

Haiti's Slighted Revolutions of 1804 and 1990

Some years ago, in Cuba's Museum of the Revolution, there were exhibits about, of course, Cuba's 1959 revolution led by Fidel Castro, as well as the 1917 Russian and 1791 French revolutions. There was, however, no exhibit on the 1804 Haitian revolution.

This is shocking, because there is arguably no revolution ever which faced more difficult odds or had a more profound effect on world history.

The victory of the former slaves of the French colony of St. Domingue against what was then the world's most powerful army forced Napoleon to sell France's Louisiana Territory to the newly born United States. Haitian revolutionary leaders gave ships, weapons, printing presses, and troops to Miranda and Bolivar, which helped bring about the liberation of the South American Spanish colonies.

Beyond changing the map of the Americas, history's first and last successful slave revolution became a beacon for African slaves throughout the Western Hemisphere and inspired hundreds of uprisings.

Perhaps for this reason, although Haitian aid to his revolutions had been conditioned on abolishing slavery, Bolivar did not invite Haiti to the first congress of new American nations in Panama in 1826, although he did invite representatives from the U.S., still a slave-owning nation.

Similar neglect has met Haiti's 1990 political revolution, which became a precursor and model for "electoral revolutions" across Latin America at the turn of the century. Hugo Chavez, Evo Morales, Raphael Correa, and others were inspired by the example set when former liberation theologian priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide defeated a better-funded U.S.-backed technocrat candidate, creating the first malfunction of modern U.S. election engineering.

Despite its trail-blazing role in human history, Haiti remains underappreciated in large part due to the demonization and misrepresentation of its revolutions and their leaders by the official historians of its imperial foes, primarily France and the U.S.. I will argue that, as a result, from Karl Marx to today's anti-capitalist intellectuals, Haiti's history has been neglected by the very thinkers and movements which could learn so much from it and about class dynamics generally.

Finally, in this current age of right-wing resurgence in Europe and the Americas, there are many signs that Haiti may soon again be where a democratic anti-imperialist uprising erupts, inspiring social movements and revolutionaries around the world.