Human Bondage (The Nation, 2004 [cited 22 September 2005]); available from <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20041004/blackburn>
- ¹⁸ Dubois, Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution. 3.
- ¹⁹ Nick Nesbitt, Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment. 10.
- ²⁰ Ibid. 2.
- ²¹ Graham Gendall Norton, "France Finally Recognises a Hero after 200 Years," The Times April 5, 2003. Available from:
http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/court_and_social/the_hitch/article1126837.ece.
- ²² Nicholls, From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti. Especially 33–66 for explanation of Haiti's culture of militarism and colour conflict. For an excellent analysis of the United States military occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934 see: Mary A. Renda, Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915–1940 (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
- ²³ Peter Hallward, Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide, and the Politics of Containment (London: Verso, 2008). 11. Emphasis in the original.
- ²⁴ Dubois, Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution. 304–05.
- ²⁵ David Nicholls, From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 46–7.
- ²⁶ Dubois, Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution. 306.