Haiti, Mbeki and Contemporary Imperialism

This paper examines a generally unremarked on aspect of Thabo Mbeki’s presidency – his affirmation of the Haitian Revolution as an event of global import, and, in the face of considerable pressure, his support for the right of contemporary Haitians to determine their own future. It begins with a brief account of the Haitian Revolution, goes onto to offer a sketch of the long attempt to contain the Revolution, outlines what has been at stake in recent Haitian politics, and its international reception, and then describes the positions taken by Mbeki with regard to Haiti.

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On the 26th of August 1789 the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was adopted by the National Constituent Assembly in revolutionary Paris. The adoption of the Declaration has often been understood as a foundational moment in the development of the epoch in human history now often thought of as modernity and, also, in the development of liberalism as a set of extant political arrangements. The declaration affirmed a set of freedoms and a commitment to popular sovereignty. It began with the affirmation that “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights”.

The Declaration, with its commitment to natural rights, did not arrive ex nihlo. The American Revolution of 1783, and in particular the Declaration of Independence (1776), was a key influence. Some of the principles codified in these documents were taken from the Magna Carta, adopted in England in 1215 as a compromise between the King and a rebellious aristocracy that affirmed the liberties of the ‘freemen of England’.

The Magna Carta was explicitly a document of Christian Europe in a time in which heretical popular movements opposed the constituted political and religious authority of the day, often in the name of divinely sanctioned rights to the commons, and elites led armies into battle in the East in the name of religion. The crusades, Peter Linebaugh argues, were “a murderous device to resolve a contradiction between baron and commoner in the cauldron of a religious war” (2008: 27). As Robin Blackburn notes with the Declaration of Independence the American Revolution “took a historic leap beyond the particularistic
notion of ‘the rights of Englishmen’” but for the great majority of its partisans the phrase ‘all men’ “did not include Indians, Negroes, women and children” (1988: 111). Similarly, it soon became clear that the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen would not include all of humanity in the count of who was part of the idea of ‘man’. The sphere in which limited freedoms were affirmed was extended, in spatial terms, from England to North America at the same time as it was ring-fenced in racial terms.

The first feminist critique of the rights announced in revolutionary Paris, the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen, appeared in 1791 - its author, Olympe de Gouges, was sent to the guillotine in 1793. Mary Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman was published in 1792. The Société des amis des Noirs or Amis des noirs, which was founded in 1788, and continued its work until 1793, advocated, ineffectually, for the gradual abolition of slavery. But when the question of slavery was discussed in the Constituent Assembly in March 1790 a decree was passed declaring that support for any uprising against the colonists would be taken as treason. The revolution was implicated in the entrenchment of the ideology, first developed to justify slavery in the United States and the Caribbean, that declared that there was an ontological split in the human, a split that rendered some more human than others, and that tied ontological fantasies of a graduated humanity to the idea of race.

In 1791 a slave rebellion, a rebellion that would in time become a revolution, broke out in Saint-Domingue, France’s richest colonial treasure. The founder of the Amis des noirs called for its immediate repression. As Peter Hallward notes: “There’s a world of difference . . . between the assertion of such fine principles [abolition] and active solidarity with an actual slave uprising” (2004a: 5). There’s also a world of difference between the sort of solidarity that poses equality as a state to be attained at some indeterminate point in the future, when the oppressed are deemed by their oppressors to be ready for equality, and the immediate affirmation of equality as an axiomatic principle.

**Liberal Racism**

Liberalism is often understood and taught as if it were a philosophy and practice of universal freedom. When there is some acknowledgement that, in theory and practice, it has failed to
include all people in its conception of ‘the rights of man’, it is sometimes suggested that these omissions are incidental rather than central to liberal thought and practice and that liberalism has the great virtue of having created the space for debates and contestation that could, over time, steadily rectify any omissions. It is perhaps in this spirit that a contemporary textbook introducing South African students to political philosophy declares that “Most discussions of freedom begin with John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty” (Vincent et al, 2012: 20).

