What are the implications of locating the origins of universal equality and liberty within the 18th Century Western revolutions?

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Abstract

This paper engages with notions of racial slavery, equality, liberty and universality, to illustrate the complexity, dynamics and inter-dependencies of processes and events of the 18th Century. Without an engagement with the context, experiences and contributions of the Haitian Revolution to the creation and legacy of freedom, equality and universality, the history of these political ideals is incomplete. Indeed, the political struggle of revolutionary enslaved men and women not only abolished slavery and established the independence of Saint Domingue as Haiti, but it also substituted the particularistic and colonial ‘universality’ invoked by the French revolutionaries with a new, open ontology of the ‘human’ who no longer could be regarded as property. Hence, the historian of political thought ought to reconfigure dominant narratives, to think differently outside of hierarchy, and to acknowledge the revolutionary events which contributed to the creation of possibilities for new futures, directions and politics.

Keywords: Age of Revolution, Haitian Revolution, French Revolution, universality, colonialism, historical amnesia.
Introduction

This paper engages with notions of racial slavery, equality, liberty and universality, to illustrate the complexity, dynamics and inter-dependencies of processes and events of the 18th Century. It will be argued that without an engagement with the context, experiences and contributions of the Haitian Revolution to the creation and legacy of freedom, equality and universality, the history of these political ideals is incomplete. Indeed, through the process of selective argumentation and erasure of historical moments, the discipline of History of Political Thought has created a Western-centric epistemological authority over historical interpretations and memory, leading to an organisation of amnesia surrounding the legacy of the Haitian Revolution as part of the Age of Revolutions. To highlight the underpinning causes of the status quo, the paper discusses the Enlightenment as a colonial project inherited from colonial modernity, which seeks to merely manage, recognise and redistribute identities and resources among white Europeans and Americans, leaving racial slavery unchallenged; the French Revolution is part of this rearrangement. I call for a reconceptualisation of the 18th Century Revolutions, contending that the unforeseen and unique Revolution in the French colony of Saint Domingue opened new possibilities for articulating, verifying and creating new forms of liberty, equality and universality. The political struggle of revolutionary enslaved men and women not only abolished slavery and established the independence of Saint Domingue under the name of Haiti, but it also substituted the particularistic and colonial ‘universality’ invoked by the French revolutionaries with a new, open ontology of the ‘human’ who no longer could be regarded as property. Ending on a prescriptive note, I suggest that the historian of political thought ought to reconfigure dominant narratives (Bhambra 2007:15), to think difference outside of hierarchy (Dubois 2006:6), and to acknowledge the revolutionary events which contributed to the creation of possibilities for new futures, directions and politics.

Methodological positioning

Since its beginnings, the academic field of political theory has created a ‘centre-periphery’ model (Bandau 2013:2) which situates the Caribbean and the Americas in a subaltern position in relation to the West. For instance, the political uprisings in Saint Domingue (later to claim its independence as Haiti in 1804) have been portrayed in the writings of the Western history of political thought as a ‘horror’ (Fischer 2004:ix), an insurgent resistance (McMichael and Morarji 2010:234), not as a revolution. This approach illustrates the specificity of the ideas which are deemed ‘universal’ and the need to shed
light on the contextuality of epistemologies and political events of the 18th Century. It is contexts and interpretation that the Cambridge School of Intellectual History focuses on. To show how discourses shape history, they took a formalist ‘linguistic turn’, adopting a ‘radical contextualism’ (deemed as a ‘bugaboo for philosophers’ by Jay (2011:558)), as a critical response to perennialism 40. They seek to identify the audience for whom a political text was written; the language contexts within which certain terms were used, and the less known writings of the time. Indeed, ideas are developed and understood in contexts, but the context of the abstract colonial universalism of the French Revolution neglects its prejudices and legacy, creating ‘outsiders’. A critique of the constructed context which places the French Revolution in the centre and the Haitian Revolution on the periphery (as a non-revolution) is needed. However, within the frames of the Cambridge School, the coexistence of racial slavery with colonial claims to equality and liberty, and the role of colonialism in shaping consciousness and the material organisation of society, cannot be adequately analysed.

