Turning the Tide: The Problem of Popular Insurgency in Haitian Revolutionary Historiography

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Abstract: This article explores the conceptual problem of popular insurgency in Haitian revolutionary historiography. Framed by fundamental questions of legitimate versus illegitimate insurgency, of the relationship between the elites and the people, and of the process of democratization and the rule of law, the article argues that the problem of popular insurgency is one way to link together analysis of past and present Haitian history and to focus on the role of the Haitian people in making that history.

The problem of popular insurgency is a conceptual problem of fundamental importance in much of the recent historiography on Haiti. What is popular insurgency's relation to the process of democratization and the rule of law? When is it legitimate, when illegitimate? What are the relationships we can observe throughout Haitian history between the elites and the people? And, more specifically, when the elites and the people speak at different moments of problems such as freedom and independence, democracy, autonomy, and the like, to what degree are they conceiving of entirely different objects and goals?

In the work of Carolyn Fick and the late Gérard Barthélemy, such questions are figured in terms of the long-standing conflict between *Bossale* and Creole cultures, between Haiti *Toma* and a Western-oriented elite.[1] From 1791 to 1804, the Haitian Revolutionaries—not just Toussaint Louverture but also, as Carolyn Fick has demonstrated, the whole multitude of Haitian slaves—fought to institute an emancipatory social structure that would allow for

1. "Bossale" refers to the slaves of Saint-Domingue born in Africa and subsequently brought by force to the Americas, while "Creole" is here used to refer to all the inhabitants of Saint-Domingue born in the colony, whatever their racial phenotype.

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the free development of all human beings. If the French *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* enfranchised white, male, adult property owners who could afford to pay a discriminatory poll tax (*marc d'argent*), it accomplished this enfranchisement by negating the civil rights of women, of slaves, and of others. Nonetheless, its universal prescription was rightly understood by the enslaved of Saint-Domingue to interpellate them as subjects to a politics of emancipation in one of the most astounding sequences of political subjectivation in modern history.

Carolyn Fick points to a historically specific and unusual confluence of factors that made it possible to abolish slavery universally for the first time.[2] These included the idea of general emancipation, the revolutionary Jacobin ideology of Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, and the political necessity of freeing the slaves to avoid losing the colony to Britain and Spain. Sonthonax, as Robert Stein has argued, was a committed abolitionist who, perhaps alone among his French contemporaries, was prepared for a universal and *immediate* abolition.[3] Fick, however, draws our attention to the simple fact that without the radical, uncompromising, and widespread revolt of the mass of slaves, the performative gesture of enunciating a proclamation would have had little effect, and "Sonthonax's proclamation may have fallen into something of a void."[4]

Following the reformulation of the concepts of freedom and equality that occurred in the slaves' relocation from Paris to Saint-Domingue in 1791, the struggle for the hegemonic power to determine the content of these concepts continued apace. Toussaint unambiguously believed large-scale plantation agriculture to be, as he put it in a letter from 1797, "the only thing that may give Saint-Domingue back its old splendor."[5] Increasingly in 1790s Saint-Domingue, however, the now-free former slaves contested Toussaint's concept of freedom. In a letter from Toussaint to Etienne Laveaux from February 1796, the black general described how he debated with a group of rebellious citizens in Port-de-Paix over the exact meaning of the freedom they had attained. Could freedom admit to multiple interpretations, or was it defendable in Saint-Domingue only via the large-scale plantation labor, under duress if necessary, of all autonomous citizens? Neither Toussaint nor anyone else—not Sonthonax, Laveaux, André Rigaud, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, or Henri Christophe, with the possible exception of Claude Moïse—in power in Saint-Domingue proposed or accepted a social model for the island based upon small-scale, self-sufficient farming.[6] Could freedom include the right to

2. Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint-Domingue Revolution From Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 162.
3. Robert Louis Stein, *Léger Félicité Sonthonax: The Lost Sentinel of the Republic* (London: Associated University Press, 1985).
4. Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 163.
5. Cited in Mats Lundahl, *Peasants and Poverty: A Study of Haiti* (New York: St. Martin's, 1979), 260.
6. Stein, *Léger Félicité Sonthonax*, 145.

tend only one's own garden, or to live in the forest, as a maroon free from society's norms and strictures, or even the right simply to sit and watch the grass grow, over a bottle of *clairin*?

Fick draws attention to the crucial period of October 1793–May 1794 when there occurred a relatively free and open transition from slavery to a quasi-sharecropping system of obligatory labor enforced by Etienne Polverel's work code, published on 7 February 1794. During this intermediary period, the slaves in the southern region of Saint-Domingue that Polverel oversaw were free to undertake a spontaneous self-organization of their newly conquered freedom, and from the little documentary evidence we possess, it is clear that they did so without hesitation. They refused the reconstitution of the post-slavery nation in subservience to a coercive state apparatus. Instead, they asserted the radical egalitarianism of an economy able to produce labor-free time in abundant surplus, time reappropriated as the most valued possession of those formerly forced to labor for others from dawn to dusk. This reappropriation of surplus free time was possible in an environment that required no more than two days' work per week for subsistence.[7]

In a clear refusal of the large-scale plantation system under which they had been enslaved, these free citizens quickly restructured their daily lives with the goal of maintaining their own self-sufficiency. Fick's description of this process is impressive, and deserves to be cited at length:

