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The Haitian Revolution: Redefining Concepts And History

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Abstract

The Haitian Revolution was the first successful slave revolt against the European colonial power. Called the “Pearl of the Antilles”, the island was the emblem of the wealth of the French empire: it was the most productive and profitable of the American continent. The creation of the state of Haiti was a long process consisting of violence, exploitation and denial of rights; however, from these elements, the black sovereignty arose and affirmed, proving to be able to impose itself and challenge the white sovereignty. The Haitian revolution showed that the emancipation of slaves was possible. The Haitian people were the expression of multiple identities that were capable of being cohesive and united: the black slaves had the courage to oppose the colonial rule and, thus, gained independence.

After more than 200 years from these events, the relevance of its concepts is disarming: began about three decades ago with the Subaltern Studies, the debate continues to occupy a relevant space among scholars from all over the world.

This thesis redefines the concepts and history of the Haitian revolution with the purpose of giving the right importance to this extraordinary and unique event, too often forgotten by historiography. Giving a voice to those who for centuries had no choice but to accept the silence of the world community means to question all beliefs and ideals of entire communities.

Keywords: Haitian Revolution, sovereignty, decolonialism, history.

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Introduction

For a long time, the Haitian revolution had been neglected by the traditional categorization of history, being considered a marginal product of the French Revolution. In the Age of Revolution, mistakenly, much attention has been paid to the French and American revolutions. However, in the last decades, the Haitian Revolution has been the subject of numerous studies that have reinterpreted it as a key event in the modern world. Haiti's international visibility and understanding of its specific contribution to Atlantic history have become particularly evident and fruitful processes: Haiti acquired a prominent and sometimes controversial role in the academic, political, literary and cultural world. Scholars argued that this event had such a force to redefine political, social and economic relations: new alternatives to the dominant modernity are discovered, revealing historical trajectories.

This fascinating approach overcame concepts such as that of the “history written by the winners” and highlights the mechanisms that led to the silencing of the past: on one side, it silenced the voices of the defeated; on the other side, it brought to light the difficulties of the dominant groups in coming to terms with the past. Therefore, this interpretation embodies a sense of hope and vindication of the rights of the Black People.

This dissertation has the purpose of examining the events and the outcomes of the Haitian Revolution, which took place between 1789 and 1805. The analysis of political thought that is proposed here aims to redefine concepts and history from “another” point of view, which had been silenced for centuries.

The Haitian Revolution is collocated in history as the successful slave revolt against the occidental and colonial powers that marked the fundamental rupture with the past. This event is deeply entwined not only with slavery, race and colonialism, but most important with the occidental world. It was the key to find out new concepts of history. In my mind, it can be compared to Pandora’s vase: inside of this, there are infinite new points of view. In the last thirty years, historiography had rediscovered this subject thanks to a new wave of the Subaltern Studies, which Guha and Spivak (1989) defined subaltern as “a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society

whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way”¹.

Authors, such as James, Trouillot and Fischer, had explored these new conceptual frameworks concluding that the Haitian Revolution must have been thought of as a simultaneous and complementary phenomenon of the European revolutions, with its characteristics and uniqueness. The previous historiography had conceived the Haitian Revolution as a phenomenon inspired by the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity of the French Revolution, written in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789.

However, in this work, it will be explained the “other” point of view that highlighted the event as an independent fact, not resulting from the Enlightenment, but which had important consequences in the rest of the world’s history, especially on the occidental sphere. A comparison between the Haitian Revolution and the French Revolution is needed to fully understand the values of the historical happenings: these two events had a clear reference and connection.

The paper is divided into three chapters: the first presents Haiti's historical, social and political context before the outbreak of the revolts; the second concerns the analysis of the research question; the third explores the outcomes and the legacies of the revolution. In particular, it was considered appropriate to start this work from a historic contextualization, framing the protagonists and the places where the event took shape. Originally Spanish territory, the western part of the island formally became a French dominion in 1697, acquiring the name of Saint Domingue. In less than a century, the economy of this area was the most productive and profitable of the American continent: for this reason, the island took the nickname of 'Pearl of the Antilles', becoming the nerve centre of the occidental plantation system based on the work of enslaved Africans. Haitian society was characterized by a complex and articulated social stratification that reflected the heterogeneity of the island. The social division was based on race and the process of racialization of slavery was triggered: a clash of sovereignties broke out,

¹ Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Oxford University Press Inc, 1989, preface, p. 35.

leading to the subversion of the colonial order. Thus, a colonial modernity began to take shape from “interstices of domination”².

In the second chapter, the research question is addressed: is the Haitian revolution to be interpreted as a radical Enlightenment or is it the result of conceptual originality of the thought of black revolutionaries, in conflict with European colonialism? What made this revolution so unique and incomparable to the others? Inconsistency and disambiguities are presented with respect to modern political concepts such as freedom, equality, nation and, above all, sovereignty. In the peculiar case of the Haitian revolution, what makes these events of caesura truly unique are the question of race and the figure of the slave, which until now had never presented themselves in these disruptive terms. It becomes difficult to analyse political thought from a methodological and an epistemological point of view: Fischer defined the study of the Haitian Revolution “multidimensional” because it required “to be tracked in the patterns of collective obsessions, in individual responses, misrepresentations, and fantasies”³.

The in-depth study made by Tomba, in his book *Insurgent Universality*, depicts the Revolution as revealing of “other possible pathways of modernization that were linked to other traditions within and outside the West”⁴. He examined French Revolution’s principles that inspired the Black Revolution, highlighting how they were appropriated and transformed by the Haitian population. The conceptual section is followed by a pragmatic part: the analysis of the figure of Toussaint Louverture and the 1805 Declaration of Independence shows the implementation of the principles of the Revolution, between lights and shadows.

In the third and last chapter, the consequences of the proclamation of Independence are highlighted. The first steps of the new State were not easy: even after the new Emperor Dessalines reiterated that slavery was abolished forever, the economy of the new nation was very fragile. Harshly criticised, Dessalines renamed the nation with Haiti, the ancient name of the island given by the indigenous Amerindian population, the Tainos: his intention was to eliminate all traces of the colonizer, breaking down any differences

² Anthony Bogues, *Empire of Liberty: Power, Desire, and Freedom*, Hanover, University of New England Press, 2010, pp. 30-37

³ Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed, Haiti And The Cultures Of Slavery In The Age Of Revolution*, Duke University Press, Durham London, 2004, introduction, p.134.

⁴ Massimiliano Tomba, *Insurgent Universality: An Alternative Legacy of Modernity*, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 42.

in people's colour-based hierarchy and using the generic term “black” to indicate every Haitian citizen. The response of the European power was to deal with Haiti cautiously, considering that the situation that had originated was truly one of a kind. However, the Haitian people proved to be united even though the crises, diseases and internal struggles had led to great turmoil on the island. The great determination of the black people expanded to the coasts of the other colonies of the Caribbean: especially Cuba turned out to be a very interesting case study. The extraordinary nature of Haitian history also reaches Western European culture, questioning even its strongest beliefs.

The main results of this work are summarised in the conclusion, explaining how the concepts of freedom, sovereignty and modernity assume different meanings, in relation to the spatial and political dimension of Haiti. Indeed, many contradictions highlighted by scholars and historians do not permit to have a shared and unique position. However, they agree that the influence of the French Revolution was a key factor. The traditional ideal of equality, fraternity and freedom are reinterpreted by a new category which has always been excluded, the Black slaves. Moreover, the lack of direct sources of the colonized remains an insurmountable problem: the events in Haiti, in fact, are overwhelmed by an imaginary component that is difficult to divide from history and political thought. Finally, some considerations are reported with the aim of giving the right value to an event as fascinating as that of the Haitian revolution.

Chapter I

“Multicolour Island”

1. The Haitian Revolution: framing the context

From the arrival of Christopher Columbus on the near island of San Salvador, Haiti was a dominion of the Spanish government. Originally, the entire territory was named Hispaniola and it was considered a safe place for European criminals and fugitives. With the Treaty of Ryswick between Spain and France in 1697, the French domination formally started in the western part and the island took the double denomination, respectively, in French with the name of *Saint-Domingue* and in Spanish, of *Santo Domingo*, by the name of the main city and its patron saint. But the future of the island would have not been the same. The eastern part of the island remained a Spanish colony until 1821, but, after a series of revolts, it declared independence and it was simply renamed *República Dominicana* (Dominican Republic), as it is still called today. On the contrary, after the Haitian revolution, the western part was called “Haiti”, which was the original name of the island’s region given by the indigenous Amerindian population, the Tainos. This radical change of the toponym is the only case that ever happened in a Caribbean colony when achieving independence⁵. Essentially, this comparison in the denomination of the two areas of the island is relevant to highlight because it permits to distinguish and, at the same time, to compare the history and the influences that occurred in this particular area of Central America. San Domingo was used to referring to the whole island, even though there were present two different dominations and two different cultures, that of France and Spain: it is inevitable that also the toponymy of the island changed so radically and brutally.

In less than a century, the economy of this area was the most productive and profitable of the American continent: for this reason, the island took the nickname of 'Pearl of the Antilles'. It became the nerve centre of the occidental plantation system based on the

⁵ David Geggus, *The naming of Haiti*, New West Indian Guide/ Nieuwe West-Indische Gids 71, 1997, p. 43.

work of enslaved Africans, in particular the first producer in the agro-manufacturing complex of coffee and sugar plantation. The efficiency of the production system was notably due to the brutality and violence that the plantation owners exercised on the black slaves: this new method of reaching great profits will pave the way to the success of the modern capitalistic industry.

Against the capturing in the African lands and the cruel system of the plantation owners, the black slavers tried to resist continuously. C. L. R. James (1989) reported that “Contrary to the lies that have been spread so pertinaciously about Negro docility, the revolts at the port of embarkation and on board were incessant, so that the slaves had to be chained, right hand to right leg, left hand to left leg, and attached in rows to long iron bars”.⁶ Although treated like animals, the author continued, “they remained, despite their black skins and curly hair, quite invincibly human beings; with the intelligence and resentments of human beings. To cow them into the necessary docility and acceptance necessitated a regime of calculated brutality and terrorism, and it is this that explains the unusual spectacle of property owners apparently careless of preserving their property: they had first to ensure their own safety.”⁷ The mechanisms contrived by the slaves to achieve freedom were many: they resorted to practice sabotage of agricultural production, individual or collective outrush and armed revolts. However, the most used and extreme method was poisoning: not only the owners and the cattle but even committing suicide and homicide to their people, including infanticide. This attitude was seen by the whites as uncontrollable which sharpened the atrocities and harshness against the slaves. The plantation owners, for their part, could do little to oppose these kinds of rebellions.

Therefore, in this environment, very profound cohesion was favoured among the African populations deported on the island: despite diverse languages and backgrounds, they were united by feelings of hatred and desire for freedom. From the contacts among the slaves, a new sense of belonging was forged that was concretized in aspects of everyday life such as the creolization of the languages and the rituals of the Voodoo

⁶ Cyril Lionel Robert James, *The Black Jacobins, Toussaint L 'Ouvverture And The San Domingo Revolution*, first published 1938, revised edition 1963, Random House, Inc., p. 8.

⁷ Ivi, pp. 11-12.

religion. The new hybrid language is a French-based language, which is now one of the official languages of the State. It is characterized by elements of West African languages and a simplified spelling, closer to the French spoken language⁸. As concerning the religion, Buck Morss (2009) described it as a “public religion as well as a secret society. (...) given the need to communicate visually when common language was lacking, emblems, secret signs, mimetic performance, and ritual were fundamental”⁹. It was the fusion of elements drawn from the African cults and from the Catholic culture, defined as “open and additive, rather than hierarchically closed”¹⁰. The moment in which the slaves were reunited, after the work in the plantation, favoured forms of organisation and protest. Inevitably, these features created radical divisions with the white, European owners, which led to the revolution.

1.1 Clash of sovereignties: the complexity of the social stratification

Haiti’s social stratification was characterised by a very complex and articulated composition. A multiracial society inevitably hides conflictual interests inside of it. The situation on the island began to change in the XVIII century when the population grew exponentially and the great request for labour force in the plantations led the French owners to increase the slave trade in order to make up for the high rate of mortality among the black inhabitants.

Dealing with the concept of belonging to a group, a community and, afterwards, to a nation means dealing with the concept of division among individuals, which inevitably leads to the creation of conflicts that turn into a struggle for sovereignty. In political theory with authors like Hobbes and Locke, the modern concept of sovereignty is defined as the one and the only recognized entity that held power in a given territory. It is composed of three fundamental elements, sealed in the social contract: such authority

⁸ Jacques L. Bonenfant, *History Of Haitian-Creole: From Pidgin To Lingua Franca And English Influence On The Language*, Florida Memorial University, USA, 2011, pp. 27-34.

⁹ Susan Buck Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and the Universal History*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 2009, p. 126.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

is assigned to a body which can be an institution or a person; it is confined to a specific geographical region; the exercise of this power is accepted by the people.

Chignola (2021) explained the epistemological turn that brought a conceptual revolution of history itself. When he focused the attention on sovereignty, he underlined that “as a boundary concept, sovereignty ceaselessly floats between the material results it produces and the fear that these results could be abruptly revoked, once the truth effect of the procedures that empower it (and which, from time to time, it has empowered) breaks down”. In the Haitian society, the people did not choose nor accept being ruled by the French authorities. He continued, “the political order that the state achieves through the irresistibility of its dominion – resulting from its modern juridification between absolutism and French revolutionary constitutionalism – must indeed remove violence and power by disguising them as a general will that belongs to no one insofar as it is authorised by each and every one. It thus works only as long as the narratives in which it is condensed and crystallised are able to reproduce themselves, thus obliterating the partiality that in fact characterises them”¹¹. The Haitian population subverted the colonial order because two sovereignties can not live together: there can be only one sovereign state.

The clash of sovereignties is based on the evolution of the concept of race and the process of racialization of slavery, according to which the black men and women and their descendants were dehumanized by not granting rights, guilty of belonging to an inferior race. Buck Morss (2009) paid attention to the conceptual framework that the Europeans have created in order to differentiate them from the “black, non-Christian, poor, inferior” category. “Europeans built conceptual barriers of difference in the form of spatial distinctions between nation and colonies, a racialized distinction of Negro slavery, and legal distinctions as to the protection of persons, in order to segregate free Europe from colonial practices”. She also cited Eric Williams that, in 1944, wrote: “Slavery was not born of racism; rather, racism was the consequence of slavery”¹².

¹¹ Sandro Chignola, *Homo homini tigris: Thomas Hobbes and the global images of sovereignty*, Philosophy and Social Criticism Journal, 2021, p. 3.

¹² Buck Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and the Universal History*, cit., p. 90.

The conflict between races was open, starting from the practical aspects of everyday life to the theoretical principles that can be found in the regulations and laws (the Negro code). The configuration of the society appeared to be extremely conflictual: few people held power and poverty was widespread; this setting generated a war of all against all. On the island coexisted two contexts: one of the plantations and one of the towns. The former was characterised by a large stretch of cultivated fields governed by the white owner and a close and restricted group of people; the latter was more open and dynamic, especially Port-au-Prince, the capital, and Cap François, ruled by a Governor and an Intendant with the contribution of the bureaucracy.

