The Haitian Anomaly

General Emancipation, Black Independence, and the Age of Revolution

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In 1791, the largest and most successful slave revolt in history commenced in the wealthy French colony of Saint-Domingue.\(^1\) Indirectly influenced by the concurrent French Revolution, a lack of imperial control and the pervasiveness of Enlightenment ideas contributed to this violent outburst against the system of plantation slavery.\(^2\) With thousands of slaves rebelling and white planters conspiring to cede territorial control to the British, colonial commissioners declared general emancipation in 1793.\(^3\) It was a desperate and precarious measure, yet the Republican slaves-turned-soldiers resisted subsequent British and Spanish invasions.\(^4\) This defense of a colony demonstrated to the National Convention in Paris that black insurgents could more usefully serve the Republic as warriors. Consequently, this political body abolished slavery throughout the unstable French Empire on February 5, 1794 to rally more fighters to its side.\(^5\) Nearly a decade later, the ex-slaves of Saint-Domingue successfully defended their freedom by vanquishing Napoleon Bonaparte’s effort to re-establish slavery, and declared Haitian independence in 1804.\(^6\)

The chaotic events of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) were an extreme shock to the widespread institution of New World slavery. Furthermore, the establishment of a relatively large and centrally located independent black state was a challenge to the broader Atlantic system dominated by oppressive European colonialism.\(^7\) Yet, revolutionary concepts concerning racial equality, general emancipation, and the liberal teleological progression of humanity did not receive widespread support in the Americas for decades. Put differently, despite its immediate importance during the Age of Revolution, the Haitian Revolution largely failed to promptly inspire emancipation elsewhere.

The Haitian Revolution and its socio-political consequences did not occur in a vacuum. Anja Bandau stresses the extreme political, economic, and social connections within the Atlantic World.\(^8\) In fact, both Robert D. Taber and Matthew Clavin insist that discussion of the Haitian Revolution was a transatlantic affair.\(^9\) Most broadly, C.A. Bayly has demonstrated that influential concepts, such as modernity, equality, and citizenship, spread rapidly across the globe throughout the “long nineteenth century” (1789-1914) – and particularly during the Age of Revolution.\(^10\)

This lack of influence thus generates the following question: why did the ideas behind the Haitian Revolution not spread more universally within the interconnected Atlantic World? Overall, concepts behind the Haitian Revolution did not spread beyond Hispaniola because they were radical, ill defined, and an anathema to the colonial status quo.

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2. Ibid, 24.
3. Ibid, 28.
5. Ibid.
In Haiti, slaves first fought for tangible concessions, only openly embracing the idea of general emancipation well into the revolt. After emancipation and subsequent independence, these ex-slaves quarreled over alternate visions of freedom, and political elites were constrained by the contemporary geopolitics; both factors created difficulties in spreading the revolution overseas.

In the Atlantic World more broadly, abolitionist policies were often limited and constrained within the political context of the colonial world. Imperial powers were more concerned with the preservation of power and the expansion of the lucrative system of plantation slavery than with abolitionism.

A LIBERAL WORLD?

Broader debates concerning liberalism took place during the “long nineteenth century.” The highlights of this period include the American and French Revolutions, the defeat of Napoleon and Imperial France in 1815, the 1848 Spring of Nations, as well as large-scale emancipations in Russia and the United States. This age was also characterized by the expansion of the global capitalist system, private property, and free trade.

Yet such an account overemphasizes the global permeation and influence of liberal ideas during this period. Several scholars have demonstrated that the political, economic, and social changes during this period were considerably limited in scope. Bayly, for instance, demonstrates that romanticized, progressive portrayals of the revolutions of 1848 are rather myopic. Following limited outbursts of liberal and nationalist fervor, monarchical authority quickly re-established itself in Europe. Similarly, Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper suggest that a liberal and virtuous characterization of the American Civil War should not be embellished. Burbank and Cooper note that, “the war was about holding the polity together first and about slavery second,” and that Lincoln was, “[deeply reluctant] to admit blacks into the citizenry.”

