

Analysis of the Relationships between Haitian Revolution and the French Revolution

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The French Revolution, more or less contrary to the will of the Revolution in France, built up a black revolution in Haiti that ultimately led to Haitian independence. That black revolution was never defeated on the island in the 19th century by anything except Haitian rebellions. It had a strong form of factual independence, being able to defeat all contenders for power on the island. Haitian rebellions and civil wars did, at various times, establish regional governments in separate parts of Haiti, and eventually (1844) a separate independent government was stably established in the Dominican Republic, replacing the previous Haitian government of that part of the island (Geggus 8). This paper – by analyzing the relationships between Haitian Revolution and the French Revolution – illustrates how these revolutions had a mutual influence on the radical processes occurring both in France and Haiti.

What unified the foreign policy of the various governments of Haiti and its parts from Toussaint through the U.S. Emancipation Proclamation was a class issue, the abolition of (and the opposition to reintroduction of) slavery. That class issue was at the same time a race issue (though colored and black Haitian governments and factions were unified on it) and an international issue; the Haitians saw the international scene as through a class darkly. The lines of class, race, slavery, and black suffrage were drawn in the world system, between Haiti and the rest of the Caribbean and its imperial governors, by the Haitian Revolution (Stinchcombe 2).

The analysis of the relationships between the Haitian Revolution and French Revolution has to be about the question of what determined what sort of object that were present in the political systems of France and Haiti. We argue that this is not a single question, but two different questions. The first question is the relation of the Haiti and its policies as a symbol in the domestic politics of the imperial countries,

which governed what happened to it among people who did not care about that country as a reality. The second question has to do with the experience of various groups to whom the reality of Haiti was very salient, for example, the experience of Josephine, Napoleon's wife, who was born into a family with plantation interests in and contacts with Haiti and Martinique (Stinchcombe 4).

There are, then, two dimensions of political sociology we have to analyze. The first is the place of a country (here, Haiti) and its policies in the symbol system of domestic politics among those who do not care about the foreign reality. The second is the place in the empire or metropolitan national political system of those who have had extensive and salient contacts with, and often interests in, the foreign political reality. It is such a combination, dissimilar in different countries, that determined, for example, the differences in the starting and ending dates of Haiti's diplomatic isolation (Stinchcombe 8).

Part of the outcome of this reasoning is that it is only in the most abstract sense that the world capitalist system acted. The diplomatic isolation of the Haitian Revolution was partly the product of domestic politics in the United States and U.S. dominance over its South American "client states, even over the independent governments whose revolutionary struggles Petion in the south of Haiti had supported substantially" (Verna 379-381, qtd in Stinchcombe 8). But North American objections to Haiti as a symbol of anti-slavery and black equality combined with the world system interests of very small parts of the capitalist and governmental class of the empires of Europe (Geggus 78). The result was that the isolation of revolutionary slave rebellion came to an end earlier in the part of the world system most occupied with maintaining exploitation of colonies, and later in the part that was heading toward a civil war over the domestic place of slaves. The world system, then, acted

differently in the different states of the core depending on their different politics of diplomacy toward Haiti.

With slight variations Haiti occupied the same place in the political cosmology of France. First, Haiti symbolized a social revolution: freeing slaves, breaking up and expropriating plantations, establishing a new government, applying terror to reputable whites as well as to rebellious blacks, all using the symbolism of the left of the French Revolution. These several characteristics seemed to be all one symbol on the right wing of all the empires, and by and large right wing people were all that cared. In particular Haiti was seen as exporting revolution, although actual help to other revolutions seems not to have been very common (Geggus 381, 385).

Whatever Haitian governments did in fact, Haiti was a symbol that meant export of revolution (Geggus 83-84).

The Haitian Revolution quite abruptly abolished the plantation system in Haiti and stopped the recruitment of slaves, made it possible for former slaves to claim tenure in a small plot, and created a large population of former slaves and an increased formerly free Creole black and mulatto population who were potential peasants. This transition to peasant tenures took place in spite of strong attempts by the revolutionary government to preserve plantations after emancipation, with the potential planters being officers of the army or civil servants (James 121).

The Haitian transition was of the same general sort that happened in France during the Revolution (James 85). In France, too, a small peasantry with no feudally burdened tenures was created by social revolution. But the depth of the social transformation involved was greater in Haiti, because the degree of compulsion by the upper class and the poverty and lack of independent agricultural experience of the lower class in the old regime had been so much greater in Haiti. The

revolutionary terror against white, and sometimes against colored, Haitians was more intense than anything organized by the French lower classes.

The greatest case for the argument that freedom creates peasantries was, of course, the Haitian Revolution, which was real liberation all at once. But even the reluctant and precarious emancipations of such places as Jamaica or Cuba or Barbados increased the potential peasant population. High prices for plots carved from bankrupt plantations in Barbados show that Barbados had produced potential peasants, even though island conditions and government policy were both against it.