It seems fair to assume that in this view Mill’s position, plainly expressed in his essay On Liberty, that “Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians” (1976: 73) is incidental rather than central to his philosophy, and to the political practices to which it has been connected. However there is a developing body of scholarship that shows that liberalism, both in theory and practice, has been a constitutive ideological and political force driving the colonial project – including genocide and slavery. This body of scholarship notes the active commitment to racist ideas, and the colonial project, in the work of liberal thinkers like John Locke, Mill and others. It also notes the centrality of liberal forms of power to modern forms of colonialism and imperialism. Domenico Losurdo argues that classic liberal thought, still exalted by contemporary Euro-American imperialism as a universal philosophy of freedom, orbits around an original distinction between sacred and profane spaces that later comes to be raced:

The sacred space, the tiny sacred island, is thus delimited with the utmost clarity from the infinite profane space. We might say that outside the chosen people everything tended to be reduced to deconsecrated nature, within whose orbit also came the populations condemned by Jehovah to be wiped off the face of the earth. The destruction fell upon ‘both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass’; or, in more pregnant terms, ‘all the souls’, ‘all that breathed’, ‘all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground’. Within the specifically profane space, the distinction between man and nature does not seem to emerge, or does not play a prominent role (2011: 310).

He shows that “Slavery is not something that persisted despite the success of the three liberal revolutions. On the contrary, it experienced its maximum development following that
success” (2011:35). In this line of critique the question of who counts as ‘man’, as ‘human’, is fundamental to how we understand both liberal thought and practice, and resistance to it.

The Haitian Revolution

On or around the 14th of August 1793 a group of slaves gathered on Saint-Domingue under the leadership of Dutty Boukman, possibly a Muslim, who had been brought to the island from Jamaica, and began a slave insurrection. On the the 29th of August 1793, Toussaint Bréda, announced his new name, Toussaint Louverture (The Opening) and his commitment to the insurrection. Boukman was killed by the French in November that year and Louverture became the leader of the insurrection. In July the following year he excoriated the slave owners, “in the eyes of humanity” (2008: 6) and announced that “We are your equals then, by natural right” (2008: 7). As C.L.R. James noted in his A History of Pan-African Revolt, first published in 1938, the leaders of the slave revolt “embraced the revolutionary doctrine” announced in Paris as their own “and fought under the slogans of liberty and equality” (1995: 47). James took the question of the human seriously arguing that: “They enslaved the Negro, they said, because he was not a man, and when he behaved like a man they called him a monster” (1989: 362). Linebaugh and Rediker note that, as is so often the case, “The idiom of monstrosity sanctioned violent, steady repression” (2000: 340).

Louverture would sustain this commitment to a universal conception of humanity, and the immediate and equal rights accruing to that status, until his death in exile in a French prison in the Juru mountains on the 7th of April 1803. Under the command of Jean-Jacques Dessalines the army forged by Louverture, fighting under the banner of ‘Liberty or Death!’, went on to attain the independence of Saint-Domingue, end slavery and become the first black republic in the modern world, renamed Haiti, on the 1st of January 1804. As James himself noted in his pathbreaking, and now classic account of the revolution, The Black Jacobins (1989), also first published in 1938, placed considerable emphasis on the leaders of the revolution. But as Carolyn Fick has shown the success of the revolution was consequent to sustained commitment from below. “The masses had resisted the French from the very beginning, in spite of, and not because of, their leadership. They had shouldered the whole burden and paid the price of resistance all along, and it was they who had now made
possible the political and military reintegration of the leaders in the collective struggle” (1990: 228). John Thornton (1993) has shown that, particular in the early stages of the revolution, this collective fortitude was animated, to a significant degree, by ideas and practices brought to the island by people enslaved from the Kongo Kingdom. But these ideas and practices intersected with new ideas and practices, including a public sphere, with elite and insurgent dimensions, that straddled the Atlantic (Nesbitt 2008). Its popular forms were largely developed via sailors and dock workers on ships and at ports (Linebaugh & Rediker 2000; Ferrer 2014) and became what Paul Gilroy (1993) has called a modern counterculture. The Haitian Revolution was not just an eminently modern event, it was also, as has often been argued in recent years, a constitutively modern event.

**Responses to the Revolution**

In a short but brilliant and influential reflection on the bicentennial anniversary of the revolution Hallward argued that “The Haitian revolution is a powerful illustration of the way in which any actively universal prescription is simultaneously an exceptional and divisive revaluation of a hitherto unrepresentable or ‘untouchable’ aspect of its situation” (2004: 5). Domination organised around a conception of graduated humanity can, under pressure, often reform itself to include a commitment to the recognition of universal humanity in the abstract, often in terms of the law, but, in the absence of outright defeat, is seldom willing to grant this recognition in the realm of the concrete. As Aimé Césaire observed: “(T)he colonizer pushes the colonized to desire an abstract equality. But equality refuses to remain abstract. And what an affair it is when the colonized takes back the word on his own account to demand that it not remain a mere word!” (Cited in Nesbitt, 2008: 86). In an oppressive situation the affirmation of universal humanity, with a universal entitlement to political and material rights, is inevitably fundamentally divisive.