I contend that merely identifying the audience of texts says little about how writings might have influenced, been used, transformed or resisted by ‘unintended audiences’ - those whom the authors thought would not have the capacity and moral qualities to understand the complexity of the ideas in the written works. For instance, the views of these authors do not necessarily reflect the popular spirit of their time. In contexts such as the Haitian Revolution, ignoring the role of praxis and oral history would undermine the political issues which revolutionaries were engaging with, both theoretically and practically (Dubois 2006). In late 18th Century, the print archive in Haiti was small, and the main pamphlets were written in French, leading preliterate Creole speakers to rely on literate French readers’ translation. Privileging writing over orality would overlook the relative effect of particular texts on mobilising action (Geggus 2007:304).

Skinner argues that ‘to demand from the history of thought a solution to our own immediate problems is… to commit not merely a methodological fallacy, but something like a moral error’ (2002:89). However, even the staunchest linguist and historian cannot escape their own ideology, subjectivity and intention – contextualisations are never neutral (Jay 2011:560). When looking through privileged lenses to a glorified past which cherishes certain moments and emotions whilst silencing others, the historian of ideas may merely justify the assumptions which had already been made beforehand by other scholars located in the same tradition. It is precisely the stated and unstated assumptions of the French

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40 ‘perennial problems’ or ‘recurring questions’ within political thought raised re-posed since Plato (Ball 2011:49).
intellectuals and revolutionaries as superior to the enslaved, and their material development based on the exploitation of the colonised that have been reproduced by Western scholars of political thought. With time, claims to ‘truth’ have been made and legitimised – a truth equated with the European experience, bias and historical ignorance of the relationships with colonies, constructed nations and non-citizens. To assume, as the Cambridge School does, that there can be a ‘correct’ reading of history implies naïve psychologism and mistrust in the capacity to reason of the subjects studied (Jay 2011:560). Instead, silences and gaps must be sought, accounted for, and addressed (Festa and Carey 2009:17).

Indeed, ‘despite its ostensibly inclusive tone, “context” has unfortunately become a buzzword for intellectual conservatism and ethnocentricity in the history of political thought’ (Goto-Jones 2008:3). Whilst I do not argue for presentism (interpreting historical events solely through the ethical/cultural lenses of present times), meanings need be open to reinterpretation, whilst acknowledging contingencies. Traditions of ideas ought to always be under revision, as they impact the understanding of history. The view of the past has traction to the understanding of the present. However, due to the Cambridge School’s belief that the past can be separated from the present, their version of historical contextualisation is closed, unable to be scrutinised and deterministic, as it reifies ‘context’ through their emphasis on the heterogeneity of time.

According to Rancière, examining a method means ‘examining how idealities are materially produced’ (2009:114) – I follow this approach to engage with the context, theory and praxis of the Haitian Revolution. In short, this paper is an intervention to the history of political thought of the 18th Century Revolutions and Enlightenment, as they both provide a mere ‘theory of emancipation that serves the cause of domination’ (Rancière 2009:116). Distinctively, the Haitian Revolution marked a point of interruption and departure from its former relationship with France, and from Haiti’s colonialized, hierarchical order. Through affirming and verifying equality they exercised liberty, establishing the grounds for an open, decolonised universality, one which opposed the totalising universality upheld by the French revolutionaries. Thus, when discussing such events, a reflexive, open and corrigible method of analysis needs to be undertaken by the historian of political thought. Rather than it being a recipe for finding ‘the truth’ of history, a method is a ‘path’ with unexpected intersections between connected histories, contexts, theory and praxis.
The Atlantic-centred epistemology of the Enlightenment and Age of Revolution

In narrating the events of the 18th Century, the history of struggles appears monologic and monocultural, filtered through hegemonic lenses, projecting entitlement and superiority of white Europeans and Americans over those whom they had ‘othered’. One of the approaches which counteract homogenised historiography is ‘cosmopolitanism’ – a pledge for dialogue between different cultures, as knowledge is ‘local’ and equally valid (Jenco 2011:6). However, this approach is relativistic and essentialist, as it rests upon geographical, temporal and political constructs already established by the colonial West, and it does not recognise the complexity of interactions between people, regardless of their nationality and location. There is a risk that ‘even the voices critical to Europe subscribe to a form of Eurocentrism’ (Bhambra 2007:146) due to their focus on Europe as a starting point when discussing the Enlightenment and Age of Revolution. Instead of creating new knowledge, this form of reasoning leads to a mere accumulation and co-option of critique within the dominant discourse and frames of reference of the historically privileged Western epistemology, enhancing ‘the theories that we then establish on the basis of this knowledge’ (Bhambra 2007:149). Similarly, the pluralists proposing ‘multiple Enlightenments’ have fallen into the trap of supporting parochialism due to their reliance on European origins and contexts (Festa and Carey 2009:4).