As reported by Clark et al. (2010), “On the eve of the revolution in France, St. Domingue had a population of about 32,000 from France, 24,000 freedmen of mixed blood, and nearly 500,000 African slaves”.¹³ In a nutshell, at the beginning of 1789, the population was composed of about 6 per cent of French citizens (*grand* and *petit blancs*), about 4 per cent of free people of colour (*gens de couleur* or mulattoes), and the rest 90 per cent were black slaves, (creoles or, most of all, *bossales*, term that refers to those slaves born in Africa).

1.1.1 Grand and petit blancs

The *grand blancs* (big whites) were the most privileged and wealthy, identifiable in the figures of the owners of the plantations, the great merchants or the colonial government officials. They were flanked by the small whites, or *petit blancs*: this categorization included stewards or administrators of the plantation (especially when the masters were absent), sailors, lawyers, merchants, artisans and clerks which filled the roles needed for the proper managing of towns. Between big and small whites could flow bad blood and sometimes these sentiments could lead to insurrections: the governor or the intendant had unlimited power because they considered that “God was too high and the King too far”.

¹³ Clark et al., *Haiti: A Slave Revolution, 200 years after 1804*, International Action Center, New York, 2010, p. 2.

There were also fugitives, vagabonds and adventurers coming from European countries, considered there as outcasts of society. In San Domingo, they found an environment in which they had privileges due to the fact that there was present another inferior class, the black people. James synthesized this social norm in a clear sentence: “No small white was a servant, no white man did any work that he could get a Negro to do for him”¹⁴. The white owner possessed the slaves and their descendants: he was the one who decided their fate because the slaves were not considered persons with legal personality but things.

From a legal point of view, the owner treated the slaves as a good, or thing, which would have been used until it became unprofitable. An attempt to regulate the relationship between the owner and the slave was the Negro Code, enacted in 1685 by Louis XIV. It had the purpose to handle various aspects: from the minimum amount of food to the hours of labour, from the burying of the dead body to the punishment; however, it was poorly applied¹⁵. The principle behind the edict was relatable to the concept of the slave in Roman law (Watson, 1989), in which he was considered in the same manner as a thing (*res* in Latin) and as a person but which possessed only the penal responsibility. The aim was to impose the colonial power and limit the freedom of the slave. Any attempt of rebelling or of escaping was punished severely.

1.1.2 Freed black men, les gens de couleur libres and the maroons

Dealing with the social, political and juridical positions of people of colour is another complicated matter. The terminology used in the historical sources often varied in the categorization of classes and, for this reason, still exist very numerous denominations for the same group of people, which might lead to misunderstanding. In the European colonies, when referring to the free black or mixed races men’s social positions, a series of peculiar classifications had taken place based on different approaches.

¹⁴ James, *The Black Jacobins, Toussaint L ’Ouverture And The San Domingo Revolution*, cit., pp. 33-35.

¹⁵ Ivi, pp. 11-12.

In the hierarchical society of San Domingo, just under the big and small whites, there was another heterogeneous class of free men, which represented the powerful force that lit up the sparkle of the revolution: freed black men and *les gens de couleur libres* (free people of colour). The main difference consisted in the way they had gained freedom. The former was freed afterwards a period of being a slave, after for the will of the master; the latter was born free. They were also called *affranchi*, which means "freed" in French, with a pejorative connotation. To a certain extent, the Negro code have given them some of the rights as the whites. They had some rights, such as the right to own land, slaves and commercial activities. They did not possess the right to vote, and so were excluded from political life. However, they had gained relevant positions in numerous sectors and often, were more brilliant than their white peers.

The first category comprehended those black men who were not enslaved anymore: numerically few, they occupied a lower position on the social ladder than the mulattoes slaves because of the darkness of their skin, considered an inferior factor by the French. The second category was composed of people of mixed races (African, European and sometimes Native American). Another denomination was mulatto, a term that indicated those born by the union of black women and white colonists and became free by the age of 24. Initially not victims of prejudices, their being half-white and half-black made them a useful tool in the eyes of the masters to intermediate with the slaves. They were allowed to receive a good education or, at least, travel to France. This factor certainly contributed to the success of the revolution as they began to be aware that they have to fight for their rights and those of their descendants. The marriage was allowed by the Negro Code: this was the opportunity for the slave and her children to be free. With the passing years, they grew in number and in fortune, gaining skills and power¹⁶.

This situation worsened when the white population began to feel threatened by mulattoes. The irritated colonists started policies against them: for example, their freedom depended on the will of the masters, they were obliged to join a special police force (*maréchaussée*) engaged in the fighting of Negroes or were not allowed to wear the European clothes and possess arms and many other restrictions. Under the point of

¹⁶ L. Mauro (Ed.), *Social cohesion and human rights. Reflections on the contemporary society*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2017, p. 167.

view of the law of the French authorities, introducing “racial terminology in the legal sphere was part of the broader progress of racial discrimination during the decades before the Haitian Revolution”¹⁷.

James (1938) reported that the hate of the white community became so strong that they created a sort of classification of the shades of the skin. "The true Mulatto was the child of the pure black and the pure white. The child of the white and the Mulatto woman was a quarteron with 96 parts white and 32 parts black. But the quarteron could be produced by the white and the marabou in the proportion of 88 to 40, or by the white and the sacatra, in the proportion of 72 to 56 and so on all through the 128 varieties. But the sang-mêlé with 127 white parts and 1 black part was still a man of colour". If the whites draw a clear line between them and the other people of colour, mulattoes used the same approach to take the distance from the slaves: in order to get some sort of respect and rights, they always tried to underline the differences between them and the slaves. As a matter of fact, “race prejudice against the Negroes permeated the minds of the Mulattoes who so bitterly resented the same thing from the whites”. James described in this way the hate between the Mulattoes and the black slaves: “even while in words and, by their success in life, in many of their actions, Mulattoes demonstrated the falseness of the white claim to inherent superiority, yet the man of colour who was nearly white despised the man of colour who was only half-white, who in turn despised the man of colour who was only quarter white, and so on through all the shades”¹⁸.

Another category of black people that was crucial for the Revolution was composed of maroons, a term that indicated those slaves that managed to escape. This practice, called marronage, was very common. When Africans were brought to the island by the slavers, some of the boldest refused to become slaves and succeeded to get free from the planters and finding refuge in the northern mountains of the island or in towns where they could find work occupation, especially women. In the mountains, some created fastnesses, reproduced themselves and lived away from the big cities and from the colonists. However, they could be dangerous for the plantations and for the people

¹⁷ Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 61.

¹⁸ James, *The Black Jacobins, Toussaint L 'Ouverture And The San Domingo Revolution*, cit., pp. 38-43.

living there. From time to time, they could decide to live together and appoint a chief. The most famous chief was François Mackandal. His figure was cited by James, Brown and other authors. To him was attributed the audacious idea of uniting all the black people and sending away the whites from the colony. The legend about him narrated that he was a great orator, able to predict the future and he persuaded his followers he was immortal. For almost a decade, he organised attacks of different nature: by poisoning, killing and massacring not only whites and their properties but also disobedient members of his group. He was described by Ferrer (2014) as a “maroon, vodou priest, rebel whose spirit, according to legend, flew off freely just as French authorities were burning his body at the stake”¹⁹. Mackandal was captured and executed in 1758; however, he became legendary and inspired the spirit of the adherents of the Haitian revolution of 1791.

1.1.3 The Slaves

The saddest and more painful faith were that of the slaves. The colonists exploited and deported millions of black people (middle passage): for centuries, they broke the equilibrium among the tribes belonging to a large portion of West African territory, from the most affected Guinea to Angola and, even, Mozambique, on the east coast. However, “in Saint-Domingue, the complexities of African identifications were often simplified and distorted”. The Europeans needed a sort of categorization of the slaves in order to satisfy specific needs in terms of activities to carry out by the slaves; based on the mansion, they choose one group or another. Considering that the origins of the slaves varied a lot, they named them according to the area in which they were captured. For instance, they named “Arada” those slaves who by the port of Allada, then changed in French into Ardra. Or the slaves from the kingdom of Kongo were simply called “Kongo” (or “Congo”): this category of slaves became the most numerous, reaching 40

¹⁹ Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror. Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 343.

per cent of imports and being considered very strong warriors, subsequently very useful to the cause of freeing the island from the white owners²⁰.

The heterogeneity was the principal characteristic of the slaves also under the point of view of their duty: the farmers on the plantations were the poorest but existed also some groups to which were assigned to take care of the manor house as servants, cooks or nurses and, in some cases, also received a rudimentary education (that included the study of French, Latin and geometry). This privileged group of slaves became attached to the white masters, betraying their people. It is interesting and noteworthy that, among the poorer slaves, it was not present the necessity or the will to separate themselves into community groups: they self-represented themselves as a united people, the «black» or «African» people. Anyway, every revolution needs a leader, so they used to their advantage the fact that some of them had gained a popular and prominent position and achieved the success of the revolts²¹.

Apart from nationality, the slaves were distinguished into two categories: bossales and creoles. The bossales were slaves born in Africa, captured and then transported in Haiti by the slavers, living a traumatic experience as exposed previously in this chapter. A famous bossale was the father of Toussaint Louverture, who was a former chief of an African tribe and had the privilege to gain freedom and be educated by his benevolent master.

The creoles were born in Saint Domingue and were able to create a new culture and a new language. Trouillot coined the expression “the miracle of creolization” explaining how black men and women under circumstances of extreme poverty and violence triggered a process of catharsis and freedom, through new forms of art, music and religion, which expanded from small plantations in the Caribbean to New Orleans, in North America. He wrote that “the Antilles alone suffice as exemplars of the repeated wonder: in relation to their size, the Caribbean islands have given birth to an impressive array of individuals who [have] left their intellectual mark on the international scene”. He also underlined that “the real achievement is that of the anonymous men and women

²⁰ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, cit., pp. 40-41.

²¹ David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 224-226.

who have woven, along the centuries, in spite of slavery and other forms of domination, the cultural patterns upon which rest the highly individualized performances of the intellectuals”²².

Gérard Barthélemy, a French anthropologist, claimed the existence of the two strands, writing about the tensions that arose between them: once came into contact with each other, the bossales faced up creolization and differentiated themselves from the creoles; the new creoles had the same approach and opposed themselves from those creolized prior to 1794²³.

The Haitian slaves were completely excluded from social, political and economic life. Moreover, they were considered genderless, without conscience or dignity, as they were conceptualized as belonging to the animal sphere than the human race. The processes of "objectification", "dehumanization" and "animalization" that developed on the Caribbean Island were very peculiar. It was intertwined with four factors: firstly, the traumatic Atlantic trade; secondly, the extreme exploitation in the plantation system; thirdly and closely related, the maintenance of this system; and lastly, the European concept of private property applied to human beings.

1.2 The rebellion of the blacks and the breaking of the colonial order

In the spring of 1789, *les gens de couleur libres* started the mobilisation against the colonial power, a few months before the convocation of the *Estates General* on 5 May of the same year. The restrictions against mulattoes had increased exponentially and the situation had become exasperating and unacceptable towards them. African descent was an indelible mark, the mulattos were excluded from any public office and could no longer practice professions, possess weapons or keep the father's surname. Moreover, they were no longer allowed freedom of movement towards France. Masonic societies, bodies dedicated to politics, philosophy and literature, were therefore in turmoil and had

²² Michel-Rolph Trouillot et al., *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures, Culture on the Edges: Caribbean Creolization in Historical Context*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2002, p. 191.

²³ Gérard Barthélemy, *Créoles - bossales: conflit en Haïti*, Petit-Bourg: Ibis rouge, Guadeloupe, 2000.

begun a debate against slavery, reaching England, the United States and France. The most influential was the *Société des Amis des Noirs*, founded in Paris in 1788, by the journalist Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville. Along the lines of the English societies, it supported the French abolitionists for the suppression of the Atlantic slave trade and the abolition of slavery. Brissot came into contact with the antislavery movement already active in the British and American territories. Among the supporters, there were important figures such as Condorcet, which had proposed to the french public a thesis for the gradual abolition of slavery. When Louis XVI convened for the election of representatives for the *Estates General* (a consultative body that had the purpose of finding a solution to the financial crisis of the crown and the American Revolution), the *Société* had the opportunity to carry out its aim of presenting the anti-slavery cause to the assembly through the speech of the liberal minister of the king, Jacques Necker, to eliminate subsidies of the slave traders.

A stopping point occurred in June when a group of French planters met in Paris in order to invoke reforms and the creation of a colonial assembly in Saint Domingue. Some had recognized the important role they played for the French economy and its glory and suggested that they were entitled to have a representation in the *Estates General*; others opposed because of the bad implications that this choice would have if the French planters and owners had more power. The status quo would have been put in great danger. After about a month of discussions about citizenship, rights and the morality of slavery, it was concluded that the representatives of the colonies could be included and the fixed number for the colony of Saint Domingue was six, but no rights were granted to the mulattoes. Albeit “discussion of slavery and the slave trade was effectively tabled in the assembly”, the *Société* was defeated by the most powerful “legislator of the colony” Moreau de Saint-Mery (also the founder of the Club de l’Hôtel de Massiac, that had the aim of defending the interests of the white planters) and “saddled with a powerful accusation: that its activities might set in motion another, much more dangerous, revolution in the colonies”²⁴.

The situation changed in a few weeks, the French Revolution began with the storming of the Bastille. On the 26th August 1789, was proclaimed the Declaration of the Rights

²⁴ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, cit., pp. 72-76.

of Man and of the Citizen, applicable in France and in the colonies. The first article stated that “men are born and remain equal in rights”: this principle was perceived by the members of the Club Massiac as an enormous threat for the future of France because it posed the white man and the black man on the same level. They began to limit and ban the, already few, accesses to black men and women in France, afraid of an immediate spread of these principles in the overseas possessions. However they could do little “to prevent information and people from moving across the Atlantic, many whites responded with excitement to the revolutionary changes”²⁵.

In the summer of the same year, another organisation, called *Société des Colons Américains*, was created by the mulatto Vincent Ogé to influence the National Assembly: with Julien Raimond, they appeared in the assembly to present a petition and ask for the granting of the right to vote to mulattoes, opposing Club Massiac. The political action of the black men, therefore, proposed a reform of the colonial order aimed at re-establishing the distinction between free and slave-based on racial inequalities. At this point, *Société des Colons Américains* and *Société des Amis des Noirs* joined forces to achieve an even greater goal: universality of citizenship, equality for all nonwhites and freedom for mulatto slaves.

