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Teaching the Haitian Revolution: Its Place in Western and Modern World History

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THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION is highly relevant to teaching the modern history of the Western hemisphere and the world in general and ought to find a place in every history classroom. Recognizing this relevance, during the last thirty years, historians and other social scientists have produced a number of sophisticated studies of the Haitian Revolution. Each study presents a different theoretical methodology and varied factual frameworks, but each offers a provocative analysis of the subject.¹ The significance of the Haitian Revolution is that it is considered the first successful slave revolt in modern times. This revolt and other events in Haitian history which followed are appropriate for classroom discussion.²

In the study of the events that encompass the grand sweep of the American, the French, and the Haitian Revolutions, 1776-1804, the discussion of the Haitian Revolution can serve as a case study for understanding major problems confronted by the European colonies in the Western hemisphere during this revolutionary period. In my teaching experience, I have found that the Haitian Revolution provides an opportunity to engage the students in a broad comparative analysis of colonial rule and the nationalistic reaction to the forcible entrance of the masses into the politics of the modern world.

The Historical Setting

In the wake of the French Revolution a series of extraordinary and explosive events swept through Saint Domingue, France's most prosperous colony. On the eve of that revolution, nearly half a million African slaves worked on plantations, outnumbering the white population almost twelve to one. The white population stood at forty thousand and was subdivided into three categories: European bureaucrats, *grands blancs* and *petits blancs*. Due to privileges and wealth, there was intense rivalry among the whites. The bureaucrats monopolized the highest administrative and military posts. *Grands blancs*, or wealthy planters and merchants, wanted some of the privileges and positions of the bureaucrats; *petits blancs*, who aspired to become grand blancs, included plantation overseers, grocers, low rank employees and poor whites in general. Common to all was the ideology of white supremacy which prevented the mulattoes, many of whom were educated and wealthy landowners, from having political power or participating with whites at any level of social equality. Mulattoes and freed blacks, approximately thirty thousand, formed the *gens de couleur*. All of them, like the slaves, lived in an atmosphere of violence, fear and contempt.

Nonetheless, slave labor generated high profit, to the extent that by the 1780s nearly two-thirds of French foreign trade was centered in Saint Domingue. By 1789, Saint Domingue "supplied half of Europe with sugar, coffee and cotton."³ Obviously, on the eve of the outbreak of the French Revolution, the colonial society was not prepared to incorporate "liberty, equality, fraternity" within the social fabric. Therefore, political, economic, and social interests clashed in Saint Domingue, leading to a complex process of class struggle, pitting slaves against masters. The racial confrontation led to a power struggle involving whites, mulattoes, and blacks. A civil war engulfed the whites, pitting those without power against those who wanted to maintain the status quo. The mulattoes fought for equality with the whites. The black slaves, in their pursuit of freedom, struggled against both whites and mulattoes. International dimensions of the revolution arose when Spain and England, fearing the spread of the slave revolt to their colonies, entered the war. England sided with the French plantation owners and sent military help. On the other hand, Spain gave aid, protection, and Spanish military ranks to black leaders. France, already a key player in the conflict, supported the mulattoes. Eventually, as the French, the Spaniards, and the British competed to win over African black fighters to reinforce their troops, members of the three races fought on all fronts.⁴

The chronological development of these events may be analyzed in three racially marked periods. First, when the revolutionary movement

began in France, whites who expected colonial self-rule acted as a vehicle spreading revolutionary ideas within Saint Domingue. *Grands blancs* organized themselves in the Colonial Committee, drafted their *cahier des doléances* and selected thirty-seven delegates to represent them in the Estates-General in France. Soon, the interests and goals of the delegates clashed with those of the revolution. Overall, the delegates sensed that the *Declaration of Man and Citizen*, adopted by the National Assembly in France, in August 1789, was a threat to their hierarchical colonial position. In an attempt to preserve their privileges, they reacted against the course of the revolution and opened the road for the disintegration of the colonial order. Meanwhile, in Saint Domingue, a faction of the colonists organized a revolt against French authority. Between 1789 and 1798, *grands* and *petits blancs* joined forces against the metropolitan power but they also opposed demands of the mulattoes for recognition of full citizenship. While whites were fighting among themselves, the mulattoes' violent confrontation for equality with the whites began.