> On some plantations, [the former slaves] took advantage of the absence of the owner and the relative state of abandon in which he left his plantation to expand the size of the small lots, or kitchen gardens, provided for them under slavery for subsistence. Thus, they began cultivating portions of the plantation property as their own. They helped themselves to the uncultivated fruit of the land such as wood, fodder, and other products that grew spontaneously and that existed abundantly in a natural state. They helped themselves to the plantation rations and sold what they could at the market. They freely used the horses and mules belonging to the plantation, both for personal pleasure and to carry their stolen goods to market. On some plantations, the workers had, in effect, taken over the land for their own purposes. As they were organized in brigades, each group would cultivate that portion of the land assigned to it, and the workers would then sell the products that were superfluous to their needs.[8]

The total transformation of society in Saint-Domingue in this period also meant a unique and autonomous redefinition of the meaning of *human freedom* by the Bossale participants in the revolution:

> Freedom for the ex-slaves would mean the freedom to possess and to till their own soil, to labor for themselves and their families, with no constraints other than their own self-defined needs, and to sell or dispose of the products of their labor in their own interest.[9]

7. Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery: 1776–1848* (New York: Verso, 1988), 8.
8. Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 168.
9. Ibid., 180.

Land of one's own, sufficiently large to nourish a family and perhaps produce a small surplus for local markets, was then and has remained until today the predominant measure of freedom for the vast majority of the Haitian nation.

No human community has ever needed a code, theory, or bureaucratic direction to begin constructing an autonomous society.[10] In contrast, the bureaucratic code of Polverel was aimed precisely at crushing and regimenting all such spontaneous self-organization. It paternalistically told laborers what was "the work expected of them, as well as the allocated earnings due to them."[11] It sought to replace the autonomous use of the universal, emancipatory faculty of reason with the hierarchal and violent logic of *instruction*:

> To cut back one day of work per week is to cut back one-sixth of the year's work and therefore diminish revenues by at least one-sixth. Suppose that a sugar estate gives, most years, three hundred *milliers* of sugar in profit through regular work of six days a week. The share of the landowner would be two hundred *milliers*; yours would be one hundred *milliers*.[12]

The slaves' insight, one that radicalized the entire Eighteenth-century logic of "Enlightenment," was, first, to have grasped immediately the universal truth that intellectual *capacity* is one and universal (though circumstances may destructively limit its development and expression), and, second, to have understood that the unfolding of this universal intelligence in any singular instance is itself the process of emancipation: *thought* as a universal attribute of humanity, *freedom* its immanent expression.

Polverel, no longer concerned with *emancipation*, now wanted simply to put blacks in their place; instead of enlightenment, he began a program of instruction of the putatively ignorant that was mere intellectual brutalization. "Africans," he concluded, "you have been educated."[13] In other words, I, the *maître*, have now returned you to your proper and natural place (of subservient ignorance, as mere laborers).

10. The ongoing effort to describe and bring into being such an autonomous society is the subject of Cornelius Castoriadis's voluminous writings, as well as those of the *Autonomia* movement in Italy (Antonio Negri, Mario Tronti, Oreste Scalzone, Paolo Virno, et al.) and, indeed, the global anarchist movement as a whole. Castoriadis's writings constitute a remarkably prescient vision that is only now, since the collapse of the Cold War political structure and the rise of a transnational culture of the Multitude, becoming fully comprehensible in its originality. The widespread refusal of work on the Saint-Domingue plantations from 1793 on (see Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 171–82) serves as a perfect historical illustration of one of Castoriadis's main critiques of theoretical Marxism: that labor is never a passive quantity fully exploited by the capitalist, but is instead *living* labor, constantly resisting its exploitation and striving to create the conditions of its own autonomy. See David Ames Curtis, ed., *The Castoriadis Reader* (New York: Blackwell, 1997), 46.
11. Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 171. Barthélemy has underscored certain more-progressive aspects of Polverel's work code—for example, its recognition of agrarian corporatism—in comparison with both the previous slave regime and the later codes of Toussaint and Christophe. See Gérard Barthélemy, *L'univers rural haïtien: Le pays en dehors* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990), 93.
12. Reproduced in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 140.
13. Ibid.

The struggle to create an autonomous society, to promote the often competing demands of liberty and equality, and to minimize or eliminate various forms of physical and symbolic violence and exclusion will always remain an unfinished *political* struggle, one never resolvable by reference to any theory or doctrine. The spontaneous self-organization of the free citizens of Saint-Domingue after 1793–94 began the construction of a newly autonomous society in a moment of open, unsettled structural fluidity. These actions stand in direct contrast to the militaristic, anti-democratic, and paternalist authoritarianism of Toussaint's 1801 constitution. Its appearance was contingent; the protean Toussaint, with his creative genius and personal experience of slavery (as well as slave ownership), could conceivably have once again reinvented himself, and come to see beyond the limitations of his militaristic worldview, creating a novel social structure that would sustain and expand the intimations of an autonomous Bossale society emerging all around him in the 1790s.