News of the triumph of the revolution in Haiti rushed around the world and was received with tremendous enthusiasm in black counter publics. In Cuba images of L’ouverture were passed from ships to men working on the docks, and then to slaves on the plantations. The Haitian Declaration of Independence was translated into Spanish, published and circulated...
Rebellions were attempted across the Caribbean, in Brazil and the United States. The possibility that the Haitian revolution was a factor in the Cape slave revolt of 1808 has been raised by a number of authors (e.g. Kelly 2009). In Charleston, Virginia, a slave rebellion was planned, largely via the Africa Methodist Episcopal Church, in 1821 and 1882 but discovered a week before it was scheduled to begin. Denmark Vesey, the leader of the revolt, had previously been enslaved in Saint-Domingue and the slaves aimed to escape to Haiti (Egerton 1999). The Haitian revolution immediately became, and has remained, central to the imagination of international black counter publics such as, for instance, the Pan-African movement. However, in the main, its reception in sites and circuits of knowledge authorised by European and colonial power was very different. Exceptions to this included Wordsworth’s poem for Louverture, published early in 1803; the pamphlet by James Stephen, brother-in-law to Wilberforce (Blackburn, 1988, p. 252); the uneven reportage in the German magazine Minerva, which ranged from outright racism to printing statements from Dessalines (Buck-Morss, 2009; Jenson, 2010) and which, in part, famously led Susan Buck-Morss to conclude that Hegel’s account of slavery in The Phenomenology of Spirit was inspired by the Haitian Revoltion; as well as the 1805 book by Marcus Rainsford, a British army officer, titled An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti (Rainsford, 2003).

Jacques Rancière does not offer much in the way of resources to think through the degree to which race is a fundamental feature of modern forms of oppression. But his work on consensus can be fruitfully appropriated for this project. He argue that:

Consensus does not simply mean the agreement of the political parties or of social partners on the common interests of the community. It means a reconfiguration of the visibility of the common. It means that the givens of any collective situation are objectified in such a way that they can no longer lend themselves to a dispute, to the polemical framing of a controversial world within the given world (2009: 48).

In others words consensus is invariably predicated on the objectification of the oppressed, and their exclusion from the count of who matters, and who has rights to intervene in the social and to access its material wealth. Rancière uses the term ‘police’ to describe the regulation of “the configuration of the visible, the thinkable, and the possible” (2007).
When the subject not authorised as part of the count of those who matter, and who have rights to intervene in the social and to access its material wealth, does so this is, across space and time, frequently read in terms of conspiracy, criminality or, in James’s analysis, monstrosity. Lewis and Jane Gordon, working in a framework that has clear resonances with James’s thinking, and which is also developed by Linebaugh & Rediker (2000), remind us that elites generally assume that the system in which they have prospered is ultimately good and that the people that disrupt its smooth functioning must be problem people – even monsters. They point out that in anti-black societies, black people are rendered monstrous “when they attempt to live and participate in the wider civil society and engage in processes of governing among whites...Their presence in society generally constitutes crime” (2009: 49).

Unsurprisingly the Haitian Revolution has been read in these terms from the beginning by liberal actors. In 1805 the French foreign minister wrote to the US Secretary of State, James Madison, declaring that “The existence of a Negro people in arms, occupying a country it has soiled by the most criminal acts is a horrible spectacle for all white nations” (Hallward 2007: 12; cf. Farmer 2004). As Hallward notes “The deeply subversive success of Haiti’s revolution provoked both at home and abroad a counter-revolution that in many ways continues to this day” (2004: 12). Paul Farmer explains that “Virtually all the world’s powers sided with France against the self-proclaimed Black Republic, which declared itself a haven not only for runaway slaves but also for indigenous people from the rest of the Americas” (2004). Embargoes were enforced and, in 1825, the Haitian government was forced to pay France ‘compensation’ for the loss of its slaves. Money had to be borrowed, at extortionate rates, to pay the debt that, at the end of the nineteenth century, took around 80% of the national budget and was only fully paid off in 1947. Today contemporary forms of armed imperialism, now backed by NGOs and donors speaking the language of liberalism, and in particular human rights and civil society, continue to deny Haitians the right to elect the leaders of their choosing and to chart their own path.