Liberal economic advances were also finite during the “long nineteenth century.” This age is associated with the concepts of private property and free trade in relation to the development of the global capitalist system. However, instead of arguing for the victory of laissez-faire and liberal economics during the 1800s, several prominent scholars discuss the complex and often illiberal interpretations of these concepts. For example, Sven Beckert and Bayly juxtapose free trade with European imperialism. Bayly, in particular, stresses that the British state’s promotion of free trade due to economic self-interest – and not due to capitalist or liberal ideals. Somewhat differently, Burbank and Cooper examine the paradoxical relationship between federally supported American settler expansion and the forceful dispossession of Native American lands. They write that, “for Americans, it was private property that was sacrosanct, at least for white men.”

Liberal ideals made limited progress during the “long nineteenth century.” The Haitian Revolution demonstrates two broader points. First, the power of conservative and imperial actors was still present in the world during this period. Second, the revolution and its associated ideas were radical and unprecedented.

HAITI: LIMITED REVOLUTION

11. Ibid, 158-159.
12. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
17. Burbank and Cooper, Empires in World History, 284.
Prior to the 1791 slave revolt, significant political tension already existed between the white planters and the conspicuous gens de couleur. As Laurent Dubois notes, the gens de couleur initially used the chaotic opening of the French Revolution in attempt to gain more political rights. Utilizing revolutionary rhetoric of the era, wealthy and educated gens de couleur demanded equality, but notably did not attack the institution of slavery; many were slave owners themselves. Aside from this small minority of slave owners, the free people of color in Saint-Domingue “generally supported the slave regime; in North Province many people of color had become indispensable as managers of sugar estates.”

The initial demands in Saint-Domingue were limited. Surprisingly, a majority of revolutionary actors at this early stage had an interest in the preservation of plantation slavery. Additionally, Blackburn observes that revolutionary ideas originally presented obstacles to slave emancipation in the New World. Because slaves were property and a prop of public utility rather than members of the community, they were essentially restricted to permanent bondage. The initial ideas in the French Revolution did not allow for general emancipation. This demonstrates that the concept was nearly “unthinkable” at the time.

Operating within the accepted socio-political sphere, the gens de couleur only resorted to arms after the failure of political lobbying and a propaganda campaign in Paris. Consequently, both white planters and free blacks rapidly armed their respective slaves, and Saint-Domingue advanced towards civil conflict. Soon after, the slaves turned against their masters, igniting the massive 1791 revolt. However, as Blackburn argues, the slaves of Saint-Domingue initially only fought to acquire tangible concessions – and not for general emancipation. He cites documents related to the uprising which demonstrate that rebel leaders at first negotiated for the selective emancipation of their immediate followers, three free days a week, and a ban on the whip.

The complete abolition of slavery was not a prevalent issue. Numerous slave commanders allied initially with the Spanish monarchy that upheld the institution of slavery. Only gradually did the militarily capable and politically adept rebel leaders call for general emancipation. Nevertheless, the fact that a singular and successful slave revolt was needed to imagine a concept of general emancipation in Haiti attests to the radical character of this idea; even slaves did not readily and ubiquitously embrace the concept during the Age of Revolution.

DESPERATION: GENERAL EMANCIPATION AS POLITICAL DEVICE

The eventual abolition of slavery in Saint-Domingue was applied limitedly. By mid-1793, the situation in the colony became dire for Republican France. The counterrevolutionary white planters mobilized and large slave armies surrounded the colonial capital of Le Cap. Republican commissioners Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Étienne Polverel found themselves isolated and at risk

22. Ibid, 179.
27. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
of losing the colony to the British, Spanish, or both. Desperate, the commissioners offered freedom and citizenship to any slave-warrior willing to fight for the new republic. Ultimately, then, due to the continued danger of slave insurgents, counterrevolutionary white planters, and rival colonial powers, Sonthonax and Polverel declared the abolition of slavery in August 1793.

Without precedent, this decree of general and immediate emancipation was a pragmatic political tool; it allowed the two commissioners to preserve Republican control of Saint-Domingue. The measure was the product of exceptional and unrepealable circumstances within the colony itself. This act was not the tangible application of some revolutionary or liberal ideal – it was a radically desperate action.