We understand the present through the past and through the possibilities opened by events. By neglecting the political organisation and agency of the Haitian revolutionaries, downplaying and erasing their story from the collective memory of political thought, the Western narrative has perpetuated violence upon global history in general, and the history of the enslaved people of Haiti in particular. There is a need to reveal the ‘memory wars’ based on a consensus of silence in France (Miller 2008:386) whose legacy is an organised amnesia around the historical signification of the actualisation of freedom in 18th Century Haiti.

As Bhambra puts it, following Fanon, a focus on beginnings instead of ‘origins’ allows us to conceptualise the web of relations between histories, and the interconnections between events and deviations (2007:122). Likewise, by looking at the routes of events which led to the conception of equality and liberty, instead of their ‘roots’ (terms borrowed from Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic 1993), we can regard events as processes, leaving open the possibility of restructuring and reconceptualising the knowledge of the past. This gesture allows one to reject historicism and discuss how ideas of the present are
conjectural and always open to reworking and change from below. Events do not happen in isolation: the precondition and co-existence of colonialism with the revolutionary uprisings in France and Haiti, and the development of the two Revolutions were all part of an assemblage of events which affected and were affected by one another.

This paper seeks to change the usual frames of reference, to deviate from the unidirectional understanding of the Enlightenment and the Age of Revolution as singular and obvious projects which have 'progress' and 'democratisation' at their core. A destabilisation of the colonial gaze within historiography is pleaded for here because the Haitian Revolution is indeed ‘an integral part of the history of Western civilisation’ (Fick 1990:1). In the lead up to the revolution, the enslaved people of Saint Domingue ‘were to make history which would alter the fate of millions of men and shift the economic currents of three continents’ (James 1989:25). The relationship between the French and Haitian Revolutions offers a paradigmatic case study.

The deeply limiting discourse on the Age of Revolution

The Age of Revolution of the 18th Century has become a frequent term used by scholars who adhere to the European or North American perspectives (Petrushka 2007:113). In The Legacy of the French Revolution, Mansfield starts with the assertion that the ‘British, American and French Revolutions are great modern events, constituting three beginnings for democratic peoples’, and their origins can be found in the ideas of modern philosophers (1996:19;22). In trying to find the origins of the ‘Modern Revolution’, Ceaser is only preoccupied with the French and American revolutions: ‘the American Revolution may be the corporeal reality of modern democratic society, but the French Revolution is its conscience’ (1996:92). Israel acknowledges some underlying differences between multiple ‘Enlightenments’, but they ultimately form a ‘singular European Enlightenment’ (2001:140). Western revolutions are portrayed as belonging to a unified project of (white) revolutionaries fighting for radically new ideals, without looking beyond the Western-centrism of these ideas. Moreover, the principle of universality is not acknowledged as being contradicted by the co-existence of the Enlightenment with colonialism. In effect, ‘if equality were accepted, slavery was doomed’ (James 2001:x).

Berlin asserts that the French Revolution ‘did not bring the desired result’, assuming that the premise of the revolution was a radical break with the past (1988:97). He rightly recognises that ‘the sum of human misery had not been appreciably decreased, although its burden had to some degree been shifted from one set of shoulders to another’
However, Berlin’s conceptions of freedom (positive – the possibility to act, and negative – the absence of constraints) were conceived in a particularistic way, applicable to the context of the West, namely the relationship of the individual to political community and political authority (Bogues 2013:211). Not only was the French Revolution bourgeois (as argued by Marxists), it was also a colonialist revolution.

The concomitant construction of the non-Western people as an ‘exotic’ population (Rousseau and Porter 1990:4) waiting to be liberated by Europeans through the extension of the latter’s truth (Festa and Carey 2009:2) pathologises and constructs non-Europeans as passive and irrational. The Enlightenment thinkers’ views embedded with racism were overtly present in their works. Voltaire claimed that black people in Africa were ‘not men’ but ‘descendants of monkeys’; Montesquieu acerbically noted they could ‘scarcely be pitied’, and God could not place a ‘good soul, in such a black ugly body’; according to Hume, they were ‘naturally inferior to the whites’; Hegel said ‘the Negro’ is in a ‘completely wild and untamed state’; finally, Kant thought they ‘have received from nature no intelligence that rises above the foolish’ (cited by Hira 2014:31-2). The Enlightenment thinkers upheld white supremacist interests in maintaining the colonial system and creating an idealised, narcissistic white epistemology based on hierarchical racialisation; racialised slavery was banalised, decried through ironic remarks (Miller 2008:68), the colonised subject being regarded as the absolute evil (Fanon 1961:6).