In Saint Domingue, the response of the French owners and bourgeoisie was to create the Colonial Assembly, in order to contrast the actions of the French National Assembly and King Louis XVI. In a new decree on 8 March 1790, France recognized the Haitian Assembly, granting legislative powers but leaving the mulatto question unresolved and unregulated. In this situation, a group of them, called Léopardins, took advantage of the instability to gain local control of the economy. They formed a different assembly, named Assembly of Saint-Marc, a province in the northwest, and proclaimed themselves autonomous, with its own constitutional laws and extreme reforms, affirming that mulattoes are a “bastard and degenerate race”, not worthy of having rights. The question was resolved when, in October 1790, the French National Assembly dissolved the Assembly of Saint-Marc, by the action of the governor of Saint Domingue’s armed forces. The colony was then divided between royalists and patriots; both groups court mulattoes’ support. Hearing about the turmoil, Ogé decided to go to

²⁵ Ivi, p. 77.

Saint Domingue together with Jean-Baptiste Chavannes, a free black man and veteran of the French forces, to organize an armed insurrection, which was soon repressed by the white coloners' army and they were condemned to the wheel torture and then hanged. Their sacrifice, however, was not in vain as they became an indelible symbol in the memory of the free mulattos. Also, the black slaves had learned of the facts in Paris and in France; most of all they caught very well the spirit that inspired the French Revolution: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity²⁶. In the meantime, in France, the debate on mulattoes and free blacks was re-opened and, in mid-May 1791, a fragile compromise was reached: the first decree dealt with the constitutionality of slavery, delegating to the colonial assembly all future decisions about the statute of "non-free people"; the second decree granted the active citizenship to mulatto owners, on condition that both the parents were born free. Although a conservative act, the colonists were infuriated and tried to subvert the decision by re-electing the body without the participation of free blacks and mulattoes. At this point, the people of Haiti rose up²⁷.

On the 22nd August 1791, the Haitian Revolution started: after weeks of preparations, it began when a group of upper-strata slaves gathered at Bois-Calman, in the northern area of the island, near Cap-Français. The myth about that night narrated that the signal was launched by the Jamaican-born leader, Dutty Boukman, after the traditional voodoo ceremony, in the presence of the other leaders and a mambo, a voodoo high priestess with green eyes and long black hair. With the signal, all the plantations of the northern part were set on fire. The leaders of the movement were Boukman, Jeannot Bullet, Jean-François and Georges Biassou: the first two were essential for the initial stages; the other two were to take over the command of the revolts once it was in progress. Fick (1991) supposed that the organisation had happened through "an incredibly vast network (...) and facilitated by the interaction of several elements. These were African, as well as creole, and included the dynamics of marronage, as well as the subversive activities of commandeurs and of house slaves, and even a restricted segment of the free blacks (Toussaint was himself a free black), whose mobility and closer relationship to

²⁶ James, *The Black Jacobins, Toussaint L 'Ouverture And The San Domingo Revolution*, cit., pp. 67-75

²⁷ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, cit., p. 120.

white society afforded them access to news and information on the political situation”²⁸. The voice of the black people was heard very well and it was louder than ever.

In the next days, the slaves continued to move from a district to another, in the west and to Port-Margot, burning plantations, seizing power and murdering white people and those blacks who did not espouse the cause of the rebellion. After the fall of the capital city, Le Cap, the rebellious acts continued until mid-September, becoming more organised and effective. The French troops found themselves completely unprepared for the guerrilla warfare, proving to be unaware of the organisational capabilities of the slaves.

The tension seemed to subside when on September 21, 1791, the Colonial Assembly at Saint Marc recognized the decree of May 15 and granted citizenship to mulattoes and free blacks. However, after strong complaints from the white settlers, the decree was revoked and three commissioners were appointed to restore the order in San Domingo. The wrath of the black people was awakened and this involved more destruction and death: in the capital of the South, Port-au-Prince, the black revolutionaries cut all the supplies; Le Cap was burnt to the ground. The island became a pile of rubble and debris²⁹.

Finally, on the 28th, the Assembly ensured amnesty to all free people in Saint Domingue accused of “acts of revolution” but the struggle did not stop. In this context, a new leader was starting to make his way into the movement: Toussaint Louverture, a young freed black, would prove that he was capable of leading the successful revolution in the following years.

After Boukman's death, the rebels were hesitating about how to proceed and asked to negotiate with the colonists: they were demanding to improve the quality of life on the plantations in exchange for the release of the prisoners. At the end of 1790, the Colonial Assembly refused to yield to the requests of the slaves so the war continued. Their resistance bore its fruits when Louis XVI granted political rights to free blacks and

²⁸ Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti. The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*, The University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, first edition 1991, revisited in 2004, pp. 91-95.

²⁹ Ivi, pp. 105-108.

mulattoes in Saint-Domingue with the so-called Jacobin decree of April 4, 1792, and a second commission was convened, supervised by Léger Félicité Sonthonax and Etienne Polverel, to enforce the ruling. They affirmed that they did not have the intention of abolishing slavery but “recognize only two classes of men in the French part of Saint Domingue: free men without any distinction of color, and slaves”³⁰.

However, the now Governor Sonthonax had to come to terms with the angry white supporters of the monarchy (France was declared a Republic) agitated by the former Governor Galbaud: in order to fight the French counter-revolutionaries, he recruited free blacks and slaves in the course of Cap-Francois battle, ended up with the burning of the city and the flight to the United States of thousands of white colonists and of the governor. Facing the impossibility of bringing the African rebels to order on 29 August 1793, Sonthonax conceded emancipation to the slaves of the northern province. Without choice, Polverel extended the emancipation to the whole colony and, with the decree of 4 February 1794, to all the dominions of France. African slaves were formally included in the nation and in the citizenship rights.

1.3 A colonial modernity

The rebellious actions of the black people triggered the creation of a new dimension made of principles, beliefs and individuals. Anthony Bogues (2010) used the expression of «colonial modernity» indicating that “there is a dialectic of freedom that emerges not from the liberal tradition and its double structure but out of the interstices of domination. This practice of freedom disrupts normalized imperial liberty. It is a form of freedom in which there is a poiesis of life with no foreclosures”. The European, occidental, white order was subverted and a new form of freedom erupted with violence. From this rupture, «racial slavery created a situation of civil death (...), a

³⁰ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, cit., pp. 141-144.

legal, ontological, site of the outside, a zone in which the treatment of bodies with violence rested upon laws, customs, and statutes»³¹.

Violence and racism were the two principles adopted by the white sovereignty to create dominion over the black one. Césaire (1955) highlighted that the export of European "civilization" to the colonies had been a process of "decivilization" and "dehumanization", both of black and of white people. Under this situation, "even the most civilized man, in a colonial activity, (...), which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal". He described it as a boomerang effect of colonization³².

In the next chapter, it will be explored how the powerful actions of the slaves produced an overturn of the spatial and racial hierarchy created by the white domination and French revolutionary thought, according to which freedom would be exported and gradually spread from the center of the revolution to the colonial peripheries. On the contrary, the political subject who put an end to slavery with the force of arms was the black people of San Domingo.

³¹ Anthony Bogues, *Empire of Liberty: Power, Desire, and Freedom*, Hanover, cit., pp. 30-37.

³² Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on colonialism*, originally published as *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Présence Africaine, translated by Joan Pinkham, 1955, pp. 35-41.

Chapter II

“A radical Enlightenment or the product of its originality?”

2. An open debate between inconsistency and disambiguation

Studying and delving into the causes of the Haitian revolution reveal inconsistencies and disambiguities, of which many scholars still wonder what their matrix was. Deepening the discourse on the Haitian insurgencies must make us reflect not only on the course of those peculiar events but also on the principles behind them, declared as universal but which in reality are not so universal. It is very interesting to see how the debate on the Haitian revolution has developed in recent years: it involves all modern political concepts such as freedom, citizenship, equality, nation and, above all, sovereignty. In general, what characterizes revolutions concerns power struggles and violence. In the peculiar case of the Haitian revolution, what makes these events of caesura truly unique are the question of race and the figure of the slave, which until now had never presented themselves in these disruptive terms.

The central questions that arise spontaneously are: is, therefore, the Haitian revolution to be interpreted as a radical Enlightenment or is it the result of conceptual originality of the thought of black revolutionaries, in conflict with European colonialism? What made this revolution so unique and incomparable to the others? In this chapter, we will therefore deal with such issue in order to develop the research questions.

Defining the political thought of the Haitian revolution is very complex as it raises questions that are still open. The two most debated aspects regard methodological and epistemological issues. In this framework, the numerous protagonists involved in the struggle pursue a purpose that is often intertwined with the objectives of other groups of the population but which equally often clash. In fact, we will see how conflicting and even surprising political formations will arise from alliances and enmities. Two were the main conflicts within the revolution: the former concerned the revolutionary elite

and the peasant majority; the latter was endogenous of the elite itself, that is, among the free blacks that held high positions in the army and free mulattoes, mostly plantations owners. From these power struggles a debate was born that still animates many historiographical perspectives today, particularly history from below and Subaltern Studies.

A critical aspect that does not allow us to have solid and shared knowledge is the question of the sources since we can only know about the speech of the colonized through the colonizer's one, according to the Subaltern Studies approach. Above all, what is missing is the word of the black working woman. The only sources we have access to nowadays are mainly unofficial documents such as direct ones from the colonial press, announcements and a few other proclamations or letters.

It is necessary to emphasize that the black slaves were mostly illiterate and therefore incapable of writing and leaving a durable testimony over time. The most widespread language was Creole, essentially an oral language, that was used by many leaders, including Toussaint Louverture. The importance of spreading a common language and popular practices was essential for the end of slavery in Santo Domingo. Fischer (2004) noted that Fick insisted a lot on this characteristic because the lack of official written documentation must not “justify a wholesale import of European revolutionary motivations for explanatory purpose”³³. Citing her words in *The Making of Haiti*, “the categorization of ‘modern’, if taken in an exclusive sense, would tend to camouflage the dynamic nature and revolutionary role of cultural diversity”. The risk of categorizing the Haitian revolution according to the Western concept of modernity is high. In this analysis, to understand the point of view of people with different origins and social dynamics, particular attention is required with regard to concepts such as sovereignty, modernity, history and nation.

Fischer (2004) described her study conducted on the Haitian revolution as “multidimensional” because it “requires all our hermeneutical skills, and like all

³³ Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed, Haiti And The Cultures Of Slavery In The Age Of Revolution*, cit., introduction, p.15.

hermeneutical work, it takes us outside the realm of what can be proved. It is an impact that needs to be tracked in the patterns of collective obsessions, in individual responses, misrepresentations, and fantasies”. In this peculiar country, “so torn by the effects of colonialism, slavery, and the conflictive and often violent struggles against them, a country where self-determination was so hard to achieve and the idea of nationhood so elusive”³⁴, each tool at disposal are essential to understand all the layers in which the events occurred. It is therefore necessary to interpret all sources that are documented facts and written memories or the result of fantasy and imagination. In the Haitian context, the imaginary component had always been fundamental in everyday life and culture of the black slaves. After each invasion and armed conflict, the Haitian people suffered from an indelible trauma that inevitably created social divisions based on skin colour and blood legitimacy.

Fischer emphasized the importance of not dividing the historical component from the imaginary one since, in this specific case, distinguishing them would lead to a misunderstanding of the events. All the deep traumas caused by the foreign dominations cannot be separated from the past, “but rather (...) events of the past serve as foils for the experience of the present, to the patterns of denial and remembrance that seem to inform present and past choices and expectations”³⁵. The path that the author of the book undertook is more than just focusing on those events categorized as moments that challenged traditional structures, she also specified “why” and “by whom” this was carried out. This is the novelty: it is no longer enough to know that these events did interfere with the course of history but it is crucial that the epistemological causes of history are fully understood.

She compared two very important concepts of history: she dealt with, on the one hand, Walter Benjamin's vision according to which history is catastrophe or trauma; on the other hand, that of Cathy Caruth which explains the general theory according to which history *born* out of the experience of catastrophe, regarding traumas as a component of the historical beings. However, she assessed that this last vision does not allow us to

³⁴ Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed, Haiti And The Cultures Of Slavery In The Age Of Revolution*, cit., p. 134.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 135.

identify the content of historical trauma because the meaning of “historical” remained unexplained. On the contrary, Slavoj Žižek managed to take a step forward in the reasoning of “Repetition in History” by stating that “only in the repetition can the first event be (mis)recognized as necessary”. He continued the logical thinking citing Benjamin’s famous phrase of the “tiger’s leap into the past”, which he interpreted in resemblance to “transference”, under the point of view of a temporal structure. Basically, the rupture that had not acquired a meaning in the past enters the historical process “through a transference reenactment in the present”³⁶.

The concept of revolutionary acts behind Benjamin's famous statement could be understood as the set of those actions that are not recognized in the history of the winners but that, instead, are perceived as states of exception. However, these exceptions have made history. This idea is fully accepted by C. L. R. James who recognizes this powerful force such as turning that Revolution, fought in the past, into something that shakes and splits the present. In this case, recovering the past does not mean guaranteed progress but is seen more as a recovery in the perfect contemporaneity of events which, however distant in time, always reopen history. In the Italian preface of James' book, “The Black Jacobins, Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution”, Chignola (2015) brilliantly explained this passage and all the fundamental characteristics of the revolution, highlighting how contradictions and struggles are critical starting points.

Under the subaltern vision of history, there are multiple subjectivities and, whenever time this happens, new protagonists emerge from the clash. The author points out that in the universal representation of history there is no place for slaves as they are always relegated to a marginal and insignificant role. Modernity always tries to hide this category, constantly resizing it because it perceives the concept of slavery as an external experience of resistance that is marginal to the main events of history. Nevertheless, what for modernity is a state of exception, for the colonial modernity is the focal point that cannot simply vanish. He wrote that defining modernity as racist and Eurocentric is not enough, “the problem is to understand its inherently conflictual nature. Thinking

³⁶ Ivi, pp. 141-142.

about progress, modernity, as the stakes of a clash in which new positions of strength are always redefined and negotiated”³⁷.

Thus a completely new subjectivity is born and to be discovered. Black sovereignty starts to be shaped, extremely intertwined with the problem of race and the figure of the slaves that undoubtedly plays a key role in the process of colonial modernity. It happens that from slavery a new culture is born and a new world evolves around concepts and definitions never seen before. From a social point of view, we are witnessing the birth of a new culture, with a lingua franca (the creole), a common religion (voodoo), a common and very hard discipline of labour (administered through the whip) and a common memory of resistance. From an economic point of view, we observe the creation of a system of plantations based on exploitation and maximization of production.

The black people put in place a process of rupture with the past driven by the need to create autonomous organizations. From this subjective self-determination a series of criticisms arises. On the one hand, it assumes radical forms of Soviet state capitalism linked to the project of “socialism in a single country”, questioning the possibility of a different perspective on history. On the other hand, it becomes an expression of the American revolutionary movement with an anti-colonial function, criticizing the high expectations of black representation based on restricted criteria. C. L. R. James aimed at changing radically any scheme that concerns exclusion and representation: he expressed and explored those projects of insurgency and subjectivation, as well as considering the ordinary vital dimension of black people, in their daily life of resistance to foreign domination and exploitation. For James, history actually advances just when the upper classes of civilization come together as equals with the lower ones, composing a single and new social class.