But the rendering of the demand for equality, backed with force, as monstrous was (and is) only one strategy of ideological containment. In Silencing the Past the Haitian historian,
Michel-Rolph Trouillot shows, brilliantly, that on the eve of the insurrection in Saint-Domingue in 1790, an insurrection that would result in the declaration of an independent black republic in 1804, colonial authority was simply unable to imagine the possibility of a slave revolt. He quotes a letter from a colonist to his wife in Paris in which the writer declared that “There is no movement among our Negroes...They don’t even think of it. They are very tranquil and obedient. A revolt among them is impossible....Freedom for the Negroes is a chimera” (1995: 72). In a formulation that has a certain resonance with Fanon’s famous comment about ‘cognitive dissonance’ Trouillot argues that:

> When reality does not coincide with deeply held beliefs, human beings tend to phrase interpretations that force reality within the scope of these beliefs. They devise formulas to repress the unthinkable and to bring it back within the realm of accepted discourse (1995: 72).

He concludes that “the contention that Africans and their descendants could not envision freedom – let alone formulate strategies for gaining and securing such freedom – was based not so much on empirical evidence as on an ontology, an implicit organisation of the world and its inhabitants” (1995: 73). One result of this, he argues, is that “The Haitian Revolution thus entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened” (1995: 73). Trouillot is careful to show that the ontological assumptions that made African agency unthinkable in Saint-Domingue before and during the revolution were also foundational to the extreme left in France. He also shows that colonial assumptions about ontology continued to shape academic accounts of the period, including on the left, in Euro-American thought for almost two centuries after the revolution – Fick’s invaluable work (1990) is a notable exception. Intellectuals of the stature of Eric Hobsbawm and Hannah Arendt could write on revolution without taking the Haitian revolution seriously. Trouillot concluded that “the narrative structures of Western historiography have not broken with the ontological order of the Renaissance” (1995: 106) and, crucially, stressed that this was as true for historians on the left as on the right. In Sibylle Fischer’s estimation (2004) the Euro-American idea of modernity as a democratic and egalitarian project emerged, and was sustained, via the active disavowal of attempts, most significantly in Haiti, to extend equality and democracy to all human beings without regard for race.
For a long time it was largely out of the academy, and via the work of radical black intellectuals like C.L.R. James and, later, Aimé Césaire, that the Haitian Revolution was taken seriously. James’ book was read clandestinely under apartheid and was taken as an important text by anti-apartheid activists in exile. It’s only in the last fifteen years, and in particular in the last ten years, that the Haitian Revolution has begun to be taken seriously in the mainstream of the Euro-American academy and the commanding heights of its progressive public sphere via influential publications like the London Review of Books and New Left Review. Susan Buck-Morss’s 2000 essay Hegel and Haiti, and her book that followed in 2009, Laurent Dubois’s 2005 book, Hallward’s 2004 intervention in Radical Philosophy, and his 2007 book, and Nesbitt’s books in 2008 and 2013 enabled the idea of the Haitian Revolution as Event to enter the philosophical mainstream of radical Euro-American thought (e.g. Badiou 2013).

If we read the Haitian Revolution as, in Alain Badiou’s sense of the term, an Event (2001) it becomes important to, as Kant did with the revolution of 1789, think 1804 as an Idea. In recent years beginning, with Buck-Morss’s famous essay in 2000 - which has been subject to a persuasive critique by George Ciccariello-Mahler (2014) – and then continuing with Hallward’s more philosophically impressive 2004 essay and Nesbitt’s 2008 book, a line of analysis has developed that stresses a commitment to universal emancipation as central to the Idea of 1804. Nesbit concludes that “The fidelity to the universal truth of human emancipation unleashed in the events of 1791-1804 began the difficult construction of an unqualified and universal freedom first concretized not in Philadelphia in 1776, nor in Paris in 1789, but in the new state of Haiti of January 1 1804” (2008: 80).