Sonthonax and Polverel’s subsequent decree, requiring that ex-slaves remain on their plantations for at least the coming year, demonstrates the disingenuous and ad hoc character of general emancipation in Saint-Domingue. Following the imperial abolition of slavery in 1794, Louverture also understood the politico-economic importance of preserving plantation agriculture and white land ownership. The concept of general and immediate emancipation was too radical even for Saint-Domingue. Consequently, this strongly suggests the inapplicable nature of the idea in the broader Atlantic World during the Age of Revolution.

CONTESTED VISIONS OF BLACK INDEPENDENCE

Following emancipation and subsequent independence in 1804, Haitians had the potential to consolidate their revolution and inspire insurrection elsewhere. The historian C.L.R. James goes so far as to compare Haiti with Fidel Castro’s Cuba in regard to both demonstrative power and the development of a Caribbean identity. However, empirical evidence suggests that the Haitian example largely failed to inspire similar movements. This was due in part to competing and ill-defined internal visions regarding an abolitionist, black, and independent state in the Western Hemisphere. Moreover, these divisions weakened a geopolitically constrained state within a hostile international system.

The origins of these divisions were visible as early as the 1797-1802 governorship of Louverture. The celebrated Haitian leader never genuinely considered dismantling the plantation system; he saw it as the only viable economic option for the country. Underpinning this perspective was the belief that Haiti needed to prove it possible to produce sugar and coffee without slavery. Yet legal enforcement of this model resulted in innumerable ex-slaves working on the same pre-revolutionary plantations for miniscule pay.

This post-insurrection situation was poor recompense for the costs of the uprising. For many ex-slaves, the plantation system was intrinsically linked to bondage. A counter-plantation vision of Haitian freedom soon emerged, emphasizing the importance of small subsistence plots and the resistance to plantation labor in all its forms. As a result, Louverture found himself in dispute with the majority of ex-slaves in the colony; he eventually resorted to force to impose his economic vision.

31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
34. Ibid, 4.
40. Ibid.
This deep division over the meaning of independence prevented the Haitian Revolution from demonstrating how a black sovereign state in the Western Hemisphere could successfully transition from slavery to freedom. Instead of economic vitality and unity, the Atlantic World was witness to Louverture’s failed experiment, comprised of a free, yet considerably coercive labor regime. Cumulatively, this economic breakdown readily played into pro-slavery arguments emphasizing black racial inferiority and lethargy.

As French governor, Louverture was constrained geopolitically as well. It is perhaps unrealistic to argue that the ex-slaves of Saint-Domingue had potential to inspire insurrection elsewhere when slavery continued to exist on Hispaniola itself. As Dubois notes in *Avengers of the New World*, “the ex-slaves in Republican-controlled areas would struggle to expand the limited freedom they had been given. The British would soon occupy much of the colony and would reestablish slavery as they went.”

The black leader also discouraged privateering and decided not to promote slave insurrections elsewhere. For example, in a secret treaty with London, Louverture promised not to attack or encourage sedition in Jamaica in exchange for an end to the British blockade of Saint-Domingue. The colony critically needed trade relations with both the United Kingdom and the United States. Louverture additionally sought procurement of military aid from Washington to better prepare his weak state against potential invasion. He had little interest in encouraging slave insurrection in the American South or elsewhere.

Following the death of Louverture and independence in 1804, the Haitian state soon became formally divided into two distinct political entities. But first, the nascent country was briefly united under General Jean-Jacques Dessalines from 1804 to 1806. The self-styled emperor declared “peace to our neighbors” as he sought to reassure powerful European empires that he had no intention of spreading insurrection throughout their Caribbean slave colonies. However, internal divisions among revolutionary generals quickly led to the assassination of Dessalines, political discord, and eventual division. These political and economic partitions within post-independence Haiti exacerbated an already fractured image of black independence, contributing to the propagation of ill-defined and contradicting ideas in the Atlantic World.

Eventually, the two Haitian states presented drastically different and competing visions of black independence in the Western Hemisphere. In the north, King Henri Christophe sought to develop a European-style monarchy, artificially creating a black aristocracy and preserving the plantation system. In the south, mulatto republicans such as Alexandre Péton and Jean-Pierre Boyer initially endorsed a quasi-parliamentary system. The political elite of the southern state also increasingly accepted the *lakou* system—a modification of subsistence farming influenced by egalitarianism.

