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Empire and Violence: Continuity in the Age of Revolution

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Abstract

When the Thirteen Colonies in North America, the slave colony of Saint-Domingue, and the colonial territories of the Portuguese and Spanish Americas all rose against their imperial rulers a new postcolonial order seemingly emerged in the Western Hemisphere. The reality of this situation forced political theorists and practitioners of the early nineteenth century to rethink the way in which they envisioned the nature and dynamics of international order. But a careful analysis of this shift reveals that it was not the radical break with prior notions of sovereignty and territoriality often described in the literature. This was not the emergence of a new post-imperial system of independent, nationally anchored states. Rather, it reflected a creative rethinking of existing notions of divided sovereignty and composite polities, rife with political experiments – from the formation of a new multi-centred empire in North America to the quasi-states and federations of Latin America. This moment of political experimentation and postcolonial order-making presented a distinctly new world repertoire of empire and state-building, parts of which were at least as violent and authoritarian as those of the old world empires it had replaced. The most radical ideas of freedom and liberty, championed by the black republic of Haiti, remained marginalized and sidelined by more conservative powers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Introduction

This article is less about origins than it is about continuity. While the revolutionary decades around the turn of the nineteenth century have often been posited as a pivotal moment of transformation – the period in which the nation-state either originated or cemented its place in international relations and political thought – I argue that it was as much a period of continuity as one of radical change. While revolutions swept across the Atlantic and altered the political landscape of the Western Hemisphere, these changes did not discard the basic elements of existing political order. That is to say, the foundational view of how the political world should be organized changed relatively little. In particular, international thought continued to operate to a large extent within an older, imperial, repertoire of composite polities and layered sovereignty (e.g. Benton, 2010, 30-32; Burbank and Cooper, 2010, 16-17; Stern, 2008). This was a period rife with experimentation with the state form to be sure, but such experimentation primarily took place within an imperial imagination and only in rare instances did it break out of a hierarchical mode of organizing power and institutions that owed much to earlier regimes.

National states as the organizing units of inter-polity relations were almost entirely contained within Europe and even here they solidified and spread only incrementally over the course of the nineteenth century. The new polities of the Americas took many different forms, from the multicentric republican empire of the United States to the short-lived city-states and federations of Spanish South America, but common to all of them was the lingering influence of older conceptions of sovereignty, territory, and constitutionalism. Although a break took place with the specifics of European colonialism in the new world, political order both between and within polities continued to be envisioned within a predominantly imperial register.

Of the ruptures that did take place during this period, the most radical had less to do with nationhood and anti-imperialism than they had with the specifics of racial hierarchy and notions of a very particular freedom – freedom from enslavement. The spread of these notions was more limited than the general wave of revolutions, however, and their advocates and thinkers have in many cases been less well remembered, side-lined as bit players in the dominating historical narratives that cast abolition and emancipation as white reformist projects, rather than black revolutionary ones.

Perhaps paradoxically, historical sociology as a field has been particularly reluctant to engage with the central role of empire in the history of the state.[1] A number of influential sociological accounts have told differing stories about the development of the state, from the classic Marxist analysis by Eric Hobsbawm to the explicit critique of historical materialism by Anthony Giddens, the majority of which have focused heavily on the early modern and modern periods of European history (e.g. Hobsbawm, 1962; Giddens, 1985; Mann, 1993; Ertman, 1997).[2] This focus on European metropoles, combined with a preoccupation with the origins of a particular form of "modern" nation-state, often ideal-typically defined along Weberian lines, have led historical sociologists to pay disproportionate attention to national, rather than imperial, polities.[3] Given this tendency, therefore, it is not surprising that the age of revolution and its immediate aftermath has overwhelmingly been read by historical sociologists as signifying a critical juncture on the path towards nation-states, rather than a more subtle shift within the framework of empire (Hobsbawm, 1962, 1-7; Skocpol, 1979, 174-205; Giddens, 1985, 32-34,

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[1] There are some notable recent exceptions to this tendency, in particular the work of Go (2011 and 2013) and Adams and Steinmetz (2015).

[2] The obvious geographical exception here is Anderson (2006), discussed in further detail below. It is worth noting that Mann has subsequently acknowledged the absence of empire in his earlier work and made some attempts at rectifying it (2012, p. vii).

[3] For a general critique of the project of defining "modern" states and state systems, see Cooper (2005, 113-149).

255-257). Pushing back on this particular Eurocentric and nation-centred reading of the age of revolution is thus one way of compelling the field to more carefully consider the role of empire in the historical processes of state formation, revolution, and inter-polity order.

This article contributes to the larger concerns of the special issue by illuminating a specific example of the entanglement of practice and theory at a very particular moment of transnational history (Barkawi and Lawson, 2016). This moment – the revolutionary decades at the turn of the nineteenth century – was fundamentally one of transboundary interaction, not just within large imperial polities but also between different empires. While I argue that it was not an origins moment per se, it was nonetheless a key period of political experimentation and theorizing of the state form, theorizing that came directly out of international or transboundary events driven forward by actors who were practitioner-theorists in their own right. Indeed, the distinction between practitioners and theorists mattered little to those engaged in the revolutionary upheavals at the turn of the century. For these men and women, thinking about the state and its place in the world was part of a larger effort of implementing reforms and enacting new repertoires of political practice – forging institutions and reshaping legal and political frameworks in the process.