The term ‘slavery’ was appropriated by Enlightenment thinkers and revolutionaries; in their discourses, its meaning was metaphorical, but also limited to the experiences of the white population in their fight against European forms of state absolutism (Buck-Morss 2000:821). In these circles, acknowledgement of the black experience was absent, as nothing beyond white slavery was accepted as ontologically real or possible. The actuality of racial slavery was ignored (Bogues 2013:210) and subsequently, further perpetuated. Even the group with the most radical demands for the non-whites, that is, Société des amis des Noirs (formed in 1788), only argued for the recognition of rights of the free men of colour, without even questioning the institution of racial slavery in debates (Bandau 2013:6). Their silence allowed oxymoronic notions of equality and liberty to be used by the colonisers. It is easy to see, then, that

the history he [the colonialist] writes is therefore not the history of the country he is despoiling, but the history of his own nation's looting, raping, and starving to death. (Fanon 1961:15).
Equality, liberty, and the supplementarity of colonialism

When reflecting on the political events of the 18th Century France, the relationship with its colonies cannot be overstated; not acknowledging it perpetuates the erasure of memory and dismissal of its significance (Sepinwall 2013:1). As throughout history the Haitian Revolution has not been acknowledged as such even as it happened, the focus of the paper now shifts to considering Trouillot’s question: ‘how does one write a history of the impossible?’ (1995:73) and his suggestion for the necessity of breaking the ‘iron bonds of the philosophical milieu in which it [the Haitian Revolution] was born’ (1995:74). In doing so, the supplementarity of colonialism with the French Revolution will be addressed, as well as its historical contingency and continuity with the Old Regime, despite discontinuities. The difference brought by Haiti’s context rests in its demands: the uprisings were a revolution which unsettled the racialised order of society.

The French Revolution was organised by the middle classes discontent with the power of the king over their livelihoods, succeeding in declaring and extending their Old Regime ‘privilege’ as ‘revolutionary right’ (i.e. to own property) (Kley 1994:16; Bien 1994:70). As the scope of the French Revolution was to shift political control from the emperor to the state, it led to a mere rearrangement and re-managing of identities without radically changing the fundamental principles around which their society was organised. Racial slavery was portrayed by officials in the colony as ‘privilege’ for the enslaved (James 1989:14), without anticipating that in 1791, 100,000 Haitian revolutionary men and women would challenge the Declaration’s statements through a revolutionary upheaval (Geggus 1981:219). Indeed, slavery was integral to the functioning of commercial society (Bhambra 2007:41) which the whole French society benefitted from. For over 75 years up until the French Revolution, the French commerce quadrupled, whilst 600,000 black people were imported to colonies (Du Bois 1961:137). Thus, colonialism was, contrary to Todorov’s claim, driven by more than ‘straightforward national interests’ (2006:31). The economy of slavery supplemented and was constituent of French prosperity and identity, providing the white French with leisure time and luxurious lifestyle (Miller 2008:57) which led to new expectations for liberty and equality among themselves, whilst maintaining slavery as the source of wealth accumulation and racial supremacy (Du Bois 1961:139).

By claiming in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (henceforth ‘Declaration’) that ‘[T]he principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation’ (Declaration 1789), whilst the nation itself was exclusionary and only permitted the right to political representation and action to the privileged white, the state was formed
upon a racist bias. A significant contradiction was prevailing in the consciousness, laws and memory of France: while trying to define ‘man’, the revolutionaries (largely aristocrats) did not recognise the enslaved plantation labourers as human. The ‘man’ of the Rights of Man was an abstraction due to ‘rights’ being, in actuality, based upon the identity of the ‘citizen’ which emerges from the existence of the state and the state’s recognition of these rights and identity (Rancière 2004:298). The inventions of ‘the human’ and ‘the citizen’ were used to add a layer of inequality among hierarchically racialised populations.