This confrontation opened the second phase. The armed struggle of the mulattoes was led by Vicent Ogé, and other mulattoes, who, in 1790, returned to Saint Domingue from France and organized the resistance to end racial discrimination against mulattoes. Confronted with the colonial military power, Ogé was defeated. He and some of his followers fled to Spanish Santo Domingo. Under French pressure, they were extradited to Saint Domingue, where they were tortured and killed in February 1791. Their death strengthened the debate for equality and provided an opportunity to the National Assembly in France to grant political rights to *gens de couleur* born of free parents. Meanwhile, neither whites, nor mulattoes, nor French colonial authorities had paid attention to the overwhelming majority of the population, the slaves, who had witnessed the debates over secession and the revolutionary ferment and actions for equality. Now, however, the slaves rose up and began the complex third period of the revolution. Their fight for freedom became a turning point for the revolution.

The uprising of the slaves erupted at the end of August 1791. It began in the northern plantations under the direction of Boukman Dutty, Jean Francois, George Biassou, and especially Toussaint L'Ouverture. Boukman, a voodoo priest, gave the signal to begin the insurrection by burning down plantations, killing and looting. From 1791 to 1804, the flames of the revolution spread all over the colony, changing leaders, destroying the colonial regime, and ultimately winning freedom for the slaves and independence for Haiti.

L'Ouverture became the most distinguished military leader of this last phase of the Haitian Revolution. He and his followers Jean Jacques

Dessalines, Henry Christopher, and Alexander Petion, effectively organized the resistance of the slaves. Emancipation was secured in August 1793. After the abolition of slavery, Toussaint strengthened his political leadership. In May 1797 he became the governor-general of Saint Domingue. To consolidate power, while fighting and defeating mulatto resistance led by Andre Rigaud, Toussaint prepared to gain control of the Spanish side of the island which was ceded to France by Spain in 1795. After Rigaud fled to France, in July 1800, Toussaint proceeded to unify Saint Domingue and Santo Domingo in January 1801. While Toussaint was establishing common administrative principles to govern both sides of the island at the end of January 1802, Napoleon Bonaparte sent a military expedition, commanded by Victor E. Leclerc, his brother-in-law, to reestablish slavery and French control over the entire island of Hispaniola. Deceived by Leclerc, Toussaint was captured and sent to a prison in France, where he died in April 1803. Dessalines now took control of the slave upheaval. Seven months later, with a combination of military skills, the will to preserve freedom, and the yellow fever that decimated the French, the former slaves claimed victory at the end of 1803.

The dynamics of the revolution allow for a variety of historical interpretations. The above events could be considered as a political, social, and international confrontation, or racial revolution, as well as a civil war, or war of national liberation. In fact, L'Ouverture and his followers led the slave resistance to fight for freedom first and then for independence. In the end both were achieved.

Historical literature indicates how, during thirteen years of war, the course of the revolution shifted the internal balance of power from one group to another. At the end, the former slaves defeated the armies of France, Spain, and England. The violent struggle destroyed the plantation economy. But the loss of human life was grievous. It is estimated that the total number dead was about 150,000. Moreover, the war left approximately 50,000 disabled on the French side, and about 130,000 on the Haitian side.⁵ Nevertheless, the former colony of Saint Domingue became the Republic of Haiti on January 1, 1804, forever altering the course of events in the hemisphere.

Impact on the Americas

To comprehend the forces that have shaped the Western hemisphere, students should understand both how the Haitian Revolution gave strength to the revolutionary concept and the impact of the emancipation achieved by the slaves. A study of the transformation of Saint Domingue from

French colony to the Republic of Haiti shows, first of all, that the fight for freedom and independence can be achieved against all odds. Second, the Haitian Revolution gave hope to other slave societies in the Western hemisphere to resist slavery and to fight for racial equality. In the nineteenth century, any society in the Americas working with slave labor had to reckon with the inspiration slaves felt in response to news from Haiti. Third, the leadership role assumed by Toussaint L'Ouverture inspired other Latin American leaders to end European colonialism. Simón Bolívar, in his struggle against Spain, not only looked to Haiti as a model but received financial and military aid from Alexander Petion.⁶ In sum, as Herbert Klein states, the slave revolt in Haiti had a “profound impact on everything from sugar prices to slave laws throughout the Western hemisphere.”⁷ In particular, the Haitian Revolution had a lasting effect on the history of the United States. The revolution in Haiti put an end to Napoleon's ambition for domination across the Atlantic and indirectly helped the United States to acquire the Louisiana Territory. In *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, Alfred N. Hunt discusses the impact of the Haitian Revolution on the southern United States. The event significantly affected the economy, religion, politics, and culture of the American South. To avoid the influence of liberation in Haiti, a wave of immigrants, including both masters and their slaves, left the French West Indies and went to Louisiana, mainly to New Orleans. The newcomers made an “enduring contribution to American culture.” They brought with them everything from French Opera to voodoo.⁸ Furthermore, the revolution in Haiti intensified the debate about emancipation in the United States. Slaveholders, afraid of the dynamic forces that transformed the slave revolt in Saint Domingue into a successful revolution, took a stand against emancipation. Opponents of slavery saw peaceful abolition as a crucial necessity to prevent a dreadful conflict. In Hunt's view, the ideology of black abolitionists' militancy in the United States had its foundation in the Haitian revolutionary victory.⁹