Toussaint, however, never admitted to such possibilities. When he addressed the rebels of Port-de-Paix in 1796, he linked their freedom from slavery to their passive submission to both the laws of the French Republic and plantation labor. "I mounted my horse," he wrote to Laveaux, "and entered into the circle where, after having reproached them for the murders they had committed, I told them that if they wished to conserve their liberty they would have to submit to the laws of the Republic, to be docile subjects, and to work."[14] Though divided by birth (as a Creole native of the island) and status (as a formerly slave-holding *ancien libre*) from his predominantly African-born listeners, Toussaint possessed a politico-theatrical genius for adapting his speech and behavior to the expectations of his audience. When writing to the Parisian *Moniteur*, he and his secretaries carefully crafted letters in the language of the philosophes. Here, before a crowd of African Bossales, he staged a traditional *palabre*, with himself, on horseback, occupying the position of paternalist authority.[15]

The rebels replied to Toussaint that their rights had not been respected, and that in their part of the island, unlike Toussaint's, they were treated unequally in comparison to whites and mulattoes: "On your side [of the island] the whites and mulattoes who are with you are good and are united with the blacks. One would think that they are brothers born of the same mother. That, my general, is what we call equality." To be discriminated against as they had been, they cried, "is not to be free."[16] Toussaint, however, refused this differential logic (here one is unfree, unlike the North) in the name of a single universal logic. "All the reasons

14. Gérard M. Laurent, *Toussaint Louverture à travers sa correspondance (1794–1798)* (Madrid: Industrias graficas, 1953), 314. All translations are my own.
15. Madison Smartt Bell, *Toussaint Louverture: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon, 2007), 123, 130.
16. Laurent, *Toussaint Louverture*, 316.

you give me appear just, but were you to have a house full of them [*mais quand même vous en auriez plein une case*] you would still be in the wrong because you made yourselves guilty in the eyes of God, the law, and men."[17] Toussaint stood before his *confrères* not to promote the immanent self-fashioning of an egalitarian society, but as the embodiment of three transcendental universals (divine law, positive law, and the natural law of all humankind) that allowed for no exceptions. If we are to believe Toussaint, his persuasive power won them over, and to a one "they responded to me that they were wrong . . . and would commit no more misdeeds and would be wise and obedient."[18]

While one could add many later and much harsher anecdotes regarding the turn to forced labor by Toussaint (to say nothing of his successor Henri Christophe), the logical parameters are sufficiently clear in this early polemic over the substance of freedom in post-slavery Saint-Domingue: could such freedom admit of multiple interpretations, or must it fall under the violent erasure of difference, destined to follow an abstract, categorical logic that linked autonomy with human labor? We undoubtedly have here an early example of the self-destruction of enlightenment: when Toussaint refused to look beyond the given (military/plantation-based) world he knew, the process of enlightenment that had taken him in a few years from being a black slave-owner to the defender of universal human rights began to grind to a halt. In refusing to bring the critical spirit of enlightenment to bear upon Saint-Domingue society after he came to dominate the island in 1796, Toussaint came to stand for the eventual regression of that society behind the universal norms he had previously brought fully into practice for the first time in world history.

Toussaint's refusal to consider the viability of a Bossale, minifundia-based society is readily understandable. As Madison Smartt Bell has pointed out, Toussaint was a Caribbean-born Creole who had never known the small-holdings and subsistence-based agriculture typical of much of Africa. Toussaint had known firsthand every dimension of the life of the plantation, however: from that of slave to land- and slave-owner after 1776. He had been fully inscribed by 1789 as a subject of the Atlantic world-system of agrarian capitalism. From his exile in the Fort de Joux, he recalled his net worth in 1789 as precisely 648,000 francs.[19] Toussaint knew exactly what it would take to make that system economically viable after 1791. Toussaint's repeated demonstrations of support for returning *grands blancs*, though always qualified by the imperative of a defending a slavery-free system, loudly proclaimed to all Saint-Domingue society his divided allegiance.[20]

17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 317.
19. Bell, *Toussaint Louverture: A Biography*, 274.
20. Ibid., 146, 201.

By 1801, Toussaint had come to give a quite singular meaning to the concept of universal emancipation. Rather than the destruction of plantation slavery and its replacement by the self-organization of the Haitian peasantry, universal emancipation in 1801 implied for Toussaint the economic reconstruction of the island with forced plantation labor. Furthermore, this social structure demanded, in his view, the unquestioned submission of all to his own unlimited authoritarian rule. Perhaps Toussaint justified this authoritarianism to himself by his increasing belief in the story he had never ceased telling publicly since 1793: that it was he alone who had first, unwaveringly, and successfully defended their freedom. In any case, his accession to power had, by his own admission, finally come to control him. Though he recognized that the promulgation of his 1801 constitution and its de facto proclamation of independence would most likely provoke Napoléon to invade, that it would destroy any hope for the quasi-Federation status for Saint-Domingue both desired in their more objective moments, Toussaint's strategic rhetorical genius was no longer in force. He admitted as much to his envoy Colonel Vincent, writing that he was unable to restrain himself from unilaterally promulgating and then sending to Napoléon as a fait accompli this new constitution.[21]

In contrast to Toussaint's steadfast dedication to a militaristic, plantation-based model of human freedom, the Bossale community of Saint-Domingue developed an egalitarian society that would effectively refuse this elite social model for the next century and a half. The Bossale community of Saint-Domingue clearly and spontaneously perceived the constitution of an autonomous transcendental state mechanism—so ardently sought after by the military elite from Toussaint to Christophe—to constitute a threat to be avoided at all costs. From 1793 on, they instituted their human rights prior to the existence of any state apparatus that would have paternalistically granted those rights to them, disproving the current wisdom that the instantiation of human rights necessarily depends upon a functional system of nation-states for enforcement. Instead, they immediately acted to construct a system that Gérard Barthélemy, in his 1990 study *L'univers rural haïtien*, rightly called an "egalitarian system without a state," one that would secure and maintain their freedom and equality, a system that functioned within the world-system itself as the latter's inassimilable, indigestible other.[22]

This process of self-organization was an act of escape from any system that would the exploit their surplus labor by incorporating them within a regime of commercial consumption

21. Ibid., 212. For a speculation on the astounding implications—both for French power and for the possible global abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century—had such a federation between France and Saint-Domingue, Napoléon and Toussaint, been constructed, see ibid., 219–20, 267. It is also of note that a model for such a decentralized imperial confederation (and perhaps Toussaint had this model in mind) was first proposed by Robespierre in his "Projet de confédération entre la France et la Corse" (26 April 1790). See Maximilien Robespierre, *Pour le bonheur et pour la liberté: Discours* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2000), 94.