³⁷ “Il problema è comprendere la sua natura intrinsecamente conflittuale. Pensare il progresso, la modernità, come la posta in gioco di uno scontro in cui vengono sempre ridefinite e contrattate nuove posizioni di forza.” - Preface of Sandro Chignola, Cyril Lionel Robert James, *I giacobini neri: la prima rivolta contro l'uomo bianco*, translated by Raffaele Petrillo, DeriveApprodi, 2015, p. 2.

In James's conceptualization of history, the key word is “immanent contradiction”, since history is not a plain sequence of facts. The subject and its establishment grow together with the struggles. James is aware that, if to a certain extent, the process of subjectivation and resistance of the slave started growing on the ships during the Middle passage, the black and exploited worker was an “authentic social product” of the American work organization and of the class relations that constituted them. From this interpretation, it appears that there is no way to break this form of power except through a total and universal revolution. Slaves, in fact, unleashed rebellions and used the practice of marronage, constantly trying to rebel against this system: so was the sovereignty of the black people born, giving birth to a new lexicon and discourse on rights and equality.

In a spatial dimension to be defined such, freedom is conceived in a universal way that goes beyond territorial boundaries. In the framework of the Haitian Revolution, freedom could not just be regarded as an exercise of citizenship rights. First, this freedom needed to be perceived by the individuals, by the human beings themselves, therefore applied to men as such. Throughout history, we have witnessed the struggle for freedom in different forms, located in different geographical contexts, with very different political, social, cultural and economic conditions. Black men were responsible for identifying a positive authority that would transform the community into a nation-State, with its own forms of control over the subjects, whilst granting, at the same time, citizens' rights. Achieving freedom was very complicated because the slaves had to find the right compromise. There was, in fact, a very strong debate on which best political and legal form of sovereignty for the black people ought to be developed. Initially, they started occupying and controlling the territory, pursuing the goal of obtaining national independence. Once this was attained, they constituted a new state.

However, this view hid an inner contradiction: although these steps were seen as necessary for freedom, at the same time, these would also constitute a limit to a full de-colonization because they were just a reproduction of a typically western process, belonging to the white colonizers. The black community needed a state with an unlimited spatial dimension, considering the global conception of the racial conflict.

Hence, freedom is not perceived as a status, that is the condition inherent to a juridical personality, but as the possibility of deciding one's own existence, so it is a freedom that can only be achieved collectively, given the structural nature of racism³⁸.

When European colonial domination began, a distortion of the unique and linear temporariness typical of European modernity took place. The idea of freedom could not be the same. The desire for freedom was suffocated, firstly, by the plantation system, and, secondly, by segregation. James wrote that: “After having been isolated by slavery in provincial fixity, the runaway traversed national boundaries and oceanic waters”³⁹. He wanted to underline the constant movement to conquer spaces and redesign them that the subjectivity of the slave and of the black worker have always tried to produce. Independence is actually achieved only thanks to this constant struggle by the slaves, never on account of a concession by the whites.

Western civilizations had self-appointed themselves with the role of liberators from backwardness and had become the bearers of principles of freedom and equality towards the black populations of Africa and Latin America, when, instead, they had completely neglected this purpose. In case they had been able to do so, it was not their duty to emancipate the black populations and the people of Santo Domingo proved it: black slaves proved capable not only of freeing themselves from Western civilization but also of subverting their beliefs and codes and turning against them.

The expectations towards the outcome of the Haitian revolution were characterized by contradictions and oppositions. The formation of different approaches was inevitable since the social stratification of the island was very complex: the white colonizers believed they only had the right to representation; the coloured assumed the possibility of advancing the same claims as the white population, without the intention of completely subverting the order of the plantation system from which they benefited as well. Black owners appealed to the principle of ownership with reference to the Decree

³⁸ Angela Y. Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom. And Other Difficult Dialogues*, Introduction by R.D.G. Kelley, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 2012, pp. 4-5.

³⁹ C. L. R. James, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery: Some Interpretations of their Significance in the Development of the United States and the Western World*, «Amistad» I, 1970, p. 259.

of March 1790, which constituted a Haitian assembly and set the electoral rights, without, however, specifying any difference in terms of race. Did black owners had the right to preside at the assembly and obtain the same rights as the whites, including the property one? The French deputies of the National Assembly in Paris had not at all considered the issue of human being property and slavery, as their only concern was to a compromise for the colonies' demand for autonomy, so as to avert a secession from the French Empire. This was the starting point, for the black owners, for the mobilization of the black population and make the revolution in San Domingo break out. In response, the White owners tried to firmly oppose the granting of these rights, in addition to their firm refusal of a possible representation of the free coloured owners.

Only after a couple of months of indecisions, the French authorities intervened clarifying the issue: through a new interpretation, they also acknowledged political rights to people of colour whose birth resulted from the union of parents born free. Many in France and in the colonies perceived this compromise as the prelude to something that could have unleashed irreversible effects all over the French Dominions. Many others did not conceive the slaves as being capable of knowing how to organize themselves since they considered them inferior and without intellect ⁴⁰.

“Cout é la libet é li pal é nan coeur nous tous” (“Listen to the liberty which speaks in the hearts of all of us”)⁴¹. According to the tradition, these were the words pronounced by the Haitian leader, Boukman, just before the first acts of rebellion started in the province of the North, in August 1791. In the period that went by from that night to the proclamation of Independence in 1804, the subjectivity of the slaves was developed in full: both white and black owners had underestimated the strength and desire for freedom of the slaves. Another contradiction occurred: who set the change in motion was the mass of the black population characterized by poverty and desperation, not the black landowners who had privileged access to the island's institutions and, in general, had a higher influence on the whites. This element emphasized even more the nature of a complete break with the past. .

⁴⁰ Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, Wiley-Blackwell, UK, 2011, pp. 29-34.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 37.

The black slaves proved to possess great resistance and tenacity, skills developed thanks to the prolonged, disciplined work of the plantations. These characteristics resulted to be very useful to the warring factions, who supported the rebels by providing them with weapons. In the first years of the insurrection, the slaves were not satisfied with the compromise that granted constitutional equality between whites and coloured. The black rebels refused to work: they would not stop fighting until their rights had been acknowledged, as individuals belonging to the French Republic. Their strong stance was mainly due to the new French Constitution, the Declaration of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen. On hearing that the Commission, composed by Sonthonax and Polverel, that arrived on the island had affirmed that the institution of slavery would still be maintained, thus emphasizing the incompatibility between French revolutionary principles and the equality of slaves, the insurgents decided to wage a counter-revolutionary war. These, in fact, decided to ally with England and Spain, driven by the strong personality of Toussaint Louverture, the General who immediately proved to be a great strategist and fundamental political figure for the Haitian people.

Regarding the achievement of emancipation, there were many factors that historians took into consideration. Fick (1991) analysed four elements that, in a certain way, converged and led to the general emancipation of 1793-94. Firstly, she pointed out the “impetus and impact of recurring slave insurrection” of the August 1791 revolt; secondly, “the profoundly felt and long-cherished ideal of general liberty” put forward by Toussaint Louverture; thirdly, “the revolutionary ideology and character of the civil commissioner, Sonthonax”, who boldly put his emancipationist principles into practice by declaring slavery abolished”; and lastly the events of summer 1793 with the declarations of war against Britain and Spain, therefore “the political and military necessity of freeing the slaves to save the colony”⁴².

Another major turning point that needs to be examined was the abolition of slavery, within the territory of Haiti, at the end of summer 1793. This historic event might be perceived by many as a necessary action in order to ensure equality between all French

⁴² Fick, *The Making of Haiti. The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*, cit., p. 161-164.

citizens, both resident in France and in its domains, in the name of the Declaration: however, the emancipation was issued to preserve colonial rule and relaunch the production of the plantations that had stopped for several years. Popkin (2011) examined the matter: Sonthonax's intention was to restore the colonial order on which France had based all its prosperity, assuming that the mass of the black population would have stopped to fight and started to work again. This did not happen. The black generals were unconvinced by this extreme act, so decided to continue to support the Spanish army. Popkin reported that on the day of the general emancipation decree, Toussaint, in a letter, used the nickname "Louverture" for the first time, claiming that "he, like the French, was fighting for "liberty and equality"⁴³.

The 1793 proclamations had forced the former slaves, now called *cultivateurs*, into a new system of political obligations. The emancipation was presented to them as a grant of citizenship rights, however, tying new duties to them: this implicitly obliged the continuation of work and political and military loyalty to France. Moreover, the black commanders were now labelled as "conducteurs": the strategy of changing names was intended to make the new regime more acceptable. The French Republic employed a new discourse to convince the remaining ordinary blacks. The proclama clarified that the end of slavery did not mean access to unconditional freedom, but it is also true that some improvements were accomplished: blacks were legally free people, the whip was not allowed as a tool of discipline and the *cultivateurs* received a sort of wage for the work they did on the plantations. As per women and children, they could benefit from some protection; however, they received a lower wage than men because of "natural inequality", which mirrored a situation characterized by strong differences based on age, gender, division of labour and social hierarchy of the plantations. For this reason, they had no choice but to keep fighting the system. Some continued to work, others chose marronage or joined the rebel groups hiding in the mountains. In this scenario, equality remained substantially at a formal level and silencing the slaves' subjectivity sounded louder than before⁴⁴.

⁴³ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, cit., p. 60.

⁴⁴ Ivi, pp. 61-66.

The two commissioners had to deal with another problem, which this time came from the white population. The production system had changed and new social and economic relations were established. The question of freedom had acquired a new meaning, which was now intertwined with the possession of lands. Fick (1991) stated that: “it was this personal attachment to the land and the active imposition of their own will upon its cultivation and utilization that would transform their past identity as slaves into that of free persons. And it was this that the new regime deprived them of”. Moreover, we should keep in mind that the acts of resistance between 1793 and 1794 remained “generalized, spontaneous, and in articulate expression of discontent in reaction to a system that had little to do with the freedom these ex-slaves had fought for, but now were not allowed to define”.

The colonists saw the abolition of slavery as a threat to their personal benefits. According to them, the colonies were mere places where to obtain the greatest benefits for the best possible price. The principles of the French Revolution should not apply to the law of the colonies. Feeling betrayed by Paris, the colonists called on the British for help and, on 4th June 1794, the city of Port-au-Prince was captured by the British army. Meanwhile, also Spanish forces were deployed on the island and formed an alliance with the black revolutionaries, headed by Toussaint. Britain and Spain had control of a vast area of the colony, except the North, where the French general Laveaux had his headquarters. France seemed doomed without the support of black soldiers.

The situation was completely reverse: Toussaint, in a famous letter addressed to Laveaux, explained that he had been misled by the enemies of the Republic, the Spanish Army, but he had understood the deception and he would have sided with his French brothers, instead. He implemented a strategy that surprised all the protagonists of the story. He was able to organize and discipline the rebel forces, defeating the Spaniards and, eventually, the British, forcing them to leave the island in 1798⁴⁵. The reasons for his change were never clear. His letters suggested that he was sincerely convinced of the republican principles and that these could also apply to the black population, yet aware of the limits that the European universalism had traced.

⁴⁵ Fick, *The Making of Haiti. The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*, cit., pp.181-184.

2.1 Towards Insurgent Universality: French Revolution's principles that inspired the Black Revolution

Tomba (2019) coined the expression “Insurgent Universality” to interpret a new vision of universalism. But why did he speak of universality and what is the difference between universality and universalism? To understand the substantial differences, he examined some crucial elements of the French Revolution, in particular, he compared the two Declarations of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen of 1789 and 1793. The former attested that “men are born and remain free and equal in rights”, whereas according to the latter, “all men are equal by nature and before the law”. The argument at the stake was the relationship between men and rights, how they obtained it and according to which criteria such rights would be granted. However, these rights need to be conquered and this can only happen through struggle. Tomba underlined that: “on the one hand, equality, freedom and human dignity reactivate the tradition of revolutionary natural rights; on the other hand, they transcend the political framework of the modern state and introduce political universality beyond juridical universalism”⁴⁶.

In the first *Declaration*, the focal point was that “men” cannot hold privileges based on nature or birth because they are all free. The rights were considered from the perspective of the state, “polemically oriented against the *Ancien Régime* and its privileges”. Therefore, every individual is primarily a “simple individual” and, only afterwards, a citizen of the State. In the French Revolution framework, the aristocratic privileges were replaced by those of a specific category, which was that of the “male, white, and a property-owner” citizen⁴⁷.

In the second one, men are equal by nature and give life to a new concept of “human subjects” that “does not exist before the declaration of rights”: in this case, they “are the expression of a political praxis by individuals who act together”. The political subject is

⁴⁶ Tomba, *Insurgent Universality: An Alternative Legacy of Modernity*, cit., p. 31.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 32.

now generalized and this can be clearly seen in the use of the word “individual”, which comprehends a new category of people, who until now had been completely excluded: “women, the poor and slaves questioned the presumed abstract character of the citizen” through insurgencies. According to Tomba; “these insurgencies, rather than asking for pure inclusion, challenged the social and political order and opened up the political form to change”⁴⁸.

The first *Declaration* gives birth to juridical universalism “that implies a subject of right that is either passive or the victim that has to be protected”. To summarize, “universalism is a juridical assumption guaranteed by a coercive power”. It is characterized by “a passive subject and a potential victim who must be protected and have his rights guaranteed” through the institution of the State. The second *Declaration* is defined as active, without limitations and more universal than the first. It triggers the “universality of these particular individuals” whose “acting (...) is more universal than the juridical universalism of the abstract bearers of rights”. Tomba defined Universality as the “political practice based on local institutions as places of democratic experimentation”⁴⁹.

In our Haitian discourse what interests us most is the analysis of the second revolutionary statement. The declaration of 1793 completely overturned the concept of unity of people’s representation, typical of the modern state: the law is conceived as a constraint by the rulers on the ruled and this creates disputes between the two political subjects. The law does not represent the general will of the people because it is now perceived as pressure from a government that is unable to “preserve their natural and imprescriptible rights”. Keywords such as “insurrection” and “exercise of power beyond and against the state” can be read in the last two articles of the declaration (articles 34 and 35) as signs of deep discontent in French society, as well as in Haitian society. Both countries were in turmoil and, in particular, there were particular categories in both societies that went through great discontent.

⁴⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

Thus, an Insurgent Universality was created, defined by the author as “the concrete situation of individuals who act in common and put into question the hierarchical organization of the social fabric”. He dealt with the concept of insurgent natural rights: they “express the political agency of human beings beyond the state”. He specified that “the matter of insurgent universality (...) is structured around the gap between juridical citizenship and the practice of citizenship of women, mulattos, blacks, and the poor”⁵⁰.

He analysed, in particular, these three categories: “these groups were not merely the excluded who demanded inclusion but the true citizens who questioned the political and social order beyond the formal recognition of legal citizenship. They were the parts that were not reducible to the *peuple* of the nation-state and, in their actions, even exceeded it. In other words, they expressed the excess of the “rights of man” over legal citizenship”⁵¹.