Global Impact

Like the American and French Revolutions, the Haitian Revolution is a vivid example of events that have produced not only fundamental changes in the structure of society in the Western hemisphere but also tremendous trans-Atlantic repercussions. On its own terms, the revolution that took place in Saint Domingue between 1789 and 1804 constituted one of the great revolutions of modern time because: a) the revolution succeeded in displacing the French colonial system and in establishing an entirely new social structure and new political order; b) the

revolution shifted the economic current of Europe, Africa and the Americas, reshaping property ownership and economic relationships in the Haitian economic structure:¹⁰ and c) the revolution represented “a radical challenge to colonialism, to slavery, and to the associated ideology of white racialism.”¹¹ The interwoven combination of all these results leads to a variety of historical perspectives. Overall, this historical event exemplifies the integration and disintegration of the European and non-European forces that have shaped the modern world.

Suggestions For Classroom Discussion

The Haitian Revolution may be used in comparative studies in the struggle for independence in the New World. Haiti followed a different pattern from that of its counterparts, the North American and the South American colonies, where the war against European colonial powers was led by white members of the elite. In Saint Domingue, the situation was radically different: black leaders led the way towards independence, and whites fought against them. By destroying the white French colonial establishment and replacing it with black African leadership, the Haitian revolution gained an identity that now makes it serve well for classroom discussion of the ideological interplay of race, color, and national liberation, as has been shown by specialists.¹²

Furthermore, the slave revolt in Saint Domingue can be used to help students learn to use documentary evidence to construct historical arguments by analyzing official reports and correspondence relating to Saint Domingue. For example, the study of the correspondence between Toussaint L'Ouverture and Napoleon can enable students to look at the personality factor in developing the power and force of history.

A debate comparing the outbreak of slave upheavals elsewhere could examine the ethnic and religious components of the Haitian Revolution. Students could establish connections among courses in the curriculum related to issues of race and ethnicity. Assignments could involve not only an analysis of primary sources and contemporary documents, but also visual evidence of material culture, an interdisciplinary approach, and collaborative learning. The Haitian Revolution can provide students with a basis for historical inquiry and understanding of multicultural dimensions of history. For example, to what extent did the rhythms of drumbeats inviting slaves to a voodoo ceremony on Plaine du Nord plantations play a role in the rebellion? Is Voodoo a religion? These or related questions can lead students to examine the syncretism of African cultural views and beliefs that were transplanted to the Americas and later integrated with European Christian beliefs and values.

In addition, with the current flowering of racial and ethnic studies, and given the importance of race in the social structure of American society, the study of the Haitian Revolution brings important information into classroom discussions for the understanding of racial identity. Race was essential for the Haitians' claim for independence.¹³ A discussion of these issues can increase students' awareness of the pivotal role of slaves in other societies, their methods of resistance, their ideological perspectives, and their achievements. In sum, the revolution offers a broad range of topics with a multidisciplinary dimension that are of interest to faculty and students.

Problems and Possibilities

As an instructor of modern European history, and also of Western civilization in the recent past, I am aware that given the constraint of time for teaching and pressure to publish it is not easy to maximize the learning process by expanding the content of syllabi. However, I am also aware that college students taking introductory courses need to expand their knowledge of the slave experience in the Western hemisphere. By looking at textbooks and by looking at the syllabi of my colleagues, I see that in the academic world few have sought adequately to include the Haitian Revolution. Most textbooks include a chapter, or a fragment of a chapter, that discusses revolutionary movements which, in one way or another, have contributed to the creation of a freer society; but an examination of twenty-one current college textbooks that survey world societies or the history of modern Western civilization reveals that only six include the Haitian Revolution in their content.¹⁴ Even though some authors have treated the subject more thoroughly than others, these six books devote, in total, about five pages to the discussion of the Haitian Revolution. The other fifteen texts do not refer at all to the Haitian Revolution.¹⁵ Deciding what to include and what to omit is a formidable task when one is teaching or publishing history, but a more balanced coverage should be the goal. The nature, the developments, and the results of the Haitian Revolution clearly show that the struggle for freedom and independence of the former French colony should get more attention. When I teach Modern European History and Modern Western Civilization, from the Renaissance to the Congress of Vienna (1815), I usually include the Haitian Revolution as a consequence of the French Revolution.