22. Barthélemy, *L'univers rural haïtien*, 84. All translations are my own.

and dependency on wage remuneration. Since it quickly proved impossible for the Bossale culture to impose any structural limitations and dependency upon leaders such as Toussaint, limitations that would keep power away from an oligarchy and firmly located with the peasantry, the ruse of the *moun andeyo* (the excluded, literally "outside people") was simply to withdraw from direct combat into the self-regulating egalitarian system described by Barthélemy.[23]

Barthélemy describes how Haitian peasant society, which has always appeared to the outside world as a regressive, aberrant failure of the process of development, in fact has long represented an organized, systematic refusal to adopt this model. Instead, Haitian rural society is an "egalitarian system without a state."[24] It is precisely this sustained construction of a large-scale *stateless* community that distinguishes Haitian Bossale society from all the major political forms of modernity, whether representative or monarchic democracy, fascist, or bureaucratic socialist.[25]

Following Pierre Clastres, Barthélemy argues that Haitian rural society should be understood not in terms of failure, but instead possesses a highly structured social system whose accomplishments are simply invisible or incomprehensible to the outside world. In his 1972 study *La société contre l'Etat* (*Society Against the State*), Clastres analyzed this process as an active appropriation of labor-free time in Amazonian subsistence economies, refiguring it not as lack (of civilization, surplus capital, etc.) but as the active constitution of societies protecting themselves from the development of a separate state apparatus that would seek (through violence) to alienate, exploit, and expropriate a maximum quota of labor from a community.[26]

Similarly, the goal of the Haitian Bossale community, in the face of the constant threat represented by elite culture and its fealty to the dominant North Atlantic model of wage-labor and surplus profit accumulation, was to maintain a state of equilibrium in the rural community that would prevent the resurgence of hierarchical power structures and social inequality. Consequently, Bossale culture strove systematically to harmonize social relations

23. Ibid., 30–68.
24. Ibid., 28.
25. This is not to claim, of course, that no comparable social structures have existed in the modern world. The best known of such stateless egalitarian systems is perhaps the Russian *mir*, which survived well into the twentieth century in rural Russia, until Stalin's forced collectivization and artificial famines of 1929–34 killed some 13 million peasants. See Alexandre Skirda. *Les anarchistes russes, les soviets, et la révolution de 1917* (Paris: Editions de Paris, 2000), 124. The *mir* was a "democratic regime in its simplest and purest form, without intermediaries and without representation. It is a regime of direct democracy in which each member personally takes part in all deliberations and all decisions . . . without hereditary, individual, or oligarchic authority" (Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, cited in ibid., 31; translation mine). Like the Haitian *moun andeyo*, the world of the Russian *mir* "constituted a closed-off world, separated from that of the cities. . . . Since the time of the Muscovite Tsars, two societies lived superposed one upon the other: that of the true country [*le pays réel*], the peasants, the living force of productive labor, and that of the State power and its predatory clientele" (ibid., 34; translation mine).
26. Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, trans. Robert Hurley and Abe Stein (New York: Zone Books, 1989).

without recourse to transcendent authority such as representative, constitutional government, police, or codified legal systems. In short, the goal was to institute a society "outside of all [constituted] politics."[27]

The mechanisms Haitian Bossale society has adopted to achieve this goal since acquiring independence in the 1790s have long appeared, to the eyes of outsiders (Haitian or not), as testimony to a failure to adopt the dominant, North Atlantic social habitus. These mechanisms include an education that limits the development of autonomous individuality in relation to Bossale society, as well as the cultivation of comportments based upon suspicion, fear of the Other, jealousy, and envy. Similarly, a whole series of social rituals enforce the constant redistribution of wealth to prevent accumulation and maintain economic equality. The generalization of the practice of sorcery (*wanga*) and the constant threat of its invocation in insular communities regulates intersubjective behavior in the absence of an objective juridical apparatus. Labor takes the form either of self-subsistence or shared, unremunerated work for the commons (*combites*).[28]

The interdependent practices of Catholicism and Vodou, in turn, play differentiated roles in this maintenance of a structure of egalitarian equilibrium. The universalism of Catholic subjectivity and rituals, for Barthélemy, offers a destructured, atemporal political interface for relations with the world outside the Haitian countryside, while the Vodou cult of ancestors (*loas-héritage*) sustains a sacralized, organic relation to the rural environment.[29] In turn, various social "strategies" support Bossale egalitarianism: the refusal of technological innovations ("technical precarity"); the strategic subdivision of property with each generation, and the nonexistence and hyper-complexity of cadastral apparatuses; and various strategies of passive (emigration, seduction, dissimulation, complication, dispersion, erosion, dissuasion, derision) and active (*cacos*) resistance to the outside world that allow the maintenance of Bossale egalitarianism in a state of dynamic equilibrium without endangering its functioning.[30] This system, a legacy of the Haitian Revolution, functioned in a state of dynamic equilibrium from the late 1790s to the 1960s, until the destruction of the Haitian (natural and social) environment under the regime of Papa Doc undermined its viability.