Among these categories, what interests us most is a thorough analysis of the condition of slaves. Tomba explained how the *Declaration* is related to the events in Haiti and this can be seen above all in Article 18 which stated: “Every man can contract his services and his time, but he cannot sell himself nor be sold: his person is not an alienable property. The law knows of no such thing as the status of servant”. To understand how the two events are connected, it is necessary to adopt the perspective according to which what happens in Haiti is not a simple consequence or evolution of French political thought. The crucial element is that only after the revolts in Haiti, was Article 18 modified: this showed that the two Revolutions had influenced each other. Moreover, paraphrasing Tomba, the Black Revolution interacted with the French one, pushing the latter to go beyond national borders, and “extended both freedom and citizenship transracially and transnationally”. The Haitian people had brought the idea of freedom to a universal level, revealing “other possible pathways of modernization that were linked to other traditions within and outside the West”⁵².

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 40.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² Ivi, p. 42.

Tomba is fully convinced of the existence of common origins between Saint Domingue and the Western civilization: he cited the thought of Aimé Cesaire, according to which “to study Saint-Domingue is to study one of the origins, one of the sources of Western civilization”. When the Western European States began to conquer the American territories and exploitation in the colonies expanded, they based their civilization on these elements. According to this logical reasoning, it was inevitable that Saint-Domingue, as “one of the sources of Western civilization”, “shaped a constellation whose spatial-temporal boundaries exceeded nationality, built bridges with other excluded subjects, and introduced a new radical concept of universality, whose legacy branches into many trajectories of human emancipation”⁵³.

An interesting passage in Tomba's book regarded the analysis of specific events that occurred between 1790 and 1791. The words that Antoine Barnave, pronounced in the Committee on Colonies, reported the intention of the National Assembly not to implement further activities within the trade conducted by France with the colonies, then specifying that the colony and its properties remained under the control of the nation. The debate on the issue of the abolition of slavery that took place in the National assembly, between the Girondins and the members of the *Société des amis des Noirs*, headed by Jean-Paul Brissot, did not reflect the thought of the black population. Indeed, while in *theory* the representatives of the political groups were convinced that the slaves were not ready to be free; in *practice* the insurrections that began in August 1791 disprove their opinion. The acts of the rebels “forced the National Assembly to recognize a new level of universality”. “The uprisings of slaves were philosophy in action, previews of theory that forced philosophy to envisage the new field of possibilities that was opened. In the daily practices of insubordination, of refusing to work and maroonage, slaves occupied public and political space and imposed, in August 1793, the abolition of slavery”⁵⁴.

Almost synchronously, three declarations, that would change the fate of the Haitian country and the French empire, were issued within a few months from one another. The

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ Ibidem.

first one was the *Declaration* of 1793 already reported. On the 29th August 1793, Sonthonax proclaimed the abolition of slavery in San Domingo and, in particular, the *Emancipation Proclamation*, at Article 2, stated that: “all Negroes and people of mixed blood currently enslaved are declared free and will enjoy all rights pertaining to French citizenship”. The third regarded the enactment of a Decree, on 10th February 1794, affirming that: “The National Convention declares that the slavery of Negroes is abolished in all the colonies. In consequence, it decrees that all men, without distinction of color, domiciled in the colonies, are French citizens and will enjoy all rights guaranteed by the constitution”⁵⁵. Thanks to these three official acts, the mass of black slaves began to impose their culture by differentiating themselves from the French colonists.

Tomba examined the concept of freedom starting from James' stance according to which the black population had always been fighting for freedom. The idea of freedom was present among the ideals of the French Revolution but, in this case, it was extreme up to a universal level. The conceptual framework of freedom has no boundaries and cannot be limited in any way: “Freedom can be neither octroyed nor protected by power in the name of passive subjects”. Toussaint Louverture, who embodied this thought, wrote these words to Napoleon in 1799: “It is not a freedom of circumstance, conceded to us alone, that we wish; it is the absolute adoption of the principle that no man, born red, black or white can be the property of his fellow man. We are free now because we are the stronger”⁵⁶. Freedom and equality are historic achievements that need to be constantly defended.

In the last part of the chapter dedicated to the Haitian context, Tomba focuses on the concept of freedom. He conceptualizes it as a “bridge” between the Haitian and Parisian uprisings, framing it “in the Atlantic and transnational context”. The new perspective of freedom is “based on communal and spontaneous self-organization, as in the case of the Bossale community that functioned as an “egalitarian system without state”. At this point, it is necessary to ask the right question. It is not enough to frame the Haitian

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 43.

⁵⁶ Ivi, pp. 43-44.

revolution in a context of struggle against slavery and anti-colonialism as we would run into the error of thinking from a Western emancipation point of view. According to Tomba, the question needed to be related to the freed mulattoes, the Creoles and the Bossales, who were the majority of the population, no longer to landowners and white colonialists. “Each of these layers moves politically in the same space and chronological time, but with different temporalities”: on the side of the colonialists, there was the will to defend the colonial system and separate the social and political revolution from the economic one on a basis of racial discrimination; on the side of the Bossales, it “put into practice non-individualistic modes of self-regulation of the egalitarian peasant system in the absence of a state”⁵⁷.

Toussaint was defined the “hero of the two worlds” because, with the Constitution of 1801, he had tried to synchronize and converge “the nascent state of Haiti to the course of European statehood through an enormous concentration of power that was placed in government hands”. Criticism of his figure had spread in the historiography as he tried to impose modernization based on the workforce and introduce a system of ownership, a typical structure of the Western civilization. Thus two diametrically opposed concepts of freedom collide: “an individualistic one based on the nation-state and the system of production for the market; the other egalitarian, communitarian and based on a subsistence economy”⁵⁸.

Tomba concluded with a final consideration on the Bossales community, highlighting their uniqueness. They tried to implement a “stateless egalitarian system” based on self-regulation and a limitation of political power and property: they “do not represent a pre-modern residue, but a chronotone with respect to the dominant modernity and its synchronizing principle”⁵⁹.

⁵⁷ Ibidem.

⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 45.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

2.2 Toussaint Louverture, the Black Napoleon

Reconstructing the profile of Toussaint Louverture (or L'ouverture) is very useful to depict the Haitian Revolution. The figure emerged, among lights and shadows, as the supreme leader of the revolution: he represented the link between the former leaders and the French colonial system.

Francois-Dominique Toussaint Bréda was a slave born in 1743 in the Bréda plantation, situated in the North Province of Saint Domingue. Up to the age of about 33, he worked as a plantation manager and was then affranchised. James reported that he had had the opportunity to learn to read and write the rudiments of French and Latin: this was the additional element that brought him more fortune and success. Today we are in possession of some of his writings but this aspect is controversial because most likely he was helped in the drafting by others who were much more erudite than him⁶⁰.

Once free, he fought at the orders of Biassou and Jean-François in the battles of August of 1793, allied with Spain to fight against the French enemy. It was on that occasion that he distinguished himself as a capable leader, with the ability to “recruit an outstanding cohort of officers from the ranks of the insurgents”. He also proved to be a great diplomat on account of his care in writing letters when dealing with the numerous French, Spanish or English generals: he “took pains to recruit white secretaries who could express his thoughts clearly and effectively”. His letters are, in fact, considered fundamental evidence for historiographers since, through these, we can trace back much information about his figure and strategy. In a series of letters addressed to General Laveaux from 1794 to 1796, we learn how attentive he was to informing himself of the events happening in Europe, or to ascertaining the conditions of his soldiers, or to planning strategies such as having informants among the slaves serving the British and Spanish. Apart from these sources, it is difficult to separate the myth from reality. In fact, the origin of his nickname “L'ouverture” (which means “the opening”) is still uncertain. It is believed that it was been attributed to him because he was capable of making “an opening anywhere”. He personified the revolutionary principle to show the soldiers the opening of a new horizon of freedom and a new political order. Others

⁶⁰ James, *The Black Jacobins, Toussaint L 'Ouverture And The San Domingo Revolution*, cit., pp. 18-19.

suggest that it was attributed by the people or, most likely, it was Toussaint himself to choose it: “with “its cryptic connotations of a new beginning” it had a particular, still hidden, meaning for him.⁶¹”

His fame preceded him. He was always described as a highly respected and always humble politician. Dubois described him as a “brilliant political and military leader”, with a very strong personality but, at the same time, never arrogant. He reported the words of a contemporary, saying he was “both ruthless and humane, capable of making barbarous threats but of sparing even those who had double-crossed him”. He also added that “throughout his career he would regularly invoke the possibility of brutal punishment, both human and divine, but also show a remarkable tendency to forgive, evoking the teachings of Catholicism as his inspiration”⁶².

He was harshly criticised because, in the early years, he did not take a continuous and very clear stance neither for mulattos nor for slaves: even if, between 1792 and 1793, he had defended his former French masters, he then chose to take part in the revolution, when the contradiction between the claims of rights of the free people of colour and the struggle of the slaves had ceased. However, in the critique, many scholars failed to take into account the framework in which Toussaint lived and acted: from the beginning, the Haitian Revolution did not fall into a pre-established model and the decisions made by Toussaint make no exception. He had belonged to both the categories of slave and that of a free coloured man, therefore it was inevitable that he would act according to different criteria and circumstances.

Chignola explained that “without a homeland by definition and as a member of a ‘foreign nation’ where access to «political existence» is denied, (...) the slave cannot be bound by the loyalty of any kind”. In the famous letter to Laveaux of May 1794, previously cited, in which he agreed to ally with the French armed forces again, “Toussaint justified his past as a 'counterrevolutionary' fighter enlisted by the Spaniards, on the basis of having seen the French clearly reject a 'closure' of the Northern

⁶¹ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, cit., p. 172.

⁶² Ivi, pp. 172-173.

insurrection, which recognized, as for the mulattos, the freedom of blacks and the granting of a general amnesty"⁶³.

What Toussaint always pursued was the “*liberté du peuple noir*”, as he wrote in his letters. He really believed in the principle of universal freedom: he was firmly convinced that the struggle for the black liberation, in particular the uprising of slaves, was the real revolution for the freedom, equality and fraternity, started in the framework of the French revolution. This was the solid line which he followed for his entire life. In this perspective, his military choices cannot be understood only in terms of “personal ambition” or the “desire for power”. Each decision that was made in the course of the revolution, “from the recruitment in the Spanish ranks to the Jacobin solidarity, from the organization of the black power to the armed resistance against Napoleon”, had the aim of freeing the world from slavery. He made himself the carrier of that light which illuminated the world from the darkness of slavery⁶⁴.

It should not be surprising that black leaders formed alliances, from time to time, with a different array of forces to achieve the goal of liberation from slavery. He reorganised the bands of rebels into a revolutionary army, repressing soldiers’ desertions and quelling the riots of the peasants. He climbed the ranks of the French army to become army General and conquered the island by defeating the British and occupying the eastern part, held by the Spaniards. Finally, in 1798, he won the civil war against the mulatto general André Rigaud who had taken possession of the southern territories⁶⁵.

Thus, Haiti was reunified and, at this point, considering that both Sonthonax and Laveaux had left the colony, the personal power of Toussaint grew so much that he had the absolute hegemony over the island. As previously reported, he was a great strategist and, for this reason, he was given the nickname of “Black Napoleon”.

⁶³ “Senza patria per definizione e membro di una ‘nazione straniera’ cui viene proibito l'accesso all'«esistenza politica», (...) lo schiavo non può essere vincolato da lealtà di sorta: Toussaint (...) motiverà il proprio passato di combattente 'controrivoluzionario' arruolato dagli spagnoli, in base al fatto di aver visto nettamente rifiutata, da parte francese, una 'chiusura' dell'insurrezione del Nord, che vedesse riconosciuta, come per i mulatti, la libertà dei neri e la concessione di un'amnistia generale.” - F. D. Toussaint Louverture, *La libertà del popolo nero. Scritti politici*, translated by Sandro Chignola, Maria Laura Lanzillo, La Rosa Editrice, Turin, 1997, Introduction, p. XXIX.

⁶⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁵ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, cit., p. 70.

In 1801, Toussaint became Governor of Haiti and promulgated a Constitution suitable for providing the tools to strengthen its executive power. Two contrasting stances were developed in his political discourse. Towards the former slaves, he assumed an authoritarian role, presenting the Republic as the only form of freedom protection for the Blacks. As for the Directory and other French authorities, he defended the autonomy and freedom of black subjectivity, concretizing equality between the citizens of the motherland and the colonies. Chignola explained that: “The Louverture Constitution (...) will assume the burden of a drastic modernization: personal industriousness, social and public morality, civic pride and racial equality - the values by which Toussaint believed possible, with a rough disciplinary action of a 'military' type, transforming the mass of slaves into a nation of citizens would have obtained through it a definitive and 'autonomous' normative sanction. Even at the price, and Toussaint knew it well, of irremediably antagonizing Napoleonic France”⁶⁶.

Napoleon's reply was not long in coming. In the plans of the French emperor there was the restoration of slavery in the French colonies of Central America together with the expansion in the territories of the Antilles, Guyana, Louisiana and Florida. In the following year, 23 thousand French soldiers were sent in the Caribbean, under the command of General Leclerc, who in a few months occupied most of the cities of Saint Domingue. Toussaint with his army organized a black resistance deciding to leave to the black general Christophe the initiative to set fire to the city, as well as hoping in the spread of yellow fever among the European troops. His response was “decisive” and “proud”; however it was not sufficient. In those months of guerrilla warfare, an anecdote became very famous: it is said that at one point the rebels in the battle of Crête-à-Pierrot were heard singing *La Marseillaise* to the great amazement of the French. The war ended in May 1802 when Toussaint agreed to leave his role of governor of the island to General Leclerc after having obtained the recognition and

⁶⁶ “La Costituzione louverturiana (...) si assumerà l'onere di una drastica modernizzazione: industriosità personale, moralità sociale e pubblica, orgoglio civico e uguaglianza razziale-i valori per mezzo dei quali Toussaint riteneva possibile, con una ruvida azione di disciplinamento di tipo 'militare', operare la trasformazione della massa degli schiavi in una nazione di cittadini avrebbero ottenuto attraverso di essa una definitiva e 'autonoma' sanzione normativa. Anche al prezzo, e Toussaint lo sapeva bene, di inimicarsi irrimediabilmente la Francia napoleonica”. - Introduction by Sandro Chignola, F. D. Toussaint Louverture, *La libertà del popolo nero. Scritti politici*, translated by Sandro Chignola, Maria Laura Lanzillo, La Rosa Editrice, Turin, 1997, p. XLII.

confirmation that everything would remain unchanged for the blacks and that his best generals would remain in command of departments. After being apparently pardoned and, to prevent his new rise to power, the former leader was arrested and deported to France, where he died on April 7th 1803.

2.3 The Haitian Declaration of Independence

The black population, however, was not dismayed the news of Toussaint's departure. «By overthrowing me, they have just felled, in Santo Domingo, the trunk of the tree of freedom for the blacks; it will grow from the roots as they are deep and numerous»⁶⁷. In one of his latest statements, he used the metaphor of San Domingo as a tree of freedom. The black struggle did not stop: the French projects for the reconquest of the island come to an end and, in a few months, they left the Haitian territories. Dessalines became commander of the Resistance and, thus, foreign domination ended forever.

