Hope, Change and the Revolutionary Reality Check: Haiti and Cuba’s Lessons for Obama’s America

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Introduction

A new day was close at hand. The elite sectors that had controlled the political and economic systems never imagined an end to their dominance. But now, a charismatic young man trained in their vane but with his eye toward the masses had unfathomably gained control. The time for change had come. Hope was the clarion call and the people mobilized to make the impossible a reality.

But how does history treat such improbable turnings of tides? Not very kindly, I am afraid. True revolutions create discomfort not only for those toppled from power, but they also create parallel shockwaves in other locales with similar histories, similar structural inequalities. And so the displaced elite ally with those in other corners of the world to silence, erase, and otherwise minimize the import of the revolutionary occurrence. Such was the case following the Haitian revolution in 1804, such was the case in the aftermath of Cuba’s socialist revolution in 1959, but the historians have not yet had their say about the new American revolution initiated by the election of President Barack Obama in the United States of America. Certainly, the revolutions enacted in Haiti and Cuba differ significantly from the “Obama-lution”—especially given the violence required to instantiate them. However, they share uncanny parallels with one another that I would like to explore here. Most centrally, I argue that the import of the societal upheavals symbolized by the Haitian and Cuban revolutions has been historically silenced (Trouillot 1995).
In his much-cited ethnography, *Silencing the Past*, historical anthropologist, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) describes how historical silences are produced: first, at the moment of fact creation (that is, when sources are initially made); next, at the moment of fact assembly (that is, during the making of archives); then, at the moment of fact retrieval (that is, upon the making of narratives); and lastly, at the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in final instance). These historical silences take the form of erasures (or, formulas of silence that erase facts) as well as banalization (formulas of silence that empty a number of singular events of their content such that all are trivialized). “History” can thus be deconstructed in two ways: the first form of historicity involves “what happened”—the facts of the matter. I like to think of this as the underbelly of history because little of it ever sees the light of day. The second form of historicity involves “what is said to have happened”—the narrative about the facts, or the story into which the facts are shaped. This second form of historicity might be conceived as “the power to tell the victor’s tale.” While Trouillot’s ethnography excavates neglected narratives about the Haitian revolution, here, I explore how the accepted and well-worn stories about Haiti and Cuba have both erased and silenced their socio-political realities in the Western imaginary.

**Listening to Haiti**

The Haitian Revolution of 1804, which began as a slave revolt and culminated into the first black republic in the western hemisphere, not only radically altered relations between Haiti and France, but also the relations between slaveholders and slaves throughout the Americas (Trouillot 1995). If the slaves in Saint Domingue (Haiti’s colonial name) were demanding the same Rights of Man guaranteed to all French citizens
by the French Revolution, France responded with a resounding “no.” Unable to defeat the rebels militarily, the French enjoined the rest of the world to turn their backs on the newly independent nation.

Yet, despite the economic consequences Haiti would suffer (and continues to suffer) for its audacity, the Black Republic also came to symbolize the previously unacknowledged desires of slaves to be free—or even more dangerous, recognized as human (Trouillot 1995). For black slaves in the western hemisphere, Haiti was a beacon of hope; for the white slaveholders, it was an unacceptable threat to a ‘way of life.’ For the duration of the nineteenth century, slave uprisings throughout the Americas were crushed with unprecedented force for fear that “another Haiti” would sprout its ugly head (Helg 1995). Still—as they always had—the slaves continued their resistant behaviors.

Seeing Cuba

Similarly, the 1959 Cuban Revolution signified a break with what was becoming the ‘way of life’ in the twentieth century Caribbean. Slavery had finally ended in the region in 1886 as a political tactic by the Spaniards during Cuba’s first Independence War, but Cuban independence from Spain in 1901 brought a “protectorate” relationship with the United States. The Platt Amendment to the U.S. Constitution constrained the right to Cuban self-government by permitting the United States to make final decisions about Cuba’s domestic and international policies. U.S. economic interests took precedence over Cuba’s domestic concerns and Cuba became a testing ground for the marketing of new American products (Pérez 1999). The Cuban cultural sphere became inundated with U.S. material culture, even though the majority of Cubans had to go into debt to access those goods. Americans began to flock to Cuba in large numbers as
tourists, celebrating Cuban cultural forms while simultaneously adulterating them towards their North American sensibilities (Moore 1997; Pérez 1999). Cuban independence was an illusion contrasted against a neo-colonial reality.

In 1959, Fidel Castro led a revolution that sought to shake off the mantle of neo-colonialism and replace it with self-determined nationalism. As had occurred in Haiti 150 years earlier, the global superpower—this time, the United States—punished the rebel nation with economic sanctions and muscled other nations into doing the same. As the Cold War compelled Cuba to ally with the Soviet Union, the United States redirected the hegemonic relationship it had nearly perfected with Cuba to the Caribbean region more broadly. In addition to the encroaching political, economic, and cultural influences from the United States, tourism is now deeply entrenched as a tool for economic development in nearly every Caribbean country.