The Enduring Salience of the Question of the Human

It has been argued that the commitment to the affirmation of a universal humanity has characterised a tradition of black radical thought that, in the Caribbean runs from Louverture through to more contemporary figures such as C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Jean-Bertrand Aristide and Lewis Gordon. There are clear resonances with this universalising response to the position of blacks in the modern world closer to home in the
commitment of Steve Biko to a ‘true humanity’. The divisiveness of the affirmation of the authentic universal (e.g. where everyone counts as human) in a situation in which a false universal functions to formally or informally exclude some people from the count of who is human retained is radical and divisive power for more than two centuries. During the course of this time it has often been read as, in effect, criminal or monstrous, in the commanding heights of the Euro-American academy. However since the arrival of postmodernism as an intellectual fad both the idea of humanism, and the work of reaching towards the universal, have often been derided as theoretically passé, naïve and even pre-critical. This posture, which can also take the form of what Rancière calls ‘policing’, has frequently not taken any account of the black radical tradition.

In contemporary South Africa this posture confronts three very different but nonetheless mutually resonant limits. One is the constant affirmation in popular protest and organisation by the oppressed of the oppressed as human, and of emancipation as the attainment of a social order that recognises the humanity of the oppressed. This is often framed in the language of recovery or restoration – and is sometimes organised around the idea of dignity. The second is the extraordinary popular return, especially among young people, to the ideas of Fanon and Biko (Pithouse 2015). The third is a shift, at the highest levels of academic theoretical production, to a return to the question of the human, also often framed in terms of an idea of recovery. For Achille Mbembe

the human has consistently taken on the form of waste within the peculiar trajectory race and capitalism espoused in South Africa...... The question this country is therefore facing today as yesterday is under what conditions can South Africa re-imagine democracy not only as a form of human mutuality and freedom, but also as a community of life. In order to confront the ghost in the life of so many, the concepts of "the human", or of "humanism", inherited from the West will not suffice. We will have to take seriously the anthropological embeddedness of such terms in long histories of "the human" as waste (2011).

**Contemporary Haitian Politics**

In recent years contemporary Haitian politics have also become increasing significant on the global stage. Haiti was occupied by the US in 1915 – “in the name of humanity, morality, and
civilization” (Abbott 1991: 34) - and subject to an openly racist mode of rule (Abbott 1991; Robinson 1996) that included organised prostitution, forced labour and attempts to suppress spiritual practices with their roots in Africa. The occupying forces took over the national bank, expropriated land to set up plantations and established an army – whose only enemy would be the Haitian people (Hallward 2004). The American occupation produced a profoundly racist imagination of Haiti in popular American culture via fantastical representations of ‘voodoo’ in horror films and the like (McGee 2012). When the AIDS epidemic first appeared in the United States it was frequently, and incorrectly, ascribed to Haitian contagion from “the little Africa off the coast of Florida” in scientific and media discourse (Farmer, 1992, p. xii). Haiti continues to be read through crass racist tropes in the Euro-American public sphere, from which they are sometimes imported, uncritically, to South Africa - see for instance, the article titled “Haiti: Rape, murder and voodoo on the Island of the Dammed” in the British Daily Mail (Malone 2010) which was republished, without critique, in the South African Sunday Independent.

An armed revolt broke out in 1918. It was defeated by 1922 and the body of one of its leaders, Charlemagne Péralte, paraded on a crucifix by the Marines. Among the ideas that developed in opposition to the occupation was noirisme, a set of ideas that sought to embrace the African dimension of Haitian life and history and to transfer power away from the light skinned elites to the darker skinned majority. Following a massacre in 1929 the Americans began to rethink their strategy and in 1934 the occupation was formally ended. In 1937 thousands of Haitians, perhaps up to a hundred thousand, working as migrant labourers in the cane fields of Cuba were expelled by the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship. Many of them sought refuge in the Dominican Republic. Rafael Leonidas, mobilising explicitly racist language, responded with a pogrom in which between twenty to thirty thousand Haitians were massacred (Sprague, 2012). Overtly racist hostility towards Haiti, and Haitians, continues to fester in the Dominican Republic to this day – most recently taking the form of the mass expulsion of Haitians from the Dominican Republic.

In 1943 Francois Duvalier, a young doctor, intellectual and activist committed to the noiriste movement, made his name via a successful American backed immunisation campaign. In 1957 he was elected into power via a rigged election. Duvalier set up his own militia, the
notorious Tontons Macoutes, who, in Hallward’s formulation, “were given the right to extract a living from the local population in return for preserving its docility” (2007:14). Leftists and pro-democracy activists were subject to particular harassment, frequently taking the form of torture and murder, including indiscriminate massacres. Estimates of the number of people killed under the dictatorship range as high as 50 000 (Sprague, 2012, p. 34). The vast bulk of the professional class fled the country. The dictatorship took an anti-communist perspective, conspired against the Cuban Revolution and was consistently backed by the United States (Robinson, 1996). Duvalier died in 1971 and power passed to his son who held it until 1986 when, facing a popular rebellion, he fled to France on a US plane and retirement on the French Riviera.