Just as ‘slavery’ had been appropriated by the French Enlightenment thinkers to reflect only the European experience, the Declaration was used by the French slave labour camp owners for their own interests. Three points are to be noted. Firstly, when the Declaration was adopted, the colonists owning slave labour camps argued against abolitionists to preserve their ‘right’ to own and exploit plantation labourers, highlighting the former’s contributions to the French economy. Secondly, the free men of colour who were legally free in France, owning plantations in Saint Domingue, were denied equal rights to the white French on racial grounds (James 2001:54-5) in 1791. Their requests for equal rights were made on the basis of their wealth and power in the colony. Only after the start of the black Revolution in Haiti (which changed the debate) did they receive civil rights (Popkin 2009:10). Thirdly, in a public debate, white French colonists asserted their ‘right’ to be part of the National Assembly as representatives of the colonies. Suffice to say, the interests of slave labour camp owners and the Assembly converged in regarding the enslaved as ‘property’, not human, with no ontological basis for holding rights. Rhetoric was used to emphasise this argument:

either they are men or they are not; if the colonists consider them men, let them free them and make them eligible for seats; if the contrary is the case, have we, in apportioning deputies according to the population of France, taken into consideration the number of our horses and mules? (Dubois 2005:75).

Cugoano (a Ghanian abolitionist) saw the fundamental natural right as the right ‘of the individual to be free and equal, not in relationship to government but in relationship to other human beings’ (Bogues 2005:45). His reference to ‘other human beings’ (all considered equal) and not to colonial institutions (‘government’) in establishing these political ideals reveals the law and the state as colonial and mythical constructs, used to suppress the colonised and to justify their exclusion from the presumed ‘universal’ equality. Indeed, the Haitians were included in the French revolutionary project, but their inclusion was under the form of exploitation upon which the West would flourish. Despite their
negative ‘inclusion’, they did not belong to the community of equals in France (Baiocchi and Connor 2013).

**Equality, liberty and universality in Haiti**

The Haitian Revolution is one of the greatest revolutions of the past two centuries (Fick 1990:1), called by the French colonists ‘the triumph of savage anarchy’ (Geggus 1981:227). Indeed, ‘had the monarchists been white, the bourgeoisie brown, and the masses of France black, the French Revolution would have gone down in history as a race war’ (James 2001:128) – this distortion of history and reproduction of colonial thinking need overcoming. The Haitian revolutionaries considered themselves radically equal to the French, beyond the mere ‘civil equality’ based on the social institution of the state. To proclaim their freedom and equality, they exercised the praxis of equality through affirmative political action by disrupting the colonial control.

Based on the idea that the enslaved people were passive, obedient and irrational, the French colonists could not envisage an enslaved people’s revolt, as the latter were seen incapable to self-organise. In the words of Rousseau, ‘slaves lose everything in their bonds, even the desire to escape from them’ (1998/1762:7). A French colonist declared before the Haitian Revolution that ‘the Negroes are very obedient and always will be […] freedom for Negroes is a chimera’, and ‘a revolt among them is impossible’. Only an uprising ‘fomented by the whites themselves’ could allow black Haitians organise against oppression (cited by Trouillot 1995:72-3) - ontological statement which did not conceive of power as existent within the enslaved. In short, the abolition of slavery was ‘unthinkable’ in the Western framework (1995:82).

Due to the circulation of news and opinions across populations, Haitians were familiar with the French claims to equality, fraternity, liberty and universality, and decided to use the Declaration as a revolutionary tool for actualising these ideals. Through their own material conditions and needs, they created a new struggle and a philosophy of praxis (Nesbitt 2008b:55) which signified more than the reformist attempts of the liberal French to reorganise society. Haitians’ ‘agricultural egalitarianism’ was afferent to their African origins and ‘the desire to define their lives through their relationship to the land than to French bourgeois revolutionary notions of liberty and equality’ (Fick 1990:250). Additionally, the radical equality advocated by them required a disruption of France’s dependency on the colonies, at a time when Saint Domingue was the most profitable (and desired) colony in the world. Only between 1783 and 1789 the colony doubled its
production (Du Bois 1961:138), its 28,000 free men of colour and 465,000 Black plantation labourers producing ‘more sugar than all the other West Indian islands’ (Singham 1994:129).