Methodological Approach

Before I continue, I should clarify that I am a Cuba scholar and a Caribbeanist. I am not a specialist on Haiti or the United States. But beyond my area of research focus, I am an anthropologist, which means that I take participant-observation very seriously—and I take it wherever I go. Therefore, as one who teaches courses on Cuba and the Caribbean, and as one who participates in and observes the socio-political processes in the United States, my analysis today will draw largely from classroom and “everyday” ethnography. Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s (1995) conceptualization of “historicity”—the power dynamics involved in the construction of history described earlier—frames my approach to the revolutions in Haiti and Cuba (as well as Obama’s America).
Silent Implications

While the import of the Haitian and Cuban cases continue to resonate for revolutionary movements worldwide, for the most part the capitalist West has sought to banalize them—that is, they have aimed to minimize or otherwise render them insignificant. On the most simplistic level, I urge you to watch the weather on the news this evening and try to find Cuba on the screen. Even when watching in Miami, from which the island is a mere ninety miles away, the network’s icon often blocks the nation that had the nerve to challenge U.S. global hegemony more than five decades ago.

Every year, I ask students in my Cuban Culture course how they conceive of Cuba, as well as the source of those perceptions. “Fidel Castro” is the most frequent response to the first entry questionnaire item, and the “popular media” is the most common source of information. Since most of my students were born in the late-1980s through early-1990s (as the Cold War was thawing), they have little conception of what “communism” or “socialism” means (indeed, recent descriptions of President Obama and the new law reforming the U.S. healthcare system suggest many older Americans are equally ignorant of what those ideological systems entail). While U.S. policy has instituted an economic blockade on the island, one result of preventing Americans from getting to know the country for themselves is a blockade on information about the realities of life in Cuba—including the good, the bad, and—yes—the ugly too. At the same time that American citizens deserve to know why Cuba’s free healthcare and educational systems are lauded worldwide, they also deserve to know why exiled Cuban-Americans bristle at teens wearing Ché Guevara iconography. When such histories are
unearthed, a broader cross-section of the U.S. population will be poised to
knowledgeably influence policy decisions concerning Cuba than is currently the case.

Similarly, until the devastating earthquake four months ago, most U.S. Americans
seldom gave Haiti a second thought. Every year, I teach a course on The Caribbean in
Post-colonial Perspective to more than 100 undergraduates. I make a point to ask how
many of them learned about the Haitian revolution in high school social studies or other
classes on world history, politics, or economics. Only very rarely do any students affirm
prior knowledge (I should note, however, that while the majority of students affirm they
have learned about the French Revolution elsewhere, few can recall much about it either).
As I teach them about Toussaint Louverture’s brilliant and cunning leadership against the
French (and the British and the Spanish), they are amazed to learn that a former slave
eventually defeated Napoleon’s mighty troops to restore peace to the colony. In contrast
to Pat Robertson’s assertion that the Haitians made a “deal with the devil” to gain their
freedom, I teach my students how Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe waged a
bloody campaign for slave and national independence after Louverture was tricked into
exile by French interests that sought to restore slavery.

There are two issues related to the legacy of poverty that regularly perplex my
students: first, why wouldn’t the people return to the plantations that had made Saint
Domingue the world’s most lucrative colony to that point in history? And second, why
did a fledgling Haiti pay restitution to the French for their loss of property? The answers
to both highlight the Haitian spirit and pride of which the world is slowly becoming
aware in the aftermath of the January earthquake. People refused to return to plantations
because they did not want to replicate in any way the conditions of their enslavement; and
they repaid the French because the first step in full independence is for one's former colonizer to formally recognize the new nation. While the French did not give Haiti the dignity of full recognition until 1825, the United States—which had become independent only three decades before—did not acknowledge Haiti until 1862, while in the throes of its own antislavery debate. Trouillot's two historicities beg us to ask what it would mean if instead of conceiving of Haitians as tragically poor, the world acknowledged a history that portrayed them to be fiercely free?

**Lessons for the Obama-lution**

On November 8, 2008 Barack Obama was elected the forty-fourth president of the United States of America by a mass movement on a platform of “change.” But as the inauguration of the first African American president neared on January 21, 2009, a rumor began to pick up momentum—Barack Obama was not American. A group known as “the birthers” claimed his Hawaiian birth certificate was not authentic; some even filed a lawsuit with the Supreme Court. Unable to block his presidency, opponents claimed his left of center policy agenda to be socialist, and a new Tea Party movement protesting the growth of the Federal government gained traction. Others reject the political and legal opposition to the Obama administration’s perceived federalism, and have begun to organize armed militias. None of these movements explicitly assert Obama’s blackness as the source of their virulence, but the racial undercurrents cannot be ignored when media pundits have to “forget Obama is black” in order to praise an aspect of his performance. Haiti and Cuba serve as reminders that the socio-political ascendance of blacks is often interpreted to signify the concurrent disempowerment of whites.
Even while Obama's administration is currently at that early "moment of fact creation," there are angry and loud voices seeking the shape the "narration of facts" in today's media age. Those voices have nearly drowned out the revolutionary cries of "Yes We Can" chanted by so many that historic November night less than two years ago. It remains to be seen which version of history will be recalled at the "moment of retrospective significance" when we look back on Obama's revolution fifty to one hundred years from now.