Speaking about the reasons of the Haitian Revolution and its relation to the French Revolution, we have to note that three main kinds of tensions over citizenship existed in Haiti before revolution. The first was the classic Latin American conflict within urban life between Creole and peninsular political influence, in a system in which urban government was dominant in colonial times; the Creole urban elite typically had an ambivalent reaction during the wars of independence, wanting to preserve urban power but with creoles in place of peninsular (James 93).

A second tension was the claim for rural representation of peasants and ranchers. The third tension was the claim of planters to run the political system to create and maintain a slave system, common to the Caribbean. We have to note that on the other islands this early in the 19th century the process of emancipation produced the deep left-right split between ex-slaves and ex-planters (so between races). It was this split that turned the French Revolution into the Haitian one. Then in the 20th century the same division produced left-right splits as the backbone of independence movements (and their pro-colonial opposition) in the British islands. In a different context it produced left-wing colored and black deputies from the Caribbean to the French parliament. This left-right anti-slavery split was in general a

very subordinate part of the ideology of the Cuban revolutions of the 19th century (Geggus 320).

The Haitian Revolution was not about abolishing economic and social exploitation: rather, its project was ending the alienation of labor power. Some of the leaders of the revolution already owned private property and some of them had risen to high positions in the various areas of the state. They were interested in making the slaves free to sell labor power by separating direct force from the economy. Their notion of freedom had little to do with creating an autonomous self; rather, they were in pursuit of a historical form of freedom as necessity (Geggus 132). The problem arises when we reify freedom won under the bourgeois revolution as freedom-in-general. Verna points out that postmodernists use highly theoretical concepts such as autonomy, the economy, democracy, freedom and justice. These concepts are strewn across the landscape of bourgeois intellectual culture, which pretends to separate itself from the contradictory process of social change as well as from the construction of social identities and “particular forms of perception and agency” (Stinchcombe 12).

Toussaint L'Ouverture was interested in abolishing one type of exploitation based on slavery and replacing it with a more recent type of exploitation based on wage labor and the abolition of formal political inequality. Along the way his project would necessitate the separation of compulsion from the economy and the labor process. This is where the tension between abstract and concrete universality became evident in the Haitian Revolution. Naturally, the French state, Toussaint and the other leaders had their own views; the slaves had a very different view that was bound to put them in conflict with those who had to exploit them in order to reproduce themselves as owners of the means of production. Even if the slaves had

no view of freedom other than full freedom beyond necessity such as comes with the abolition of exploitation, oppression and inequality, the fact remains that the revolution could only have survived in a world based on different forms of exploitation.

The broad goals of the Haitian slaves were revolutionary in the way that the French Revolution embraced Enlightenment principles grounded in the rule of necessity: These very principles were designed to deepen the separation of state from society, of the economy from state and society, of the individual from the state and society, and to organize bourgeois property relations in order to make peasants and urban workers free to sell labor power. This project lies at the heart of bourgeois democracy, and therefore capitalist democracy has to be grounded in domination and necessity. This was the way to institutionalize and strengthen the bourgeois revolutions with their new property rights, laws, and other socioeconomic and political bases, including the separation of coercion from society and the economy and the socialization of the doctrine of the 'Right of Man' from which women were excluded, except generically under men (Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen).

The nationalization of society was also integral to this project. It was about reconstructing the state, the productive forces and social relations of production beyond mere sensuousness, physicality and materiality. The crisis of the Reign of Terror that befell the revolution under Robespierre and the revolutionaries had certain parallels in the Haitian Revolution. Toussaint and the Saint Domingue revolutionaries appeared as individual actors, seemingly outside the concrete social relations of production within the revolution. At the existential level, the individual identities of the revolutionary actors appeared to have been limited by the

individuated side of their social consciousness, but their particularistic identities were integral to their social being as agency.

The Haitian Revolution was a piercing scream for a new type of civil society to be born to release these same concrete, historical, individual impulses: necessity hijacked freedom. The formation of the Haitian state in the revolutionary process soon exposed the contradictions and instabilities of this process (James 67, 89). The French Revolution pointed the way forward in the development of modern concepts of citizenship and national identity and the articulation of the principle of individual rights, but this was done under bourgeois dominance. The bourgeoisie did not grant rights to anyone; the bourgeoisie had to engage in prolonged struggle before it could win the rights it got and take control of the state and dominate labor and society.

Despite laborious attempts by many observers to portray the situation differently, the plain truth of the matter is that Haitian history and nationalism have been inextricably linked to the domestic affairs of France. The Haitian evolution began as a slave uprising; it was in every sense of the term a social revolution. This was no convenient reshuffling of the ruling elite, exchanging one obnoxious, dominant caste for another one later. Quite the contrary, in this revolution the African slaves became the absolute masters in a now free state. What ignited as a spark of rebellion unexpectedly erupted into an uncontrollable wildfire of civil war proportions, before eventually turning into a war along undeniable color lines. When news of the revolution in France reached the Caribbean colony, the settler class was confronted with the dilemma of deciding which faction would prove most beneficial to its interests.

Works Cited

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