As discussed earlier, the distinction ‘white’/‘black’ employed by white Enlightenment figures created a hierarchy of abilities and worth, the former being constructed as more human and superior to the latter. In Haiti, the two terms continued to be used, but in a distinctively different way: white was ‘the vernacular term for any foreigners, even if they were Jamaicans or Brazilians of dark complexion’ (Blackburn 2006:648). A ‘black epistemology’ emerged with the Haitian Revolution, which opposed former epistemological binaries based on discriminatory divisions along racialised lines. Their revolutionary approach allowed for an open ontology and liberty to emerge due to their opposition to essentialised identities and to the reduction of humans to property. The Black Haitians destroyed the reified category of agency-less ‘slave’ by ending the forced enslavement which they had been subject to; their use of the term ‘black’ was as a political, non-essentialised identity which helped form an anti-colonial consciousness.

The Haitians are the authors of the most revolutionary acts of disobedience which brought into existence a reconsideration of who ‘the human’ is in the ‘human rights’ discourse of the 18th Century. The equality of rights enforced by the Haitians demonstrated that the Rights of Man ‘were indeed universal’ (Dubois 2005:3), counteracting the view that French Revolution ‘was a radical break, a stasis and a change of regime together’ (Mansfield 1996:34). Whilst aware of the ideals of the French and American Revolutions, the Haitian revolutionaries transformed them (Nesbitt 2008b:2-3), adding their context which combined ‘both human rights with anti-racism’ (Kaisary 2012:198). In doing so, they offered a unique and radical contribution to the political events and successes of the century, both radicalising and demolishing ‘the epistemology that dominated the Age of Enlightenment’ (Nesbitt 2008a:28), creating a new socio-political understanding of society. The limits of the structured and exclusionary ‘universalist’ promises of the French Revolution and their failure to implement universalism had remarkably been highlighted for the first time. Indeed, as Badiou argues, true universality is that which escapes structuring and which allows for new, unforeseeable events to be created by anyone. It is this type of open universality which the Haitian Revolution demonstrated through breaking open the sphere of belonging (van den Hemel 2008:23).

The particular singularity of the Haitian Revolution radicalised and universalised the meaning of equality and liberty. Indeed, ‘singularization is the actual, unpredictable
singularisation’, it cannot only be conceived in terms of its differences from the other
revolutions, but rather in ‘its singularity and its commonality with other revolutionary
moments in the Age of Enlightenment’ (Nesbitt 2008b:24). It can be said that the Haitian
Revolution was a dual revolution: the fight was carried for the abolition of racial slavery,
and for the establishment of an independent republic (Bogues 2013:218). The overthrow
of racial slavery was condemned by European historians as ‘extra-legal’ acts of violence
(Ghachem 2012:212-3), but it is precisely the extra-(colonial) legality and ingenuity in
thinking and praxis which led to an egalitarian revolution.

The Haitian Constitution of 1801 drafted by Toussaint Louverture abolished
slavery in an explicit manner: ‘here cannot exist slaves on this territory, servitude is therein
forever abolished’. All former enslaved men and women were defined as French, which
implied that all Haitians were equal to the white French and had the same rights as the
French citizens in France: ‘all men, regardless of color, are eligible to all employment’
because ‘here, all men are born, live, and die, free and French’ (cited by Semley 2013:65).
The French Declaration did not ban slavery or offer emancipation; instead, formal
emancipation in France (in 1794) became implemented after the upheaval in Haiti. A year
later, however, the French constitution restricted the status of citizenship and voting rights
from the colonies (Semley 2013:72-3), ensuring that only property owners could be
citizens.

In 1805, Dessalines promulgated in the Haitian Constitution a new way of thinking
about the category of ‘black’ – not in racialised, but in political terms, serving for a
particular worldview: ‘the Haitians shall henceforward be known only by the generic
appellation of Blacks’. At the same time, the Constitution, by going beyond traditional
colonial legacies, created the most inclusive political statement on general human equality
in that period (Bogues 2013:224). By declaring slavery as ‘forever abolished’ on Haitian
land, it destabilised the racialised thinking imposed by the West. Freedom, in the French
sense, was tied to political liberty, whereas freedom for the Haitians meant liberty in
actuality, through praxis. They succeeded in developing this new conception of freedom by
making a distinction between liberty and independence – their freedom allowed Haitians to
create a sovereign state (Bogues 2013:227-8). Thus, the Revolution succeeded in
universalising (not merely extending) equality and liberty, but also creating a new space of
possibility for further struggles to emerge. It was a site of knowledge and theory
production which led to a society in which people were no longer property (Bogues
2013:230).
The Haitian Revolution inspired other enslaved people to assert their liberty. With the outbreak of war in February 1793, Jamaica had to face once again the question of direct aid to Saint Domingue. The colonists in Jamaica aided the Spanish forces which were invading Saint Domingue (Geggus 1981:231). So, solidarity among the white colonists in Jamaica and those in Saint Domingue prevailed, due to their common interest to control the two colonies. Concomitantly, the Revolution inspired Black Jamaicans to take action (Cormack 2011:156), leaving a deep trace in Santo Domingo as well (later to become Cuba) (Fischer 2004:131).
Conclusion