The development and long-term viability of this stateless egalitarianism and refusal of contractual wage labor relations may appear as no more than a curiosity, a Luddite blip in

27. Barthélemy, *L'univers rural haïtien*, 29.
28. See ibid., 32–33, 35, 37. With the exception of short- and medium-term labor in the Dominican Republic by those in the 20–35 age group, *combites*—units of cooperative labor—allow for the accumulation of a minimum of capital without endangering the internal balance of the community.
29. Ibid., 43.
30. Ibid., 48, 51.

the ever-more-encompassing reach of Western consumerism and its founding ideology of liberal individualism. And yet, in a period in which global humanity is already being forced to address the havoc this secular mythology has wreaked upon the earth, we may well be obliged not only to moderate certain "excesses" of consumer and business behavior (while leaving the system functionally intact), but, if we are to survive on the planet, to call into question the global politicoeconomic structures that perpetuate and reinforce the culture of "boundless" consumption and progress. As such, the long-term sustainability of Haitian stateless egalitarianism—and notwithstanding the externally determined ecological disasters Haiti has known (deforestation, Creole pig massacre)—is of interest to all who believe that the coming shift from unlimited consumerism to an ethics of global responsibility (Jonas) will require fundamental changes to the sociopolitical system that has brought us to the brink of disaster.

Given the immediate historical context of a slave-labor-based world-system, from the moment Napoléon abandoned the revolutionary ideals of 1789 and decided to reinstall French slavery, it is doubtful that an entire nation composed solely of small farmers could have remained free from slavery beyond 1802. Whether or not this is true, the crucial point is that even when they did defeat the French in 1804, the global political context that so feared the Bossale vision of an anarchist, minifundia-based freedom quickly and systematically undermined (by refusal of diplomatic recognition, embargo, etc.) any incipient autonomy of the Haitian state, reducing it to the empty rhetorical posturing of a largely worthless constitution. No true freedom—one that would allow for the sustained development of both liberty *and* social equality—was ever possible for Haitians in such an unfree totality as was Western modernity in 1804.

During the early years of the Saint-Domingue revolution (1791–96), the shared imperative to abolish slavery allowed for the strategic composition of a radical populist movement uniting the black and mulatto elite with the numerically superior Bossale community. The Enlightenment thought that Toussaint Louverture absorbed into the core of his being after 1789 had radicalized the struggle for the universal freedom from domination of the people of Saint-Domingue, uniting a diverse community under the empty, absent signifier of *libete*/*liberté* in a true expression of populist reason. After 1796, however, the fundamentally conflicting visions of freedom of these two communities—one dedicated to imposing the individualistic freedom of the wage-labor/consumerist individual, the other dedicated to a fully egalitarian, subsistence-based, stateless community—quickly divided Saint-Domingue between (elite) state and (Bossale) nation.

Freedom is not an eternally preexistent, ready-at-hand "natural" right; the ideology of a timeless natural right dear to Toussaint served from this point of view merely to justify new forms of servitude, "producing retroactively the foundation that gives [subjection to

authority] its legitimacy."[31] To the *moun andeyo*, the call Toussaint made for their submission could only appear as the ruse of a new servitude that attempted to lure them into accepting anew the regulation and control of their bodies and productive power. The contrast could not be starker between the immanent structuration of this vernacular society and Toussaint Louverture's dedication to plantation labor, the abstract formalism of constitutional law, and his unwavering, Kantian insistence that all subjects be bound by these structural limitations. The laws of Bossale society remained immanent, never inscribed in a constitution or decree, but instead only existed in their actualization, in the process of their constant externalization and expression as the activity of an oral community.

While the Haitian Revolution announced the universal elimination of slavery, it also contained the seeds of the human and social dysfunction of post-1804 Haiti. This occurred for Haiti not in some essentialist, teleological dialectic of enlightenment necessarily leading to barbarism, but only insofar as its population—divided between an elite that favored a plantation-based labor state and a nation desiring to maintain small-holdings land plots—never reached a consensus on how the latter might be sustained in the capitalist world-system of the time. Instead, the Bossale community only managed to survive for the next century-and-a-half through passive and (occasionally) active resistance to the Liberal world-system, in a strategic *marronnage* to the Haitian hills.

The recognition of the unique and significant contributions of this Haitian egalitarian social system must be emphatically distinguished from any romanticization or aestheticization of rural life, poverty, or the like. Haiti's outrageously elevated rates of infant mortality and AIDS are to be universally decried. Such secondary effects of Haitian rural poverty and isolation within the contemporary world-system, however, must be distinguished from the unique social structures invented in rural Haiti since 1804.

To understand the foundation or ontological ground of human rights as an indeterminate yet universal possibility to "singularize" one's existence, while allowing one to retain the notion of the human as an indeterminate opening onto possibility, necessarily remains a problematic, and, indeed, aporetic proposal. For, such a vision of the "human" and of human rights as was put forward in the Haitian Revolution operates its own structural exclusions. The former slaves of Saint-Domingue forcibly broke through their prepolitical situation of exclusion from the domain of right, to become political subjects of universal rights. They constructed for the world not one but two unique and previously unimaginable forms of political "dissensus"—that is, a contestatory reconfiguration of the ontological parameters of social existence.[32] For

31. Warren Montag, "The Pressure of the Street: Habermas' Fear of the Masses," in Mike Hill and Warren Montag, eds., *Masses, Classes, and the Public Sphere* (New York: Verso, 2000), 132–45, 50.
32. Jacques Rancière, "Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, nos. 2–3 (2004): 304.

