



Slave Resistance, Slave Revolts and “Democratic Revolutions”

Week Seven Lectures



"Democratic Revolutions" in the late 1700s

- Philip Curtin mentioned that starting with the American Revolution of 1776-1983, many revolutions and reforms occurred throughout the European world, as well as the European occupied parts of the Americas.
 - The Spanish and Portuguese engaged in imperial reform in the 1760s-1770s, prior to the American revolution, but this was not a "revolution".
- Perhaps the most famous, and potentially radical, was the French Revolution, starting in 1789.
- Curtin notes that some revolutions spurred on others, leading to copies, imitations, and applications of other strategies.
- While most of these revolutions were progressive, they were not necessarily radical or against slavery or exploitation. They were still fairly elite.

Resistance and Revolution among Slaves

- While these grand revolutions in Europe and America provided some inspiration, according to Gomez, "the enslaved did not need theoretical principles . . . to know the depth of their anguish and yearning for deliverance" (109)
- As early as 1503, slaves were revolting against their masters, engaging in various different strategies to ensure success. Every 5-10 years, there was a slave revolt in a different plantation colony, most leading to deaths of both whites and blacks.
- Methods of Resistance ranged from the most mundane to the most violent. Slaves wanted an end to their oppression.

Maroonage: Planning to Escape

- One of the most famous ways to resist slavery was simply to leave. "If the enslaved could flee to an inaccessible place beyond the reach of the authorities, they could live in a manner of their choosing; it was not Africa, but barring repatriation, it was as close as they could get" (112).
- Maroons, as these communities of runaway former-slaves were called, often existed in the mountains, swamps, or jungles. It had to be away from where white plantations and authorities were located.
 - These communities often depended on slaves on plantations to obtain supplies and sell goods.
- Many slave owners hated these communities, as "they inspired rebellion and defiance among the enslaved" (112).
 - The Palenques in Cuba and the Saramaka in Suriname were some of the more infamous

Maroonage: Planning to Escape

- A Few of the Maroon communities were quite successful:
- Palmares, which was established in 1605 in northeastern Brazil near Pernambuco, would be more accurately described as a "Black Republic" than a Maroon Community. It existed for almost 100 years (1695) and it operated a functional army, fighting almost twenty wars with the Portuguese before they were defeated. The population was as high as 30,000 Maroons
- The United States had a lot of Maroon communities as well. They were often located in the Swamps.
 - The two most famous were in the *la cypriere* of Louisiana and the Dismal Swamps of Virginia/N. Carolina.
- Maroon communities were often a way in between slave plantations and freedom in the Northern United States, which was reached on the proverbial "Underground Railroad".

Everyday Resistance on Slave Plantations

- Not all individuals could escape or go to war. And furthermore, some slaves actually had an inferiority complex (a psychological result of slavery) and indeed felt inferior to whites.
- Resistance did occur on plantations, though it was often indirect:
 - Abortion and Infanticide
 - Creation of "Fictive Kinship"
 - Transformation of Christian Beliefs to Correspond with African traditions
 - Language maintenance and Creolization
 - Sabotage of machinery; setting fire to crops
 - Work Slowdowns****
 - Murder of Slave owner
 - Absconding
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The Haitian Revolution

- On the Island of San Domingue, in the French Antilles, following in the turbulence of the 1789 French Revolution, caught the French Authorities off guard by beginning a coordinated, armed revolt throughout the Haitian half of the island. The revolution lasted from 1791-1804.
- Led by General Toussaint Louverture and his Lieutenant Jean-Jacques Dessalines
- Without getting into too many details, these individuals fought against the French for many years, linking revolting slaves throughout the colony against the slave-holders.
- This led the French to Abolish Slavery in 1793, but the war didn't end. Dessalines eventually proclaimed Haiti an independent Black Republic in 1804, evicting the white former slave-owners. Those who refused to leave were executed in 1804, leading to the deaths of up to 5,000 men, women, & children.

The Haitian Revolution

- The Haitian revolution inspired black people throughout the world. It was the first (and only) revolt to defeat militarily a European slaveocracy and create an independent nation bereft of slavery.
- African Americans read about Haiti in newspapers and heard from black sailors about the developments in the revolution. Nearly everyone was concerned with the outcome.
- Furthermore, according to Fanning, as many as 13,000 free black people in the USA migrated to Haiti to be part of the independent republic.
- Some Haitian military leaders went on to assist other Caribbean nations in their uprisings.
- One might argue that the Haitian revolution was part of the rising tide of revolts in the early 1800s in the USA, such as those of Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and John Brown.