These two Haitian states were not completely isolated. Within the broader imperial world of the “long nineteenth century,” the contrasting systems attracted different supporters. Many abolitionists, including the prominent Englishman Thomas Clarkson, “hoped that Christophe’s
regime would serve to refute the racist theories of their opponents and prove that...emancipation did not necessarily mean the end of prosperity in the Caribbean.\textsuperscript{52} Conversely, the admired Abbé Grégoire, being too uncomfortable with monarchies, supported the southern republic.\textsuperscript{53}

This competing support contributed to the fragmentation of the Haitian example as a powerful influence. As Seymour Drescher asserts, the new Haitian rulers appeared to be too preoccupied with internal struggles to pose an actual threat to the widespread system of colonial plantation slavery.\textsuperscript{54} Drescher even disputes the notion that Haiti was a direct catalyst of any subsequent slave mobilizations within the Caribbean.\textsuperscript{55} He says that, “neither as military threat, nor as threatening example, did Haiti loom large…after 1805.”\textsuperscript{56}

Geopolitical circumstances also continued to undermine the black state’s influence during the Age of Revolution. Following independence from metropolitan France, Haiti was politically isolated by the major powers of the Atlantic World.\textsuperscript{57} For example, American President Thomas Jefferson favored a policy of containment in regard to the former colony.\textsuperscript{58} The Founding Father crudely suggested that the US, the U.K., and France could work together to “contain this disease to its island.”\textsuperscript{59} For their part, post-revolution Haitian leaders understood the acute hostility and resistance directed towards their state and foreswore wars against their slave-holding neighbors.\textsuperscript{60}

ABOLITIONISM IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD: FRENCH AND AMERICAN EXAMPLES

Moving beyond the scope of Haiti, contemporary French and American abolitionist movements demonstrate the radical and nearly unthinkable character of the Haitian Revolution. These movements were constrained within the context of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Quite simply, many abolitionists could not readily adopt violent, general, and immediate emancipation as a platform within the existing political and social atmosphere. This was a world dominated by European empires in which slavery was commonplace and predominantly unquestioned as an institution.

In France, influential Enlightenment-era figures were subdued in their abolitionist demands. For example, Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry only advocated for the improvement of slave conditions, while the Marquis de Condorcet insisted that slavery should be outlawed through a gradual process that would start by lessening the hardships of slaves’ lives.\textsuperscript{61} The prominent Société des amis de Noirs – which was extremely active in the early revolutionary period – called for an end to the Atlantic Slave Trade and advocated for the gradual emancipation of slavery in the Americas.\textsuperscript{62} Nevertheless, C.L.R. James comments that the group was more concerned with battling for the rights of gens de couleur in the French National Assembly.\textsuperscript{63}

Even after the 1791 slave revolt in Saint-Domingue, members of the Société only blamed the slave trade for the insurrection. In response, the organization limitedly called for racial equality of

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 68.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 69.
\textsuperscript{54} Geggus, The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 12
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, 13.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 12.
\textsuperscript{57} Reinstein, “Slavery, Executive Power, and International Law,”192.
\textsuperscript{58} DuBois, Avengers of the New World, 225.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Blackburn, The American Crucible, 218.
\textsuperscript{61} DuBois, Avengers of the New World, 72.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} James, The Black Jacobins, 115.
the gens de couleur. Dubois notes that the French abolitionist plan for the gradual reform of slavery was too extreme for many whites.

American abolitionist discourse in the period immediately after the Haitian Revolution also demonstrates an abhorrent perception of violent, general, and immediate emancipation. Citing the African-American Frederick Douglass as an example, Davis notes that US abolitionists often ignored the Haitian Revolution in their orations. Clavin goes into more detail concerning the American context, demonstrating that abolitionists utilized “the conservative tactic of moral suasion…they clung to the dream that slavery would end peacefully wherever it existed, in time.”