On January 1st 1804, Dessalines proclaimed the independence of Haiti: the ancient indigenous name of the island was restored and a new Haitian flag was chosen from the French tricolour, yet tearing off the white - “the colour of racist hatred and too long oppression”- and adding the Coat of arms. From that moment on, the first black Republic in history was established, acquiring its independence which inspired the autonomous organization of blacks (the so-called “common wind”) throughout the Americas. The message of liberation and resistance from Toussaint and all the Haitian people had crossed all borders.

Independence achieved in 1804 was the outcome of a violent and exhausting struggle, also disruptive at ideological level. As a matter of fact, the black slaves used the language of the French Declaration of Rights to claim even more power for themselves. Chignola expressed this concept of total change. “The anonymous plebeian,

⁶⁷ “En me renversant, on n'a abattu à Saint-Domingue que le tronc de l'arbre de la liberté des noirs; il poussera par le racines, parce qu'elles sont profon des et nombreuses”- Chignola introduction, *La libertà del popolo nero. Scritti politici*, cit., p. L.

multitudinous origin, arising from a process of liberation that grows contaminating itself with the Declarations of Rights and which increases speed and power with the discipline imposed by the order of the plantation and military experience, redeems the formalistic Eurocentrism of idea of freedom and allows the slave to be reintegrated into the materiality of a conflict that cannot be obliterated by the simple expansion of European modernity.” Moreover, he assessed that: “Freedom for the slave does not come from Paris or London, from the philanthropic ideas of abolitionism. The freedom of the slave, subjectively understood, is rather what keeps in tension and reopens the very definition of the European idea of freedom”⁶⁸.

Even after the achievement of Independence, many European philosophers and scholars continued to reflect on the events from a pure Eurocentric point of view. However vehemently they tried to disguise this approach, their discourse resulted imbued with the notion of European superiority. Buck-Morss (2009) reported the consequences of this approach that led to the complete overturning of the Haitian principles, always examined in relation to the European ones. “Haiti’s political imaginary as liberated territory, a safe haven for all, was too grand for statist politics. Its absolutely new extension of both freedom and citizenship transracially and transnationally, does not lend itself to political appropriation as a definition of national identity”. The author urged not to fall into the error of evaluating the acts of the slaves in San Domingo in the wrong way: we must not lose the sense of “historical rupture”, of “world-historical contribution” that the Revolution gave to humanity, “that went far beyond existing European Enlightenment thought”⁶⁹.

Once Toussaint took direct control of power on the island, he wondered which form of state would be best. A unitary political subject was born from the multitude of individuals united by colonial and racial oppression. It was based on the modern concept of nation, however it was lacking territorial dimension. In the case of the Haitian state, the spatial dimension was not fixed and limited such as the European one.

⁶⁸ “La libertà per lo schiavo non viene da Parigi o da Londra, dalle idee filantropiche dell’abolizionismo. La libertà dello schiavo, soggettivamente intesa, è piuttosto ciò che tiene in tensione e riapre la stessa definizione dell’idea europea di libertà.” - Preface of Sandro Chignola, *I giacobini neri: la prima rivolta contro l'uomo bianco*, cit., p. 10.

⁶⁹ Buck Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and the Universal History*, cit., pp. 145-147.

In such a heterogeneous context, this element was considered secondary to a much larger and more universal project. The Haitian Constitution of 1804 invoked a sense of unity that did not exist on the island: as a matter of fact, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Toussaint's successor, was assassinated just after two years, in 1806, and this resulted in the division of the country and the consequent formation of two political regimes, one in the north and one in the south.

The form of power exerted was a dictatorship in which Toussaint ruled in order to cope with the problems that arose during the war. He attempted to transform slaves into citizens, to educate them to freedom and to create, by doing so, the logic of modern discipline as obedience to a command perceived as legitimate and rational. The military dictatorship that he established therefore appeared as an exceptional and necessary form of government to restore order in the country but this attempt failed. After his expulsion, the country experienced the presence of Henri Christophe's kingdom in the north and Pétion's republic in the south.

Chapter III

“The echo of the forgotten revolution”

3. Outcomes of the Haitian Revolution

In *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot (1995) defined the Haitian Revolution “the most radical political revolution of that age”. In *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, Blackburn (1988) wrote: “Haiti was not the first independent American state but it was the first to guarantee civic liberty to all its inhabitants”⁷⁰.

The people of Haiti have shown great resilience and managed to carve out a place in the world. The history of the country has always been characterized by struggles, diseases and crises, but also by a strong spirit of resistance and unity. Thanks to these strong points, it was the second democracy in the western hemisphere and the first republic in the world to be recognized. A surprising detail that needs to be underlined is that only this island of the Caribbean archipelago was able to achieve such a result. Ferrer (2014) remembers its uniqueness: "this new country sat in the middle of the Caribbean Sea surrounded by islands that remained European colonies deeply invested in the regime of slavery"⁷¹. Indeed, the rest of the slaves of the French colonies had to wait for the revolution of 1848 in order to be freed.

The first steps of the new State were not easy. In the aftermath of the proclamation of Independence, on September 22th 1804, Jean-Jacques Dessalines proclaimed himself Emperor of the island with the name of Jacques I. His power grew so much that he established "an independent, constitutional nation of "black" citizens": this was a milestone never reached in history, so far. Immediately, he had to face great problems, both internal and external. He encountered various obstacles, since the new State was not recognized by the European powers and by the United States. Even the Catholic Church did not support their cause. Salt (2019) studied and analyzed the events after the

⁷⁰ Buck Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and the Universal History*, cit., p. 39.

⁷¹ Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror. Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution*, cit., p. 4.

proclamation of Independence. She reported the criticism moved by the historian Philippe R. Girard according to which Dessalines's act of declaration was just a "narrowly focused declaration of independence that denounced French imperialism".

It was neither about an armed conflict for emancipation, nor a political manifesto for the rights of men. In response to this view, the historians David Armitage and Julia Gaffield interpreted the statement as an oath between Dessalines, the army generals and the population of Haiti "to renounce France forever and to die rather than live under its dominion"⁷².

The military and strategic approach of Dessalines differed greatly from that of Toussaint L'Ouverture. In fact, it has to be emphasized that Dessalines was a slave who had lived a great part of his life on the plantations, experiencing all the violence and suffering on his own skin; on the contrary, Toussaint had had the opportunity to live a more dignified life. The hatred that Dessalines felt against the white masters was very acute: he started a campaign of violence and extermination against the French colonists to affirm the full sovereignty of the Blacks⁷³.

In the new Constitution of 1805, Dessalines explained the new status of the white population: ""handful of whites" who had "professed" the right "religion"—the rejection of slavery— were under his personal protection. He granted them naturalization papers that welcomed them "among the children of Haiti"⁷⁴. It represented the first series of principles to be created by slaves. The Constitution was composed of different parts, which addressed several subjects. After a preliminary declaration, consisting of 14 articles, it addresses the Empire, the government, the council of state, ministers, courts, worship, the administration and, finally, contains general provisions. In the text, he declared that Saint-Domingue was "a free state sovereign and independent of any other power in the universe, under the name of empire of Hayti." Dessalines reiterated that slavery was abolished forever; in other passages, it can be read that any ownership right over a person was not allowed (Article 10: "fathers and mothers are not permitted to

⁷² Ibidem.

⁷³ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, cit., p. 125-137.

⁷⁴ Dobois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, cit., pp. 300-301.

disinherit their children”); and a new sense of dignity was given to agriculture (Article 21: “Agriculture, as it is the first, the most noble, and the most useful of all the arts, shall be honored and protected”). We can highlight two other very interesting elements. The first concerns article number 12, which states that “no white man of whatever nation he may be, shall put his foot on this territory with the title of master or proprietor, neither shall he in future acquire any property therein”. The following article granted an exception for German and Polish citizens. The second interesting passage regards Article 14 in which all the Haitian people recognized themselves in the appellation of “Black”. The text said: “all acceptance (sic) of colour among the children of one and the same family, of whom the chief magistrate is the father, being necessarily to cease, the Haitians shall hence forward be known only by the generic appellation of Blacks”⁷⁵. With this proclamation, however, the killings of the white people did not stop. According to the principle of justice of the emperor, he was returning all the pain and hatred that the French rulers had poured out on the poor Haitian victims, he was thus avenging America.

This news could only upset the European powers that until then had seen themselves capable of imposing their sovereignty and their power on all American territories. Their response was to deal with Haiti cautiously, considering that the situation that had originated was truly one of a kind. Spain, England and all the European powers looked upon Haiti as a social experiment that they could not grasp yet. No one knew what its future would be like. The sugar and coffee market remained very important for the parties involved and, therefore, it was necessary to be cautious in the choice of economic policies ⁷⁶.

The emperor, at that point, had to rebuild a completely devastated island, which needed to recover its economy after years of insurrections and war. Dessalines had to make radical decisions such as mobilizing every Haitian to prevent foreign invasions and reintroducing a system of hard plantation labour. However, his was a very short reign. He was assassinated in 1806, plunging the nation into a crisis once again.

⁷⁵ <http://faculty.webster.edu/corbetre/haiti/history/earlyhaiti/1805-const.htm>

⁷⁶ Salt, *The Unfinished Revolution. Haiti, Black Sovereignty and Power in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World*, cit., p. 63.

Salt (2019) explained that: “as Saint-Domingue exiles travelled and fled to various ports, and news reports of creeping revolutionary fever spread from ships to novels, Haiti loomed as an imagined racial spectre of disease, violent rebellion and black retribution—but also a potentially lucrative one”⁷⁷. Despite the civil war that broke out in the country between the south, headed by Alexandre Pétion, and the north, ruled by Henri Christophe, relations with foreign powers continued to be pursued, allowing the inhabitants of the island a profit minimum from trade.

The contradiction that stands out is that the capital was necessary and the island knew only one way of producing it, that of the plantations. The abolition of slavery did not imply a complete liberation: the work on the plantations had to be restored at all costs. This thought was supported, firstly, by Toussaint and then shared by Dessalines. From the point of view of the countries that traded with Haiti, it was convenient to recognize the nation.

This was the idea of James Stephen, great grandfather of Virginia Woolf, who sustained Haiti’s sovereignty. He criticized France for how it had managed the revolution in Haiti, stating therefore how the British government should learn the lesson and not repeat that mistake with its own possessions. His position may appear relatively unusual but, as he wrote in capitol letters in one of his pamphlets, “I conceive to acknowledge without delay, the liberty of the negroes of St. Domingo; and to enter into federal engagements with them as a sovereign and independent people”⁷⁸.

He suggested allying with Haiti, considering the potential impact on the future of that region of the world and of the British economy. Moreover, he criticized the British government with regard to their colonial policies in the Caribbean; he visited several colonies and marveled at how their culture was much more advanced than what was reported among Westerners. His sentiments could be misleading: all he cared about was the maximization of profits and power in a new social, political and economic context. He had been very far-sighted in understanding how the Haitian revolution had led to a

⁷⁷ Ibidem.

⁷⁸ Ivi, pp. 63-65.

new world order, in which former colonial policies were “inapplicable”⁷⁹. However, what he hoped did not happen, since the United Kingdom recognized the sovereignty of Haiti only in 1839, that is, several years after the recognition by France. Despite the critical situation, the outcome of the Haitian revolution was not as bad as one might think. Historiography has re-evaluated many aspects of the Haitian case, concluding that the narration of an island excluded from trade and intentionally rejected was untrue.

What just described was the vision of an individual, i.e. a member of British society. The point of view of other intellectuals and prominent figures was very different. Salt reported another vision: that of a British vicar and visitor to Haiti, William Woodis Harvey. He wrote a long essay, sustaining that the Haitian case should have been handled through gradualism: after breaking free from slavery, the population was still suffering its effects, so he suggested “gradually returning from scenes of confusion and bloodshed, to habits of industry, peace and order; steadily aiming, amidst frequent reverses, to establish a regular and independent government”. In his opinion, in case of great difficulties and resource limitations, they should have worked to improve agriculture and trade, thus starting to lay the foundations for an empire. Between the lines, however, it is possible to perceive his doubts regarding the real construction of a state. His concern was not about the people he had been in contact with, who he considered in a positive way, but about their leaders: in his writings, in particular, he referred to the figure of Dessalines who described as “vain” and “ridiculous”, at the head of a government with “burlesque” attitudes⁸⁰. The fundamental point of Harvey's analysis was, however, the interest of the British system of slavery. According to him, in British possessions, it could never have existed the possibility to “produce a Dessalines due to its gradual and perhaps more merciful approach to ending slavery”. Harvey recognized the uniqueness of Haiti, not on account of the economic problems, nor the difficulties that its population had experienced but, above all, “of the blackness of the country and its history of slavery”⁸¹.

⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 67.

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

⁸¹ Ivi, pp. 68-70.

Much criticism had been levelled at the emperor: it was, therefore, a sentiment common to many. Dubois highlighted the contrasting visions of the figure of Dessalines: on the one hand, the response of the public corresponded to a great veneration and gratitude for the independence of Haiti; on the other hand, this mythology tended “to obscure the internal conflicts within the revolutionary movement”. Salt added that this view also tended to distort the rebellious acts that the slaves had carried out during the revolution. Converging the vanity of men with the absurdity of Haiti's existence denigrated the liberation discourse of the black people: indeed, “ridicule often emerged even in attempts to offer recognition and reciprocity, as mainly white Atlantic world officials struggled to place politics, aptitude and self-actualised black futures within their political landscapes”⁸².

With this approach, it is clear that the educated European citizens had not understood the intentions behind the gestures of Dessalines, misinterpreting the words written in the new Constitution. For Dessalines, the emulation of Napoleon was meant to put his people on an equal footing with the French counterpart. Fischer (2005) delved into this concept, also citing the words of Harvey. She wrote that: “the connection between Dessalines’s ascension to the imperial throne and that of his nemesis Napoleon appears to have escaped European observers who marvel at the absurdity of “an uneducated, barbarous, though indeed successful negro, having authority over negroes as ignorant and as uncivilized himself, and possessing but a part of a comparatively small Island, claiming the title of Emperor!”⁸³.

In the preamble of the Constitution, it is immediately possible to identify the problem of racial equality. “In the presence of the Supreme Being, before whom all mortals are equal, and who has scattered so many kinds of different beings over the surface of the globe for the sole purpose of manifesting his glory and might through the diversity of his works; Before the whole creation, whose disowned children we have so unjustly and for so long been considered; We declare that the terms of the present Constitution are the free, spontaneous, and determined expression of our hearts and of the general will of

⁸² Ibidem.

⁸³ Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed, Haiti And The Cultures Of Slavery In The Age Of Revolution*, cit. p. 231.

our fellow citizens”. In these few lines, it is possible to see many references to the thought of Enlightenment and how the French Revolution formed many concepts in Haitian culture. We can notice the reference to a Supreme Being, according to which this entity acts by establishing racial equality and by creating a new state, through a social contract. Fischer pointed out the presence of two concepts that express a dual movement: “they assert a principle of universal equality and then in the same gesture affirm human diversity and difference”. In the first part of the text, the aim is to emphasize the equality between men and that the differences between these are the expression of the glory of the Supreme Being; in the second part, there is the rejection of that racial exclusivism that had led to the disowning of the African people. “The Preamble thus sketches a conceptual frame in which equality and difference, universalism and identity-based or historical claims, show themselves as intimately linked and indeed inseparable. Universalism and particularism continuously refer back to each other, racial equality cannot be achieved without particularistic claims, and particularism is ultimately justified by a claim of universal racial equality”⁸⁴. As stated before, this concept is explored in the articles 12, 13 and 14, cited above.