The rebellion against the dictatorship was driven by small popular organisations, usually locally organised, often linked to the church and subject to serious repression, mostly via paramilitary forces allied the state. Popular mobilisation continued inspired, Hallward writes, by “the modest though revolutionary principles of liberation theology’s preferential option for the poor – and affirmation of the dignity and equality of the people” (2007: 17). In 1990 Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a Catholic priest committed to liberation theology and its central idea, that emancipation can only be attained by the self-activity of the oppressed, who had survived an armed attack on his Church in 1988 – following which he was expelled from his order, the Society of St. Francis de Sales, was elected as President. He won more than two thirds of the vote in an election in which 80% of the electorate cast their votes. The US had invested $36 million in the campaign of his rival, former World Bank official Marc Bazin (Hallward 2007: 31). On the day of the election a US delegation, led by Jimmy Carter, tried to persuade Aristide to renounced his overwhelming victory and offer the Presidency to Bazin (Hallward 2007: 37). Within a month of his election a first attempt was made at a coup – and thwarted by massive popular mobilisation.

In The Parish of the Poor, published in the year in which he was elected to the presidency, Aristide wrote that “Bolivar’s bright sword”, the sword of liberty, would be found “in the parishes of the poor” (1990:13) and insisted that “the people will write their own fate” (1990: 107). Hallward describes Aristide’s politics as: “affirmative and egalitarian, based on the self-evident but explosive principle that tout moun se moun. Everyone counts as one,
every person is endowed with the same essential dignity. . . The only agent or actor adequate to the declaration *tout moun se moun* are the people themselves – the people united in a collective project of social transformation” (2007: 21, c.f. Aristide 2007).

Hallward also notes that Aristide stressed the political virtue of simplicity and took the view that “If politics is not clear and inclusive it is not politics at all” (2007: 22). The resonance with the ideas developed in the contemporary South African poor people’s movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo, and often described as *ubuhlali* or as ‘a living politics’ are striking.

In office Aristide acted swiftly and effectively to dismantle the armed forces that had contained and exploited the Haitian people for so long and pursued a set of modest reforms, such as an increase to the minimum wage and price controls on basic foods. Although these were modest measures it was clear that he was on the side of the people. Haitian elites allied with imperialism and Aristide was abducted and removed from office in a US backed military coup in September 1991. Following the coup the popular movement that had elected Aristide into office was subject to serious repression (Hallward 2007, Robinson 2006). Thousands were killed.

In 1994, after huge demonstrations by Haitians living in the United States, Bill Clinton allowed Aristide to return to Haiti, and to serve out the rest of his term, that ran till 1996. But the conditions imposed by Clinton were onerous and Aristide’s return did not mark an affirmation of Haitian sovereignty. He had to accept a structural adjustment programme and to share power with the opposition that he had so soundly defeated in the election. In the coming years the idea that it would somehow be undemocratic for an elected leader not to cede power, in part or even in full, to an unelected and unpopular elite and foreign backed opposition would continue to be presented as if it were democratic common sense.

Aristide now implemented an even more modest programme but small concessions to popular demands generated extraordinary fear and hostility among the Haitian elite. For instance urban land occupations were not opposed by the state and the elites turned to gated communities and private security with the result that the bitter split between elites and the rest of the society became increasingly inscribed into space. Hallward (2004b) remarked that “For all its undeniable faults” Aristide’s party
remained the only significant force for popular mobilization in the country. No other political figure of the past fifty years has had anything like Aristide’s stature among the urban and rural poor. Reporting from Port-au-Prince in March 2004, the BBC’s correspondent was obliged to concede that, whereas Aristide was ‘universally reviled’ by the wealthy elite, he was still almost as universally affirmed by the great majority of the urban poor.

In 2000 Aristide was re-elected to the Presidency with 92% of the vote. With George Bush in office the American state was acutely hostile. USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy invested heavily in the project of creating a vocal opposition, an opposition that lacked any kind of popular support, via investment in ‘civil society’ (Hallward 2007, Robinson 2006). There were cases where Aristide’s supporters engaged in violence, sometimes as a matter of self-defence, but there is no doubt that the period of his rule was, by a very considerable distance, the freest, and least violent, in Haitian history at any point since the American invasion in 1915.