The North American movement generally targeted white, educated, and middle-class audiences in propaganda campaigns and speeches. As a result, Toussaint Louverture was initially portrayed as a passive, benevolent, and civilian leader of emancipation and black independence. The fact that American abolitionists gathered to celebrate the anniversary of the peaceful and gradual abolition of slavery in the British Empire also indicates the conservative quality of the movement. Factions of the group only radicalized and advocated for insurrection in the 1850s – five decades after Haitian independence.

This relatively limited character of contemporary French and American abolitionist movements demonstrates the truly radical nature of events in Saint-Domingue. It was unimaginable for abolitionists to adopt and promote a platform of ubiquitous and instantaneous emancipation. In turn, this contributed to the lack of advocacy for the Haitian example abroad. Similar to most other members of society, gradual abolitionists gasped at the bloodshed in Saint-Domingue. As Clavin asserts, many within American society viewed general and immediate emancipation as the harbinger of a racial apocalypse similar to the Haitian Revolution. These US citizens did not accept this as a plausible idea during the Age of Revolution.

IMPERIAL AMIBITIONS: THE PRESERVATION AND SPREAD OF THE ATLANTIC WORLD SYSTEM

A final reason that the Haitian Revolution did not spread throughout the Atlantic World was because imperial powers did not want it to. Regardless of arguments concerning the morality of the institution, Atlantic empires derived a large part of their wealth from plantation slavery. In order to maintain and expand their political and economic power, these entities had an interest in the preservation and growth of slavery. For that reason, these empires viewed the black, independent, and inherently anti-slavery Haitian polity as a serious threat. Several of these pro-slavery states undertook significant measures to reduce Haitian influence, prevent large-scale insurrection, and therefore ensure enslavement.

From a legal perspective, Robert J. Reinstein argues that an immediate “casualty” of the Haitian Revolution was the possibility of gradual emancipation in the Upper South of the United States. “The [American] domestic reaction to the Haitian Revolution contributed to the enactment of draconian laws on emancipation and manumission that entrenched slavery for six decades.” As

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64. Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 129.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid, 135.
69. Ibid, 132.
briefly mentioned above, the United States government also adopted a pro-slavery foreign policy towards Haiti. This was an attempt to physically isolate the country and its founding ideas. Again, as Thomas Jefferson asserted, “as long as we don’t allow the blacks to possess a ship we can allow them to exist.”

Other American polities adopted proactive countermeasures against potential insurrection following the Haitian Revolution, as well. In Cuba and Brazil, for instance, “the planter elites…were manifestly not paralyzed by fear of their slaves but, mindful that a further twist of war and revolution could compromise or destroy their wealth, they acted with due caution.” Measures included strengthening of the colonial garrison, encouraging European immigration, and halting slave imports. In general, cessation of the Atlantic Slave Trade was not a tangible application of Enlightenment-era ideas. Rather, it was an act to stop the flow of potentially rebellious Africans into the Americas. Economically, it was also a means to increase the value of slaves on respective domestic markets.

Many Atlantic empires not only desired the preservation of slavery during the Age of Revolution but several actively attempted to expand the institution in the Western Hemisphere. These polities were completely averse to the nascent Haitian state. The ruin of Saint-Domingue created an economic vacuum for sugar and coffee. Both Portuguese Brazil and Spanish Cuba viewed this development as an opportunity to increase their own respective production through the expansion of plantation slavery. Similarly, in the United States, the 1803 Louisiana Purchase enabled slavery to spread across the newly acquired American Southwest. The most powerful states of the time had strong interests in preserving and expanding the vital institution of plantation slavery. Poor, isolated Haiti was generally helpless to influence this status quo during the “long nineteenth century.”

CONCLUSION

The Haitian Revolution had a significant impact within the larger context of French sociopolitical turmoil. Yet the upheaval had a limited liberal impact within the broader Atlantic World of the “long nineteenth century.” Overall, this was because the Haitian Revolution was unprecedentedly radical, ill defined, and an anathema to the colonial interests of the period. The revolution’s limited reach demonstrates the powerful and continued presence of conservative elements during the Age of Revolution.

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75. Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 225.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid, 258.
79. Ibid, 258, 261.