For Dessalines, to build a nation meant going to break down all those limits of the past, including the linguistic and symbolic ones: it was not enough to destroy what was material, by razing cities or destroying plantations, it was necessary to forge a new culture by using the name that fully represented the island, as well as a new name for the citizens. Behind the renaming of the nation, there was an intention, on the part of Dessalines, of eliminating all traces of the colonizer, breaking down any differences in people's colour-based hierarchies and using the generic term “black” without any shame.

“Disrupting any biologicistic or racialist expectations, they make “black” a mere implication of being Haitian and thus a political rather than a biological category. In both cases, liberation from oppression is imagined through a complete break with the inherited past”. Moreover, “the very act of calling all Haitians black, regardless of their

⁸⁴ Ivi, pp. 231-232.

phenotype, would for a long time be recognized as a radical break from the entrenched practice of distinguishing, at the very least, between mulattoes, blacks, and whites”⁸⁵.

The constitution of 1805 is underestimated by contemporaries. It contained truly avant-garde elements. “Through the act of renaming, the constitution of 1805 thus performs one of the most troubling paradoxes of modern universalist politics—the paradox that the universal is typically derived through a generalization of one of the particulars. Calling all Haitians, regardless of skin colour, black is a gesture like calling all people, regardless of their sex, women: it both asserts egalitarian and universalist intuitions and puts them to a test by using the previously subordinated term of the opposition as the universal term”. The work carried out for the drafting of the Constitution was permeated by a radical change in the rationalized vocabulary.”⁸⁶ Unfortunately, the effort of Dessalines and his subordinates to completely free the country from the foreigners’ influence was not successful.

Despite the intention of achieving great changes on the island, the Haitian revolution did not end with the victory over the French, while the new anti-racist discourse was swept away in a short time. The conflicts in the country restarted between 1807 and 1820: Haiti was once again divided both from a territorial point of view and from a racial one. Popkin (2011) assessed that “despite the conclusiveness of the French defeat, few whites at the time believed that a society governed by people of African ancestry could endure; most assumed that it was just a matter of time before some outside power succeeded in reasserting control over the island”.

In the meantime, however, the Spanish and Portuguese colonies were rebelling, following the example that Haiti had set. After the assassination of Dessalines, a new civil war was declared. The conspiracy was carried out by his soldiers, Alexandre Pétion and Étienne Gérin, two mulatto generals, supported by the black general Henri Christophe, commander-in-chief of the army. The modern Haitian historian Claude Moïse has written that “Dessalines’s policies upset everyone”. The manifesto quoted the following words: “Soldiers, you will be paid and clothed; cultivators, you will be

⁸⁵ Ivi, p. 233.

⁸⁶ Ivi, p. 235.

protected; landowners, you will be guaranteed the possession of your properties”⁸⁷. Discontent was therefore so widespread that the emperor was called *éfilée-la-folle* (“Crazy Défilée”). With his death, Dessalines became the leader of the voodoo cult and a symbol of black liberation.

The three conspirators who had organized the killing of the emperor could not agree on how to govern the country. Therefore, the territory was divided into two spheres of control again: Henri Christophe, general of the northern part, tried to impose his power on the generals of the south but they resisted the attack. In the northern part of the island, therefore, Christophe formed a government in the footsteps of Dessalines, in the southern part, instead, Pétion was elected president of the new republic. Popkin explained that: “the split between Christophe’s government in the north and Pétion’s in the south has often been described as a revival of the conflict between blacks and men from the mixed-race population, similar to the conflict between Toussaint Louverture and André Rigaud during the revolution. As in that period, the conflict did not entirely follow racial boundaries”⁸⁸.

The two sides never managed to prevail over each other during the armed conflict. Both sought the support of the British forces that controlled the neighbouring colony of Jamaica but had no interest in strengthening Haiti to avoid consequences against their interests. Moreover, both governments faced some problems with the rural population, as small landowners had taken possession of some land. In the northern territories, Christophe implemented a kingdom in 1811, trying to improve services, such as education and medical care. For his part, Pétion worked to implement educational policies based on a European style for teaching children and high-ranking families. French was also taught, thus creating a language barrier, an approach that ended up having a very strong resonance in modern-day Haiti⁸⁹.

Both governments were willing to divide the island in order not to surrender to France: the danger had returned with the defeat of Napoleon in 1814 and the restoration of the

⁸⁷ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, cit., pp. 142-144.

⁸⁸ Ivi, p. 146.

⁸⁹ Ivi, pp. 147-148.

Bourbon monarchy under Louis XVIII. After the Congress of Vienna, the islands of Martinique and Guadelupe had returned to France, after a period of English occupation. In addition, all the European powers had acknowledged the claim of France to conquer Saint Domingue, even with the use of force. The former plantation owners had put strong pressure on the French government to take back their possessions on the island, convinced that they had the support of Pétion and his men so as to defeat Christophe. “When French agents tried to open negotiations with them, however, both the rival Haitian governments indignantly rejected any proposals to renounce the freedom from slavery and the independence that had been won at such a high cost. In 1816 Christophe told one would-be French representative that “ the Haitians will be unanimous on this point at least, to fight to extinction rather than submit again to the yoke of France and slavery”⁹⁰.

It was in this context that one of the first condemnations of European colonialism written by a non-white author was published. It was the Baron of Vastey, advisor and spokesperson for Christophe. Buck-Morss (2009), when dealing with Haiti’s black identity, reported his words: “the cause that I defend is that of the entirety of humanity. Five hundred million men, black, yellow and brown, spread over the surface of the globe, are reclaiming the rights and privileges which they have received from the author of nature”. She commented: “yet when he and others produced a discourse of Haiti as a nation raising itself up to the level of European nations, the original emancipatory project wherein “national boundaries played a minor role,” was transmuted into “a particularism in which national interest and respect for national boundaries took precedence”⁹¹.

Pétion suggested an agreement with France, according to which Haiti would compensate the plantation owners for their lost lands (the indemnity amounted to 150 million francs) and, in exchange, they would request the official recognition of their dependence. This proposal was rejected by the French government but still set the stage for the recognition, which only occurred in 1824.

⁹⁰ Ivi, pp. 148.

⁹¹ Buck Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and the Universal History*, cit., pp. 146.

In those years of turmoil and revolutions in Latin America, Pétion was appointed president for life in 1816; however, he died in 1818 and was replaced by another mixed-race veteran military officer, Jean-Pierre Boyer, who was able to put an end to the civil war started in 1820. After the suicide of Christophe, the northern area was left without a leader and Boyer took advantage of the vacuum and occupied the area. Then, in 1822, he also managed to take the territories of the former Spanish colony of Santo Domingo, unifying the territory of Haiti for twenty-two years, with the inclusion of the Spanish-speaking population.

As a result of Boyer's success, France realized that regaining control of the island was no longer a viable possibility. The other Spanish possessions in South and Central America had achieved independence and, in accordance with Monroe's doctrine, the United States was committed to opposing any attempt by the European powers to re-appropriate the former colonies. Meanwhile, relations with France continued and Haiti remained the main supplier of coffee for the former colonizer. In 1825, the French government had initiated a reimbursement system for all French nobles who had lost their possessions and wealth during the French Revolution. The colonists of Saint Domingue did not accept being excluded from these reimbursements, so the French government had to look for a strategy to guarantee their inclusion: eventually, they worked out the problem by demanding that Haiti become an official French protectorate. Outraged, Boyer refused the proposal, since he was not willing to sacrifice Haiti's position after so many years of struggle for its own independence. He would not give up diplomatic power, especially to safeguard the country's international affairs.

Haiti's geopolitical position was also endangered when the newly independent republics, unwilling to go against France, refused to recognize Haiti's independence by excluding the country from a congress held in Panama in 1826. Following the petition idea of a few decades earlier, "Boyer was willing to consider paying some compensation to the former colonists for their lost lands, although not for their slaves, who -he pointed out- had been emancipated in 1793 by officials representing the French government, but he

balked at the terms the French proposed”. The matter ended with the arrival of a naval squadron on the island in the spring of 1825, setting very harsh conditions for the Haitians: the indemnity amounted to 150 million francs and, moreover, importers of French goods demanded to pay only half the tariffs charged on imports from other countries.

If Haiti had refused to fulfil these commitments, the French government would have withdrawn the recognition of its independence. On top of that, Boyer was threatened that if he refused the ultimatum the city of Port-au-Prince would be bombed. At this point, the President of Haiti had no choice but to accept the agreement, hoping to be able to change some terms later. The Haitian people were forced to take a loan from French banks to pay the indemnity. The terms imposed by France were impossible to meet and, for this reason, the island was unable in any way to recover. To this problem, also added the crisis in the sugar cultivation sector, which had now been moved, in particular, to Cuba and Brazil.

After several years, realizing that Haiti would never be able to pay off the debt, the French government agreed to reduce the amount of repairs in 1838 and finally gave up any threat of military intervention in Haiti. Haiti was able to pay the full balance required only in 1893: this long-lasting financial instability caused an impoverishment of the state and a consequential internal insecurity, which still affect the present. This strategy implemented by France was later defined as “neo-colonialism”, that is, the approach carried out by more developed countries to continue exploiting the resources of the poorest, albeit formally independent, countries.

Although the country lingers in a state of poverty, what happened on the island and what its inhabitants were able to do had immense historical, political and cultural significance. According to Buck Morss (2009), “the self-liberation of the African slaves of Saint-Domingue gained for them, by force, the recognition of European and American whites—if only in the form of fear. Among those with egalitarian sympathies, it gained them respect as well. For almost a decade, before the violent elimination of whites signalled their deliberate retreat from universalist principles, the black Jacobins

of Saint-Domingue surpassed the metropole in actively realizing the Enlightenment goal of human liberty, seeming to give proof that the French Revolution was not simply a European phenomenon but world-historical in its implications”⁹²

3.1 The situation in the Caribbean: the Cuban case.

The echo of the Haitian revolution spread all over the Western world, as well as in the neighbouring areas of Haiti. Indeed, the Caribbean islands experienced many of the sentiments and problems that also emerged in Haiti. The outcomes clearly differed between the area of Europe and North America and the area of Central America: in the former, a strong philosophical and historical debate ignited, which is still ongoing today; in the latter, radical changes altered the general structure of many former European colonies. The example of the black revolution had spread across the North Atlantic Ocean, from Cuba, Jamaica and Venezuela to Virginia and Florida.

To get a more complete view of the Revolution’s framework, it is very interesting to analyse what happened in the Caribbean Sea: in this area, there are located Puerto Rico, Jamaica and Cuba, three large islands which were occupied by the English and Spanish forces. In particular, the events of Cuba attracted the attention of many scholars and authors such as Fischer and Ferrer. Also James reserved some pages on the Cuban case in the last part of his book, *Black Jacobins*.

Claimed in the name of Spain by Christopher Columbus during his first voyage in 1492, Cuba was ruled for four centuries by the Spanish domination which led to the extermination of all natives (there was also the Taíno population, as well as in Haiti) and the importation of slaves from Africa for sugar plantations. James wrote that “in the first part of the seventeenth Century, early settlers from Europe had made quite a success of individual production. The sugar plantation drove them out. The slaves saw around them a social life of a certain material culture and ease, the life of the sugar-plantation owners”⁹³. We therefore find a social stratification similar to the Haitian one.

⁹² Buck Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and the Universal History*, cit., pp. 39-40.

⁹³ James, p. 392.

On account of the small size of the island, an intense political relationship was established between plantations owners and traders. Moreover, “the sugar plantation dominated the lives of the islands to such a degree that the white skin alone saved those who were not plantation owners or bureaucrats from the humiliations and hopelessness of the life of the slave”⁹⁴.

In the first weeks of 1812, word had spread that the Spanish *Cortes* had abolished slavery in Cádiz. This event immediately shook the hearts of Cuban slaves and free people of colour. On March 19th, 1812, a revolt led by José Antonio Aponte and nine other conspirators broke out. The Aponte Slave Rebellion was very short but it marked the beginning of a change. Salvador Muro y Salazar, Marquez of Someruelos, Captain General of the island, defined these acts as motivated by a “stupid ambition”. On the eve of their execution, he added that “it is therefore absolutely necessary that they [the slaves] be relieved of the illusion that slavery has been abolished, by telling them frankly that there is not, and never has been, such liberty....”⁹⁵. With these words, the general wanted to highlight that the insurgency of Aponte was a unique event, determined by a single individual, so denying that it was an expression of a general discontent. He defined the leader of the revolt as a “fantastic king” recalling and denigrating the image of king Henri Christophe, who in those years had taken power in Haiti.

Fischer's comment underlined the characteristics of the general's political strategy, noting many elements in common with the approach that the French government had towards the nearby Haitian colony. “The political and strategic payoff of this redescription is clear. A dismissal of the political activities of the non-white population as delusionary fantasy would not preclude cautionary measures. But to the extent that the reality of these activities is acknowledged, their political meaning and transcendence are denied. By establishing a close link between the events of the conspiracy and the rumours about an abolitionist Spanish law, Someruelos disavows the revolutionary intent of Aponte and instead assimilates it to moderate abolitionism. This, it seems to

⁹⁴ Ibidem.

⁹⁵ Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed, Haiti And The Cultures Of Slavery In The Age Of Revolution*, cit., p. 41.

me, is more important than his hard line on abolitionism itself: together with any possible connection with Haiti, he eliminates the third possibility, that of black agency, and of a slave revolution on the Haitian model”⁹⁶. The connection with Haitian revolutionary leaders is shown by some sources, claiming that the Cuban leader possessed portraits of Toussaint Louverture, Henri Christophe, and Dessalines.

The revolutionary activity of Aponte and his testimony becomes one of the most important ones in the history of Cuba. From the documents of his trial, we are able to get useful and very interesting information. “More than any other document from the revolutionary age in the Caribbean, Aponte’s transimperial, multilingual, and radically heterogeneous book is a reflection of the hemispheric scope of the slave economies as well as a testimony to the influence of revolutionary ideas coming from Haiti and France”. Many of his documents were lost and the little information available about his figure was gathered thanks to the work of José Luciano Franco: he reported that Aponte was a Cuban-born cabinetmaker and artisan sculptor; a descendant of the African population of Yoruba, he had managed to emerge as a bourgeois among free blacks and mulattos and, like his grandfather previously, he had held military positions in the battles during the English occupation of Havana. The other limited information that Franco was able to collect concerned the "oral history" that many populations in Havana were handed down from generation to generation.