This was matched with support for armed opposition to Aristide’s government (Hallward 2007, Sprague 2012). The first incursion into Haiti, via the Dominican Republic, happened in July 2001. In December there was an airborne assault on the presidential residence and, during the following year, attacks on rural police stations.

Thabo Mbeki & Haiti

In June 2003 then President Thabo Mbeki, speaking at the University of the West Indies in Kingston, Jamaica, said that:

Next year, 2004, this Caribbean country will celebrate the bicentenary of its birth as the first black republic in the world. We, for our part, will be celebrating the 10th anniversary of our liberation from apartheid.

We have agreed with the Government of Haiti that, to the extent possible, we should work together to celebrate in an appropriate manner both anniversaries, informed by the fact that the victory of the African slaves in Haiti in 1804 is directly linked to the victory of the African oppressed in South Africa in 1994 (Mbeki 2003a).
Mbeki, noting that very few people in South Africa knew about the Haitian Revolution, argued that “we should use the occasion of the bicentenary of the Haitian revolution to inspire especially our youth to understand the capacity of the African masses in Africa and the Diaspora to change their social conditions”. He also sounded a note of caution observing that the response to the Haitian Revolution was very different to that of the French and American revolutions and suggested that examining the reasons for this may help to explain “why, in many respects, the African condition, certainly in sub-Saharan Africa, has been worsening over a number of years, despite the fact that we now exist as black republics, as Haiti has done for two hundred years.” He ended his remarks with a reading of the poem *Invictus*.

Back home he continued to speak about the meaning of the Haitian Revolution. In October that year he wrote that:

> The African slaves of Haiti laid down their lives to ensure that the democratic and republican ideals of the American and French Revolutions truly applied to all human beings. They made enormous sacrifices to give universal meaning to the prescriptions of the American Revolution that “all men are born equal”, and those of the French Revolution, incorporated in the Declaration on the Rights of Man, of liberty, equality and fraternity.

> The sacrifices they made established their place in human history as true democrats and republicans, even surpassing those in America and France who are celebrated in school textbooks as the global architects of democracy and republicanism. Because of what they did, they had to pay a price imposed on them by those who claimed the right to describe themselves as the world’s best democrats and republicans (2003b).

He went on to note that:

> Those who did nothing or very little to secure the victory of the slaves, positioned themselves as the best friends of the liberated slaves, the best advisers of what the free slaves should do with their freedom.

> We too have received all manner of advice and prescription about how we should conduct ourselves (2003b).

In December 2003, on the eve of the bi-centennial of the Haitian Revolution, Aristide issued a demand to France to pay reparations, in the sum of $21 billion dollars, the contemporary
value of the money that Haiti had been forced to pay France after the abolition of slavery. This escalated tensions with the imperial powers, and worsened the presentation of Aristide as unbalanced in the international media – which had long relied on sources such as Haitian elites, US diplomats, USAID and so on (Sprague, 2012). Aristide was demonized in the French media, including its left wing titles (Hallward 2007). Jacques Chirac warned that “Before bringing up claims of this nature I cannot stress enough to the authorities of Haiti the need to be very vigilant about—how should I put it—the nature of their actions and their regime” (Hallward 2004). Calls from the ‘international community’ and ‘civil society’ for Aristide to resign and cede power to an opposition that had never been elected, and clearly had no popular support, became more strident.

Mbeki’s stated commitment to be in Port-au-Prince for the commemoration of the bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution was received with open hostility by forces opposed the elected government in Haiti. For instance Groupe 184 declared that Mbeki was not welcome in Haiti and that his visit would be received as “an insult” (News24: 2003). This was widely covered in the South African media, and without critique. Groupe 184 - funded by the European Commission at the behest of France, headed by a notorious sweatshop owner, who was also the owner of the largest television station in the country, and devoid of any credible claim to popular support (Hallward 2004; Hallward 2007; Sprague 2012) – was uncritically referred to as a “civil society” organization in a manner that suggested democratic legitimacy (News24: 2003; IOL 2003).