Toussaint Louverture and the various elites who followed him after 1801, liberty meant the universal, uncompromised abolition of chattel slavery for the first time in world history, a freedom inscribed through the construction of transcendental social mechanisms (constitutional, juridical, military, religious, paternal, moral) to ensure the enforcement of that prescription within a nation divided between an "enlightened" elite and an "unenlightened" peasantry. For the Bossale community, freedom meant instead the construction of an undivided, stateless egalitarianism, with its own attendant forms of violence: the systematic suppression of the expression of individuality among its members to assure the reproduction of social equality.

The former slaves of Saint-Domingue demonstrated through an active process of political subjectivation that the attribute "Man" of 1789 was not *only* an ideological falsehood of the bourgeoisie's bid for power (Marx), but that as a previously inconceivable interjection into the (symbolic) economy of the eighteenth-century world-system, in its very formalism it retained an operative efficacy. The positive efficacy of this abstraction ("Man") opened a gap or interval in that century, a gap inherent in the inadequation between the slaves' active and ongoing depoliticization and exclusion (through the dehumanization of slavery) and the universal rights of man, a process enacted through their isolation from the normative consensus on slavery of the Assemblée Nationale.

The problem of popular insurgency, already so important to studies such as Carolyn Fick's *The Making of Haiti*, runs through three more recent books on Haitian history that have just been or are about to be published: Madison Smartt Bell's biography of Toussaint Louverture, Alex Dupuy's *The Prophet and Power*, and Peter Hallward's *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide, and the Politics of Containment*.[33] I think attention to the problem of popular insurgency is one way both to link together our analysis of past and present Haitian history and to focus on the role of the Haitian people in making that history.

Bell's 2007 biography is impressive, not only beginning to fill a glaring gap in Anglophone research but surpassing in many aspects the monumental but highly tendentious work of Toussaint's francophone biographer Pierre Pluchon. While not plumbing new archival resources (save for a number of fascinating privately held letters), Bell's *Toussaint Louverture* operates a necessary weighing and sifting of the many complexities and obscurities surrounding his subject's life and thought.

Bell also offers us a balanced appraisal of Toussaint, one attentive to its subject's contradictions, yet never losing sight of Toussaint's fundamental contributions. In the conclusions of the book's fourth and seventh chapters Bell offers a decisive analysis of Toussaint's complex

33. Madison Smartt Bell, *Toussant Louverture: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon, 2007); Alex Dupuy, *The Prophet and Power: Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the International Community, and Haiti* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); and Peter Hallward, *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide, and the Politics of Containment* (London: Verso, 2008).

persona. In Bell's analysis, Toussaint was a leader "capable of absolute treachery, absolute ruthlessness, and absolute hypocrisy"; rather than condemning Toussaint for Machiavellianism, however, as did Pluchon, Bell shows how all these qualities, along with those of logical clarity, rhetorical brilliance, military genius, and the like, were expressed to the highest degree and without reserve to achieve the conditions he thought necessary for his community's initial and continued emancipation from slavery.[34] Bell traces in Toussaint the operation of a protean logic, in which "Liberty," the author observes, is, in Toussaint's analysis, "a right given by Nature; equality is a consequence of that liberty."[35]

The result is the conflict over a mass-based insurgency, and one led and directed from above. In attempting to analyze and judge contemporary history, the problem of popular insurgency is intensified, yet becomes even more difficult to judge, given our proximity, both temporal and emotional, to current events. This reappears in the contentious debate regarding the overthrow of Aristide in 2004, and his overall place in contemporary Haitian politics.

Two quite recent texts nicely frame this debate: Alex Dupuy's *The Prophet and Power: Jean-Bertrand Aristide* from 2007, and Peter Hallward's recently published *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide, and the Politics of Containment*.[36] The contrast between the two authors' appraisal of Aristide could hardly be more starkly drawn. Dupuy's study is informed and detailed, laying out the case for his argument that "when he left [Haiti] in February 2004, Aristide had become a discredited, corrupted, and increasingly authoritarian president who had betrayed the trust and aspirations of the poor majority."[37] While this line of thought is familiar to followers of Haitian politics and has been developed by a number of writers, from Michael Deibert, Charles Arthur, and Laënnec Hurbon, Dupuy offers perhaps its most detailed and sustained analysis. Dupuy critically examines in detail the interconnections between Haiti and the imperialism of the US neo-liberal New World Order. He is attentive both to the conflicts between the Haitian elite and Aristide, as well as the US-supported creation of a pseudo–"democratic opposition" that has repeatedly shown itself unable to garner anything more than miniscule popular support in democratic elections. Dupuy goes on, however, to accuse Aristide of three principal failings: first, to have alienated his enemies in 1991, and thus to have contributed to his own overthrow. Second, the author argues that by the time of his re-election in 2000, Aristide was no longer faithful to his original, progressive principles,

34. Bell, *Toussaint Louverture*, 106.
35. Ibid., 103–4.
36. At the time of this writing, Hallward's book was yet to be published. My comments here refer primarily to Hallward's review of Dupuy's book, an article containing in summary Hallward's forthcoming argument. See Peter Hallward, "Aristide and the Violence of Democracy," ZNet, 9 September 2007, http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=13735 (accessed 13 December 2007).
37. Dupuy, *Prophet and Power*, 2.

and was instead merely "using state power for his and his allies personal gains."[38] Finally, and most significant, if true, Aristide abandoned his democratic principles and responded to an increase in political opposition by arming his poor supporters to create the infamous street gangs referred to as *chimès*.