There was a problem with spreading the news between Haiti and Cuba. Ferrer dealt with the system existing at the time: the primary sources of information came from the slave vessels, which, calling at different Caribbean islands, brought the latest news. She reported the example of the ship *Charming Sally*, whose captain John Davison had reported to the Cuban authorities and population the news of the rebellions acts of Le Cap and of the alliance between white and free people of colour in Port-au-prince. On board the vessel, there were some slaves to be sold: according to Ferrer, this detail (which she defined as “an excess of communication”) was not to be underestimated. “The same event – the arrival of a slave ship carrying both captives to be sold and news of black and mulatto revolution – highlighted the simultaneity of the destruction and the

⁹⁶ Ivi, p. 42.

rise of Caribbean slave systems. The material infrastructure that disseminated the example of revolutionary antislavery was the very same infrastructure that underwrote slavery's expansion. Thus, news of the slave revolution arrived in the same vessels that were facilitating its antithesis – the entrenchment of slavery – in nearby Cuba”⁹⁷. Therefore another contradiction of the new world system emerged.

With the abolition of slavery and the proclamation of independence of Haiti, “the plantation, indelibly associated with slavery, became unbearable”. James (1968) noted that “for the first century and a half of Haiti's existence there was no international opinion jealous of the independence of small nations; no body or similar states, ready to raise a hue and cry at any threat to one of their number; no theory of aid from the wealthy countries to the poorer ones. Subsistence production resulted in economic decay and every variety of political disorder. Yet it has preserved the national independence, and out of this has come something new which has captured a continent and holds its place in the institutions of the world”⁹⁸.

Once learnt the news of the slave and mulatto rebellions, the Spanish government tried to keep those associated with the French colonies out to prevent their influence from exasperating and changing the structure of the colony in Cuba. This new approach had also changed the phenomenon of maritime marronage. Cuba had been considered one of the safe places where to escape: for example, some slaves who escaped from Jamaica said they wanted to receive baptismal water to be welcomed into the more tolerant Spanish colony; however, after the first turmoil of 1780 in France and Saint Domingue, all French people of colour, free blacks and even creoles were not allowed to disembark on the island. The situation in Cuba had worsened. "If Haiti became the epicenter of Black Atlantic freedom after 1804, Cuba became its antithesis. The destruction of Saint-Domingue's plantation world and the eventual rise of a peasant one on the same ground facilitated the hegemony of slavery, sugar, and the plantation on the neighbouring island. Eager to preserve the privileges won with Saint-Domingue's collapse and

⁹⁷ Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror. Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution*, cit., pp. 57-58.

⁹⁸ James, *The Black Jacobins, Toussaint L 'Ouverture And The San Domingo Revolution*, cit., p. 393.

confronted with the fact of Haitian independence, authorities and planters in Cuba mobilized images of racial apocalypse to suppress any threat to their power.”⁹⁹

Meanwhile, the slave trade continued to be implemented by Spain, even after the agreement signed in 1820 between Spain and England to put an end to this suffering. Unfortunately, the activities did not stop but continued illegally to bring African populations to the island. The situation worsened when a rail-road was built in Cuba, expressly to meet the growing demand from the sugar industry. Following this news, the Haitian king Christophe expressed all his sorrow: “it was “only with the greatest grief that [he could] bear to see Spanish vessels engaged in the slave trade within sights of [Haitian] coasts.”¹⁰⁰”

During the nineteenth century, the Cuban bourgeoisie began to be intolerant of the Spanish government. In evaluating the struggle for the liberation of Cuba, it is necessary to take into consideration two factors: if, on the one hand, in the imaginary of Cuban slaves and free-of-colour had been created a revolution of black soldiers and sailors who publicized the Haitian message of freedom; on the other hand, this message had materialized from encounters between real people who had further fuelled the myth of Haiti. Whatever the feelings of the Cubans were, whether based on reality or imagination, it was the Haitian revolution to serve as an “anchor of solidarities¹⁰¹” not only for those years but for future ones.

At the end of the century, the two wars of independence broke out: the first, called “The Ten Years’ War”, occurred between 1868 and 1878 and “The Small War” between 1879 and 1880. José Martí was the political leader and Maceo was the General. Independence from Spain came only in 1898.

⁹⁹ Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror. Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution*, cit. p. 338.

¹⁰⁰ Ivi, p. 336.

¹⁰¹ Ivi, p. 339.

3.2 The legacy in the Western world

The impact of the Haitian revolution was so remarkable that it went beyond its borders. Slavery was, in fact, an institution present in the societies of the entire American continent, from north to south. The victory of the Haitians over the French and the subsequent declaration of independence had challenged the whole Eurocentric world made up of “whites”, with a “supposedly higher level of civilization” and people who were “naturally destined to rule”¹⁰².

In the eighteenth century, Western civilization was the bearer of universal principles such as freedom and equality, concepts at the basis of the thought of the Enlightenment. In theory, they were supposed to be the liberators from darkness, but what they accomplished in the colonies was just slavery, death and destruction. Freedom and slavery were conceptually antithetical: yet, it was precisely in this period that “the economic practice of slavery—the systematic, highly sophisticated capitalist enslavement of non-Europeans as a labor force in the colonies—was increasing quantitatively and intensifying qualitatively to the point that by the mid-eighteenth century it came to underwrite the entire economic system of the West, paradoxically facilitating the global spread of the very Enlightenment ideals that were in such fundamental contradiction to it”¹⁰³. This enormous paradox did not seem to upset the conscience of the Enlightenment philosophers of the time. Even today, it seems that this approach, in a Western and White context, continues to be dealt with according to the vision of the time, that of total white supremacy.

The occidental author who was most often cited and criticized for his position towards slavery was Hegel. In the context of the Haitian revolution, the German philosopher stood in complete antithesis. The famous sentence “it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained” of Hegel, in *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807) addressed the issue of the “struggle to death” between master and slave. According to him, this relationship is “the key to the unfolding of freedom in world history”¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰² Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, cit., p. 158.

¹⁰³ Buck Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and the Universal History*, cit., p. 21.

¹⁰⁴ Ivi, p. 48.

In the words of Alexandre Kojève (1969): “He must overcome him “dialectically.” (...) he must leave him life and consciousness, and destroy only his autonomy. He must overcome the adversary only insofar as the adversary is opposed to him and acts against him. In other words, he must enslave him”¹⁰⁵. In his interpretation, he stressed the concept of “labor, socioeconomic oppression, and violence” linked to a “vigorous bodily immediacy of a revolutionary rhetoric” however absent in Hegel's thought. Kojève stated that: “man is Self-Consciousness. He is conscious of himself, conscious of his human reality and dignity; and it is in this that he is essentially different from animals”. There is the opposition of the two notions: the human and the animal, in which the human perceives reality and dignity and the awareness of these two. Fischer summarized this principle, stating that: “epistemological structures are from the beginning folded back into concerns of existential philosophy, practical philosophy, and political struggles”¹⁰⁶.

This well-known passage has also been interpreted from a point of view of sexual and racial issues by women and men of colour. Paul Gilroy, in *The Black Atlantic* (1993), “Hegel provides the terms for “a firm rebuke to the mesmeric idea of history as progress” and “an opportunity to re-periodise and reaccentuate accounts of the dialectic of Enlightenment.”¹⁰⁷ Moreover, Davis suggested an allegory of Hegel's dialectic of master and slave between Toussaint Louverture and Napoleon.

Both Buck Morss and Fischer accuse Hegel of having deliberately avoided making reference to his present. It is widely ascertained that Hegel was aware of what was happening in Haiti, precisely because, when he conceived the concept of master-slave, the first revolts had broken out both in France and on the island. In those months, Hegel commented: “reading the newspaper in early morning is a kind of realistic morning prayer. One orients one’s attitude against the world and toward God [in one case], or

¹⁰⁵ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the reading of Hegel. Lectures on the phenomenology of spirit.*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1947, p. 15.

¹⁰⁶ Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed, Haiti And The Cultures Of Slavery In The Age Of Revolution*, cit., p. 29.

¹⁰⁷ Ivi, p. 25.

toward that which the world is [in the other]. The former gives the same security as the latter, in that one knows where one stands.”¹⁰⁸

Buck Morss harshly criticized him: “Either Hegel was the blindest of all the blind philosophers of freedom in Enlightenment Europe, surpassing Locke and Rousseau by far in his ability to block out reality right in front of his nose (the print right in front of his face at the breakfast table); or Hegel knew—knew about real slaves revolting successfully against real masters, and he elaborated his dialectic of lordship and bondage deliberately within this contemporary context.”¹⁰⁹ Fischer continued by pointing out how the whole context in which he lived suggested many reference to the historical events, such as the *Code Noir*, the legal documents where the “thinghood” of the slave “was enshrined, stressing throughout the translatability of the Hegelian terms into the terms of modern racial slavery”¹¹⁰.

Taking a step forward in philosophical reasoning, many philosophers have wondered how to overcome the dialectic of the relationship between master and slave. This question has always been considered as the profound disagreement in Hegel's thought, as Hegel himself had failed to overcome the problem and explain clearly this passage. Buck Morss defined Hegel's passage as permeated by “obscurity” and “silence”, questioning why at this point he left the matter “unsaid”. She suggested that, if “those who once acquiesced to slavery demonstrate their humanity when they are willing to risk death rather than remain subjugated”¹¹¹, the intent of Hegel was, actually, closer to several black scholars thinking than one might think. Reporting his word permitted to have a clearer idea. Indeed, he stated that: “The individual, who has not staked his life, may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person; but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness.”. The purpose of the abolitionists was precisely to recognize the slave as a person, taking into account how much they had tried to change their position in all ways and achieve freedom, at the cost of their lives. “The goal of this liberation, out of slavery, cannot be subjugation of the master in turn,

¹⁰⁸ Buck Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and the Universal History*, cit., p. 49.

¹⁰⁹ Ivi, p. 50.

¹¹⁰ Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed, Haiti And The Cultures Of Slavery In The Age Of Revolution*, cit., p. 27.

¹¹¹ Buck Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and the Universal History*, cit., p. 55.

which would be merely to repeat the master's "existential impasse," but, rather, elimination of the institution of slavery altogether"¹¹².

Butler agreed with Buck Morss in stating that there are ambiguities in Hegel's discourse. She stressed her idea that "the master-slave dialectic secures "a liberationist narrative for various progressive political visions." In her account, Hegel's resolution of the dialectic is "dystopic" and far closer to the Foucauldian view according to which subjects cannot, in the strict sense, be liberated from oppression, since they come into existence only as effects of just that oppression, than to any idea of revolutionary liberation"¹¹³. Hence, Hegel's missing explanation leads to a large number of different directions on which it is difficult to agree.

The events of the Haitian revolution had completely upset the contemporary world, questioning all the most deeply rooted certainties in European society. The legacy of the Haitian revolution was the complete subversion of the principles of freedom and equality, typical of the western world. At the end of the eighteenth century, the French colony of Saint Domingue had shown the great contradictions of capitalism. There was a black subjectivity that had managed to impose itself on a white subjectivity, breaking the plantation slavery system. Haiti had become the leading example of decolonization for all the other colonies scattered throughout the Caribbean, in Latin America and the United States.

¹¹² Ibidem.

¹¹³ Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed, Haiti And The Cultures Of Slavery In The Age Of Revolution*, cit., p. 28.

Conclusions

The Haitian revolution marked a fundamental break in the history of the Atlantic world. As we have seen, the Haitian state, after having undergone French domination for over two centuries, changed its structure forever, which repercussions are visible today.

Many historians, sociologists, philosophers and academics from all over the world have dealt with this extraordinary event, contributing to a detailed and in-depth analysis of a topic that has been silenced for too many centuries.

The repercussions of the revolutionary event that have been analysed here concern concepts of freedom, sovereignty and modernity.

When European colonial domination began, a distortion of the unique and linear temporariness typical of European modernity took place. The idea of freedom could not be the same. Freedom is conceived in a universal way that goes beyond territorial boundaries. In the framework of the Haitian Revolution, freedom could not just be regarded as an exercise of citizenship rights. First, it needed to be perceived by the individuals, by human beings themselves, and it is achieved through struggle and rebellion. Only then, the Haitian people can achieve emancipation. Therefore, the black community perceived freedom as the possibility of deciding one's own existence, so it is a freedom that can only be achieved collectively, given the structural nature of racism.

The Haitian population subverted the colonial order because two sovereignties can not live together: there can be only one sovereign state. The black people put in place a process of rupture with the past driven by the need to create autonomous organizations. Black sovereignty starts to be shaped, extremely intertwined with the problem of race and the figure of the slaves that undoubtedly plays a key role in the process of colonial modernity. It happens that from slavery a new culture is born and a new world develops. From a social point of view, we are witnessing the birth of a new culture, with a lingua franca (the creole), a common religion (voodoo), a common and very hard discipline of labour (administered through the whip) and a common memory of resistance. From an economic point of view, we observe the creation of a system of plantations based on exploitation and maximization of production.

This new triumphant black sovereignty overthrows the concept of modernity by presenting and imposing its subjectivity as an independent black people. The spatial dimension of sovereignty went beyond its national borders, thus breaking the traditional conception contained in the notion of modern State.

The principles of the French Revolution inspired the struggle of the Haitian people: these French ideals provided a transcendental importance in the Haitian context, however considering them a starting point. The undisputed leader of the Haitian revolution and great supporter of the French republican principles was Toussaint Louverture. James (1989) reported his famous words: “I took up arms for the freedom of my colour, which France alone proclaimed, but which she has no right to nullify. Our liberty is no longer in her hands; it is our own! We will defend it or perish.”¹¹⁴

Thanks to his key figure, a black community was forged: his personality and his great diplomatic skills inspired millions of slaves and mulattoes not only on the island of Haiti but also on the other Caribbean islands. He became the emblem of the struggle for emancipation against a violent and despicable master, demonstrating that the Haitian people could be an example to follow and emulate.

The Haitian Revolution was not a marginal event because it showed all the contradictions by which Western civilization was characterized. It challenged the capitalism of the European colonies by destroying the plantation system from which they made large profits through the exploitation of black slaves.

An element that many scholars have highlighted is the lack of direct sources of the colonized that makes the analysis work more complicated. The risk of categorizing the Haitian revolution according to the Western European concepts of modernity is high. In this analysis, in order to understand the point of view of people with different origins and social dynamics, it was needed to think outside the preconceived notions.

Haiti's political imagery as a liberated land and paradise for all assumes infinite configurations: every concept contextualized in the Haitian Revolution went far beyond existing European Enlightenment, exceeding any limit of race and nationality.

The new Haitian state was the first independent nation entirely constituted by free men in Latin America and the second erected in the entire continent. Despite the many contradictions within the Haitian discourse, this revolution inaugurated a new historical

¹¹⁴ James, *The Black Jacobins, Toussaint L'Ouverture And The San Domingo Revolution*, cit., p. 281.

epoch marked by the end of black slavery in the Americas and the beginning of decolonization.

This event generated a new awareness in the black community by breaking the racist ideology and starting a completely new popular culture born from the meeting of African and European populations.

To conclude, we must think of the Haitian revolution not as an event that happened and ended in the past but as a turning point that continues to have repercussions in the present day: the Haitian revolution and all the concepts related to it returns from the past even stronger, shaking and breaking the present consciousness.

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