On the 1st of January 2004 Mbeki was, despite the pressure, in Port-au-Prince for the event as promised. He was the only foreign head of state present. In his speech he declared that “Today we celebrate because from 1791 to 1803, our heroes, led by the revolutionary Toussaint L’Ouverture and others, dared to challenge those who had trampled on these sacred things that define our being as Africans and as human beings” (Mbeki 2004). Tens of thousands people attended the celebrations. Mbeki was excoriated in the South African media, and by the white dominated opposition Democratic Alliance (DA), whose leader described Aristide as ‘the Mugabe of the Caribbean’ (IOL 2004b). The DA referred to Mbeki’s visit as a misuse of taxpayer’s money, a disaster and a fiasco (IOL 2004b) and
declared that "Because of his over-emotional response to Haiti’s 200th anniversary ...
President Mbeki, alone among African or world leaders, insisted on participating in the celebration” (2004a). The Mail & Guardian, often considered a progressive newspaper, ran a story under the title ‘Mbeki’s Haitian Party’ (2004) that, without critique, recycled the most base propaganda emerging from the forces preparing the coup to come. Mbeki’s spokesperson, Bheki Khumalo, was quoted as saying that “Haitians themselves must decide the make-up of their government” and that the visit “had to do with an affirmation of the dignity of black people” (Mail & Guardian 2004) – but the headline had already set the story in a very different frame. It was very clear that liberal South Africa, from the media to the parliamentary opposition, remained profoundly invested in the ontological order established by colonialism.

When Mbeki, at the request of Caribbean leaders, authorized a shipment of equipment, including arms, to Haiti – the scorn and outrage from the liberal establishment, at home and abroad, escalated dramatically. But the axe fell before the shipment arrived.

On the 29th of February Aristide was removed from his home, against his will, by the US military and flown to the Central African Republic. French and American soldiers took control of the country. South Africa joined Caribbean states in calling for an investigation under the auspices of the United Nations. Liberal NGOs, like Action Aid (Hallward 2007: 239), which now has a large presence in Johannesburg, along with Batay Ouvriye, described by Hallward as “like any number of neo-Trotskyite sects . . . militant and inconsequential in equal measure” (2007: 186), offered ‘civil society’ legitimation for the coup, at the hands of US soldiers, that deposed an elected leader who continued to enjoy overwhelming popular support.

Writing in the immediate aftermath of the coup Hallward observed that “the overthrow of Aristide has most often figured as yet another demonstration of perhaps the most consistent theme of Western commentary on the island: that poor black people remain incapable of governing themselves” (2004b). A government was put together, made up of representatives of the traditional elite, and attacks on neighbourhoods that were pro-Aristide became routine.
The South African state jointed with Caribbean states to request that there be an investigation, under the auspices of the United Nations, into “the circumstances leading to the departure of President Aristide” (Reuters, 2004b). The request was ignored and the United Nations, instead, provided troops that secured the authority of the new leaders installed by an alliance of local elites and imperialism and continued the repression of the popular movement.

When Aristide arrived in South Africa, and was given the respect due to a head of state, he was frequently treated as a criminal by the media and the South African state was subject to open scorn. One journalist in particular, Fiona Forde, pursued a straightforwardly propagandistic approach to the coup, and Aristide’s presence in South Africa, with particular vehemence. As late as 2009, when many of the facts relating to the coup had been established, she continued to report that Aristide had ‘fled’, making no reference to the fact that he was kidnapped, against his will, by the US military (2009). She presented Aristide’s presence in South Africa as an abuse of taxpayer’s money (often a racially coded claim in South Africa), and, as recently as 2015, implied that it was consequent to corruption (2015) rather than a matter of solidarity. Gerard Latortue, who was placed at the head of the government after the coup, and whose record of violent repression is well documented (e.g. Hallward 2007) was quoted as if he was an unproblematically credible voice on matters relating to Aristide.

A study published in The Lancet in 2006, found that around 4 000 people allied to Aristide’s party, and possibly more, had been killed in political violence in the greater Port-au-Prince area since the US and UN backed regime was installed in power after the coup (Kolbe & Huston, pp. 864 – 873). When elections were held in 2006 Aristide’s party, Fanmi Lavalas, was simply barred from participation, which happened again in 2009 and 2010, while the figures associated with the coup received less than 2% of the vote. Yet in many ‘civil society’ and media circles these were the people presented as the democratic forces in Haiti while the popular movement built from below, at great cost and against great odds, and elected into state power was relentlessly portrayed in criminal terms. The ontological order
developed to legitimate colonialism, the order in which rights are not assumed to be for everyone, the order in which the demand for full and equal participation in governance is rendered monstrous, remains. Mbeki took a position again this. We would do well to recall that, on this matter, he stood firm against a tide of howling racism backed by powerful forces, at home and abroad.

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