To re-examine the significance and complexities of Haiti's unique revolutionary movement, one may look at a body of significant narratives and periodical publications printed at the time of the revolution or a few

years after. Important archival and library resources are available, particularly the collection available at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a branch of the New York Public Library, and the collection at Moorland Speingarn Research Center, at Howard University, in Washington, D.C. In today's electronic communication explosion, there are many other ways to add information to historical survey courses. My advocacy for the inclusion of the Haitian Revolution in modern Western and world history teaching is not at the expense or exclusion of other important issues. However, one hopes that college and university professors, textbook authors, leading historical journals and publishers will encourage a widespread discussion of the Haitian Revolution by incorporating its coverage in their works and assignments.

Notes

1. Among them, Alfred N. Hunt's *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988) and Carolyn E. Fick's *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990) provide new depth to the understanding of the revolution. A well documented study of circumstances anticipating the revolution is Robert Forster's *A Sugar Plantation on Saint-Domingue*, a paper presented at a Staff/Graduate Seminar (University of West Indies, 1988).

2. In recent decades, the fields of social history and ethnic studies have focused on a wide range of Haitian issues, stretching from the complexities of the political system to the religions and beliefs in the nation, from poverty and economy to mass emigration to the United States. In particular, the United States' military presence in Haiti has stimulated a resurgence of interest in Haitian politics and culture.

3. Ralph Korngold, *Citizen Toussaint* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 12.

4. A seminal study of the revolution is Thomas Ott's *The Haitian Revolution* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973).

5. Alex Dupuy, *Haiti in the World Economy: Class, Race, and Underdevelopment since 1700* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), p. 74.

6. Upon Dessalines's death in 1805, a civil war between the forces of Henry Christopher and Alexander Petion split Haiti into a northern black realm led by Christopher and a southern mulatto republic headed by Petion from 1807-1818. Bolivar, in 1815, moving on to Haiti, met and received assistance from Petion. See J.C. Dorsainvil, *Manual de historia de Haiti* (Santo Domingo: Editora de Santo Domingo, 1979), p. 153.

7. Herbert Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Oxford: University Press, 1986), p. 208.

8. See Hunt, p. 4.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 147-150.

10. For example, when French control ended in Saint Domingue, Cuba became the great sugar mill of the Americas serving particularly U.S. interest and capital. See also C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1963), p. 25.

11. David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Color and National Independence in Haiti* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 3.

12. In addition to those already mentioned, other works are Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d'Haiti*. 3 vols. (Port-au-Prince: Edmond Chenet, 1992); James G. Leyburn, *The Haitian People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941); David Geggus's "The Haitian Revolution," in Franklin W. Knight and Colin Palmer, *The Modern Caribbean* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1989), pp. 21-50, as well as Patrick Bellegarde-Smith's "Haitian Social Thought in the Nineteenth Century: Class Formation and Westernization," *Caribbean Studies* 20:1 (March 1980), 5-33.

13. Dupuy, p. 76.

14. Textbooks consulted for this article were:

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Chambers, Mortimer, et al., *The Western Experience: The Modern Era*, vol. III. 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991).

Chodorow, Stanley, et al., *The Mainstream of Civilization*. 6th ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1994).

Greaves, Richard L., et al., *Civilization of the West. From 1600 to the Present*, vol. II. (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

Harrison, John B. et al., *A Short History of Western Civilization. Since 1600*, vol. II. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990).

Hirschfeld, Charles and Edgar E. Knoebel, eds., *Classics of Western Thought: The Modern World*, vol. III, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980).

Kagan, Donald, et al, *The Western Heritage*, vol. II. 3rd. ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1987).

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Stavrianos, L. S., *The World since 1500*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1988).

Weber, Eugene, *The Western Tradition*, vol. II, 4th ed. (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1990).

Willis, F. Roy, *Western Civilization*, vol. II. 4th ed. (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1985).

Winks, Robin W., *A History of Civilization: Prehistory to the Present*. Combined Volume, 8th ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1992).

15. Of the above list, Burns, Chambers, Kagan, McKay, Palmer, and Winks have information pertaining the Haitian Revolution.