Revolutionary emblems are not ‘givens of history’ (Ghachem 2012:212) – they are open to interpretation and often shaped by dominant epistemologies, which in the case of the 18th Century ‘Age of Revolution’, is an undeniably Atlantic-centred, and more specifically, white-centred. The event of the Haitian Revolution cannot be reduced to the European and American contexts of the period precisely because it was a new, radical act which made possible, through the very assertion of equality, liberty and universality, for possibility of their existence. In line with Jay’s argument, the Haitian Revolution can be understood from a contextual viewpoint only as ‘im-possible’ because it is ‘not merely the realisation of the prior possibilities that already exist in the world’ (2011:566). The political theorist and historian of political thought must endeavour to be self-reflexive and focus on the relationship of the present to the past, to discover silences, gaps and processes, identities and events which had not been given recognition due to historical biases.

The question emerges: ‘to what extent is state power the same thing as political power?’ (Rancière 2009:118). In this paper I indicated the qualitative difference between the French and Haitian Revolutions: the former represented a mere reorganisation of society, whereas the latter, by breaking out of these impositions, created a new black, egalitarian epistemology and established a universalist legacy. As the essence of politics is the ‘power of the people’, democracy is enacted by those who are considered not to have the quality to exert power: in this case it is the colonised subjects whom, the colonists thought, were not to be capable to organise a revolution (Rancière 2009:118-9). The Haitian Revolution was not only the most democratic event of the 18th Century, but it also opened spaces for contesting, affirming and making equality and liberty possible.

Discussing the 18th Century Revolutions is highly relevant to understanding not only the past, but also the present, with the caveat of not fetishising contexts and temporal categories (the 18th Century), so as not to fall into the trap of compartmentalising history (as the Cambridge School does). The exploitation of Haiti by France and the West in general did not stop after the former’s independence: in 1825 France adopted a new strategy for control. Threatened with ever-more destruction and invasion by France, Haiti was forced to accept an extortionate amount of ‘independence debt’ to ‘compensate’ the colonisers for the ‘loss’ of property and profit, the equivalent of $21bn being paid until 1947 (O’Nions 2010). By 1900, 80 per cent of Haiti’s national budget was being spent on loan repayments (Gillam 2010). To generate revenue, the former colony had no choice but
to privatise public services (i.e. only 10 per cent of education is provided by the state),
capitalise on natural resources and borrow from Western banks (used by the West as neo-
colonial tools for exploitation). Since the 1990s, the neoliberal structural adjustment
policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have affected the country,
destroying the Haitian food industry and increasing dependency upon imports and loans
(Kim 2010).

We can now see the ongoing under-development by the West of Haiti, ‘currently
the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere’ (Central Intelligence Agency 2014).
Demanding France to return the debt paid by Haiti is only a first step in towards a notion
of justice, and it is much needed. Biases, erasures, and solidarity amongst old colonisers in
new ways (under the system of capitalism, the industry of war and so on) are at stake in
contemporary policies and narratives of the past and present. Thus, by focusing on the
relationship of the past to the present, to silences, processes, routes and beginnings, as
opposed to a unified, Eurocentric historiography, roots and origins, we can see how the
histories of the French and Haitian events during the 18th Century were connected.
Colonialism and neo-colonialism still pre-condition the social, economic and political
organisation of contemporary world and the consciousness of its people. Contrary to
Skinner’s assertions, the role of the historian of political thought is normative, because
knowledge is always political and situated. Their prescriptive task is to highlight biases and
the hegemonic depiction of history, avoiding and resisting the privileging, justification and
reinforcement of colonial consciousness and its wrongdoings. Following Blackburn who
stated that ‘to ignore Haiti was to diminish all the other revolutions’ (2006:644), I maintain
that by acknowledging the radical legacy of the Haitian Revolution and its relationship with
all other political events of the time (see decolonialism and postcolonialism), the history of
all other revolutions would be open to discussion, disagreement and corrigibility, leading to
the growth of less biased knowledge.
References