In response to Dupuy, as in other articles published in forums such as *Radical Philosophy*, Hallward defends Aristide as a democratically elected president, one whose putative transgressions of the law should be addressed through legal means rather than through the suspension of the rule of law that is CIA-funded violence or an internationally sponsored coup. Most significant, and against Dupuy, Hallward provocatively defends Aristide's recourse to "the one and only source of non-predatory pressure available" to counter the entrenched corruption of the Haitian political elite: "the force of direct mobilization."[39] In particular, Hallward strives to defend Aristide's evocation of "Père Lebrun" or the lynching of Tontons Macoutes. In Aristide's speeches of 4 August and 27 September 1991, writes Hallward, he "refused to rule out recourse to violence as a last-ditch strategy whereby people might defend the government they had elected against extra-legal pressure from the army, the Macoutes, and the ruling class."[40] In contrast to those two speeches, Hallward reminds readers of Aristide's "relentless emphasis on the *non-violent* struggle for social justice" in the vast majority of his speeches up until his final ouster in 2004.[41]

Hallward argues that "the real meaning of Père Lebrun was very simple: given their lack of weapons, resources, or international friends, it meant resistance by all means necessary to prevent a further coup d'état and further aggression from the Macoutes. . . . In 1990–91, to insist like Alex Dupuy (or the US human rights groups that he cites) on a *blanket* condemnation of Père Lebrun would have been tantamount, in practice, to an insistence on mass submission to the Macoutes."[42] In essence, Hallward accuses Dupuy of having already made up his mind about Aristide, and attempts to show how Dupuy's book is structured by a series of contradictions that inevitably find Aristide at fault, whether for too much or too little democratic and populist behavior. Hallward argues in particular that Dupuy never demonstrates proof that it was Aristide who was responsible for the creation and manipulation of the chimès. Instead, Dupuy merely states that "everyone knew the chimès were working for Aristide."[43] While Dupuy concludes that by 2004 Lavalas would become equated with the chimès, Hallward counters that "in actual fact it is Dupuy himself (along with a few other

38. Ibid., 170.
39. Hallward, "Aristide."
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid. (emphasis mine).
42. Ibid. (emphasis mine).
43. Dupuy, *Prophet and Power*, 156.

intellectuals, NGO consultants and unelectable social-democrats) who has gone to some trouble to make this equation appear plausible. As for the millions of Haitian people who still support Aristide as a unifying symbol and spokesman of their own political struggle, it seems they don't buy it."[44]

On the other hand, Hallward's review never counters one of Dupuy's most penetrating critiques of Aristide's political practice: that Lavalas was a charisma-based political organization based upon an incipient cult of personality. "Lavalas," Dupuy writes, "was not a democratic organization, and neither did it seek to adhere to or foster a democratic practice. In the absence of mechanisms of control and accountability, and a program debated and approved by the rank-and-file of the movement, there was a danger that . . . anything could be said in the name of Lavalas." And Dupuy concludes: "Between the leader and the masses, there must exist a structured organization controlled by enlightened and responsible people."[45]

What are the historical and interpretive implications of such historical visions of Haiti as a site of radical, mass-based insurgency for democratic self-determination? Taken in this sense, the contemporary debate over Aristide, violence, the *chimès*, and the process of popular mobilization immediately reminds us that 1804 was a revolution characterized by the conflict between the plantocratic elite led by Toussaint Louverture and the mass of liberated slaves that Madison Smartt Bell powerfully brings to life in *All Souls' Rising*.[46] What light might this contemporary debate shed on the process of the Haitian Revolution? Who has the right and power to determine the meaning of freedom in any given instance? A vanguard elite, or each and every individual?

In its original and powerful reception of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, the Haitian Revolution testifies to both a radicalization and comprehensive demolition of the epistemology that dominated the Age of Enlightenment. The former slaves of Saint-Domingue asserted their unconditional right and capacity to exercise the universal human faculty of judgment. Free of all masters, these former slaves, the great majority of whom were of course illiterate and without "formal" education, put to the test the Enlightenment faith in human reason as a universal possession of the human species. They enacted the proposition that there in fact exists a structure of reason that grounds and allows for the appearance of any singular manifestation of empirical acts of judgment across cultures and epochs.

In interpreting the concept of *libete/liberté* autonomously, Haitians necessarily brought the lived-through experience of slavery to bear upon an abstraction. They proceeded not according to dogmatic, alien principles (the North Atlantic doctrine of liberty for white, male,

44. Ibid., 144; Hallward, "Aristide."
45. Dupuy, *Prophet and Power*, 93, 95.
46. See Madison Smartt Bell, *All Souls' Rising* (New York: Penguin, 1996).

property holders), but instead rejected such authority to proceed as if a universal order of right were discernible in the world, if only one could abstract and extract the notion of that order from singular empirical experience.

Thrown together without regard for cultural and geographic origins, cut off from much of the substance of their ancestors' traditions and moral communities, the slaves of Saint-Domingue were obliged to move beyond the moral desolation of their world to undertake creative acts of judgment with whatever materials they might find at hand, including the surviving shards of African human rights traditions and the Catholic, Masonic, Enlightenment, and Vodun moral codes that circulated more or less freely throughout colonial Saint-Domingue. The abstract concept of *libete*/*liberté* that floated overseas to Saint-Domingue in August 1789 was not an ossified universal precept under which various empirical phenomena were to be subsumed, but just the opposite. This monstrous concept was an explosive destroyer of social customs and habits, one whose meaning was quite unfixed and novel (Did it include the poor? Free *gens de couleur*? Slaves? Women? Jews?). Only concerted acts of communitarian and intersubjective political judgment—not the forcible imposition of an ossified truth—could decide such questions and lead to the destruction of the universal abjection of slavery. The caustic force of this concept cleared away putatively universal Enlightenment-era habits of thought that had made of the right to property an absolute and, in consequence, slavery a necessary evil enshrined to the greater glory of economic expansion.

The sequence of events from 1791–1804 enacted a drastic and utterly singular break with the Enlightenment order of knowledge, however, on the level of the *transmission* of knowledge. The conception of enlightenment itself was fundamentally ambiguous. On the one hand, a range of Enlightenment thinkers from Rousseau and Condorcet to William Godwin celebrated the human capacity for autonomous reflection, while Kant famously defined Enlightenment as the subject's emergence from self-incurred immaturity. On the other hand, the metaphor of "enlightenment" necessarily implied a hierarchical order of knowledge, in which the knowing, "enlightened" master illuminates a subaltern subject entrapped in the cavern of ignorance. The *Encyclopédie*'s definition of education clearly reveals this fundamental bias: education is not the subject's self-directed coming-to-knowledge, but is instead "le soin que l'on prend de nourrir, d'élever et d'instruire les enfans."[47]

Such elitism was fundamental to North Atlantic Enlightenment theories of knowledge, all of which, from Locke and Condorcet to Grégoire and even Rousseau, reaffirmed this structural inequality in the transmission of knowledge. For the Abbé Grégoire, those subaltern groups the bishop judged to be in need of "regeneration" were to submit to a process directed

47. *Encyclopédie de Diderot et D'Alembert* (CD-ROM) Marsane: Redon, Version 1.0.0, "Education."

by enlightened elites like himself. The poor were to submit to "the paternal solicitude of the government," and Jews were to be "corrected" and "civilized," their cultural singularities erased in order to "dissolve them into the national mass."[48] Women, whom he denounced as incorrigibly conceited, immodest, and dissolute, should be denied the "universal" rights of "Man," and the black blood of African slaves was to be Europeanized by racial miscegenation, while the putative ignorance of Africans on every continent would be erased by paternalistic education.

Within this context, the reception and judgment in Saint-Domingue of the events of 1789 and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* utterly negated such a model of education and enlightenment. The Haitian Revolution might never have occurred had these former slaves simply followed the dominant order of knowledge, turning to a *maître* who would all-knowingly *interpret* a text such as the 1789 *Déclaration* to them. Such a Parisian or *grand blanc maître* would describe to them all the logical reasons why this document did not apply to them, why, in the language of Condorcet and Grégoire, they were not ready for freedom, or why their enslavement was necessary for the greater good of the French economy (the planters' Club Massiac).

The slaves of Saint-Domingue constructed an organization of knowledge that utterly destroyed the hierarchical model of all-knowing master/ignorant disciple. They never stopped to wonder whether the faculty of human reason was universal; they simply proceeded upon the assumption that all humans share an equal intelligence, and that inequality lies only in the energy and attention devoted to its expression.

Unbeholden to any intellectual master, they knew immediately that they were capable of all that any human is capable of; all they needed was a word, a text, upon which to exercise their faculty of judgment. They had only to pick up an idea one day after 1789 when they went down to the docks of Cap du Roi, talking to a French sailor or having someone read them a posted announcement, and to refine that tool of Revolutionary France's denial of civil rights (to slaves, women, Jews) into the novel concept of universal emancipation. These former slaves had no need of an interpreter; they had only to observe, compare, combine, evaluate, and act.

A text, a document placed directly between two intelligences, bypassing all "enlightened" interpretation for the uninitiated, announced to those able to interpret it the creation of a slavery-free society. When the 1789 *Déclaration* arrived in Saint-Domingue, it helped to structure a new configuration of knowledge, between two subjects with no degrees or accreditation

48. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 134, 67, 95.

(the *Tiers Etat* and the slaves of Saint-Domingue) both of whom desired to construct their own emancipation, free of any *maître interposé*. The judgment of this document was no passive witnessing of a pure, unchanging truth (Condorcet), but instead the invocation of an unheralded power to *translate* a North Atlantic language into these slaves' own experiential idiom, the pragmatic desire to express their insight into the categorical need to destroy plantation slavery in the language of the *Rights of Man*.

The sequence of the Haitian Revolution from 1791–1804 could follow no master plan; it was from beginning to end the most masterful political improvisation of the Radical Enlightenment. These former slaves, like contemporary Haitians who defend their democracy against its oligarchic obfuscation with the only means available to them, systematically followed through the political implications of this new model of knowledge. Just as they refused the interposition of an interpretive *maître*, the Bossale community judged themselves apt to govern without any interposition of authority, of those "entitled" to rule by virtue of their birth, sex, property, nationality, or race. Napoléon could make no distinction between Toussaint and the Bossales of Saint-Domingue. The Haitian Revolution scandalized the North Atlantic Enlightenment powers because it was, unique for the eighteenth century, an affirmation of true democracy: the proper and logical right of anyone, absolutely anyone, to political sovereignty. The scandal of the Haitian Revolution is to have affirmed the right to sovereignty on the part of those with absolutely no qualification beyond their human capacity to judge and act autonomously. Like all master improvisers in the Black Atlantic tradition, they structured their improvisation from the formal coordinates of a preexisting Standard (the *Déclaration*), but refused simply to reiterate the same *esclavagiste* refrain rehearsed in Paris or Philadelphia. Instead they improvised a political elegy to freedom whose message continues to resonate, as contemporary historiography reminds us, in the continuing Haitian struggle for the political autonomy of a nation.