Reading practice as theory

This article does not follow the traditional approach of viewing the history of political ideas through the optic of great canonical thinkers and their body of work. Rather, it adopts an approach that insists not only on the entanglement of theory and practice but on the necessity of reading practitioners as theorists, fashioning their own view of the dynamics of the world around them through their actions and policies.

Two related trends in intellectual and legal history have paved the way for this particular approach. The first is the time-honoured historical method of focusing on the practical and political context within which influential works of theory have been written (e.g. Van Ittersum, 2006; Hunter, 2013). The other trend is of a more recent date. A number of scholars have begun to focus on political and legal practitioners as theorists in their own right, highlighting the way in which judges, politicians, and magistrates argued for their particular interpretations of imperial law (e.g. Pitts, 2010; Fitzmaurice, 2014). A slew of recent works on the history of empire have combined these two approaches, effectively writing the history of imperial practices and the history of imperial theoretical and legal justifications as one and the same (Mantena, 2010; Benton and Straumann, 2010; Benton and Ford, forthcoming).

The approach advocated here goes beyond a search for the historical origins of particular theories or an insistence on the importance of historical context (e.g. Pocock, 1957; Skinner, 1969). Instead, it argues that practices themselves constitute a certain type of theorizing. It is no coincidence that such an approach has been particularly fruitful in legal history, since legal documents and rulings contain within them justifications and analyses which have the potential to make broader claims about the political or social world based on the details of specific cases. But the insights are not limited to legal history – indeed, much political practice can be read as theory when looked at from a certain vantage point. Does a head of government or a revolutionary leader have to write down a doctrine for us to be able to say that their policies constitute a particular view of the world? Surely a careful reading of their actions and policies can provide some insight into their perspective on the political landscape that surrounds them.[4]

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[4] In some cases such actors did indeed document their thoughts in a more coherent and systematic fashion, but given the vagaries of historical scholarship and the passage of time these texts have not always been submitted to careful scholarly analysis. See for example the rich sources left behind by Toussaint

Constitutions and declarations of independence are arguably among the most potent examples of specific political theories articulated within practice-oriented frameworks, whether authored by individuals or by committees (e.g. Lane, 1996; Armitage, 2008). Such texts represent the way in which the elites of new polities conceive of themselves, including crucially their relationship to other states and their position in inter-state politics. They are not just documents meant for governance or targeted at internal audiences, but also messages being broadcast to the other powers of the world, signalling goals, ambitions, and attitudes. In one sense, then, declarations of independence and founding constitutions are the products of very specific marriages between pragmatic politics and aspirational ideological frameworks, encapsulated into documents with lasting historical consequences. When studied on their own terms, they can be revealing windows into these moments of political turmoil, potentially illuminating the *weltanschauung* of their composers.

A revolutionary moment

Since R. R. Palmer's influential work in the 1950s, historians of Western Europe and the Atlantic world more broadly have referred to the decades surrounding the nineteenth century as the age of revolution (Palmer, 1959 and 1964).[5] This particular moment has been seen historiographically as a defining turning point in the emergence of not only nationalism but also the "nation-form" – the progenitor of the twenty-first century nation-state model – whether this emergence has been located on one side of the Atlantic (Bell, 2001; Sewell Jr., 2004) or the other (Brading, 1993; Anderson, 2006). Indeed, much of the historiographical debate of the past two decades has

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Louverture, including his short memoir explicitly defending his political programme as governor of Saint-Domingue (Girard, 2013 and 2014).
[5] Palmer's original work was notably Eurocentric, relegating the revolutions in Latin America to a few sentences and leaving the Haitian Revolution entirely untouched.

centred on the origin points of this new mode of politics, the central question being whether the old imperial metropoles or the colonies of the new world were the more important spaces for turning revolutionary ideals into political transformations. To put it somewhat crudely, this was a debate between Paris and Port-au-Prince (e.g. Dubois, 2004; Geggus, 2010).

Of notable importance for this debate has been Benedict Anderson's magisterial account of nationalism and, in particular, his notion of a certain kind of revolutionary creole nationalism originating in the colonial Americas (Anderson, 2006, 49-67). The creole elites of Anderson's story pioneered the idea of modern nationalism in the decades leading up to their revolutionary struggles against European imperial metropoles, and the formation of autonomous postcolonial republics in South America was essentially the culmination of this process. This creole nationalism, Anderson argues, contained a particularly modular notion of what exactly a nation meant, making it all the more easy for the intellectual framework to circulate and take root across the globe during the following century (Anderson, 2006, 80-82).

A number of European historians have pushed back against Anderson's account, arguing that the revisionist views of the origins of nationalism have gone too far in decentring European politics from the intellectual origins of a modular nation-form. Such critiques include arguments focusing on the importance of the French Revolution for articulations of the nation as a political project (Sewell Jr., 2004) as well as arguments for locating the origins of nationalism far earlier, in seventeenth century Northwestern Europe (Pincus, 1999; Gorski, 2000). In recent years the field seems to have moved towards a more complex and multifaceted understanding of the period, focusing more on the circulation of revolutionary ideas and practices across the ocean than on the somewhat one-sided search for specific points of origin (e.g. Klooster, 2009).

The various historical narratives of the age of revolutions, whether they place their emphasis on one side of the Atlantic or the other, have been immensely important for our conceptions of the development of the international system. As indicated above, the period has typically been read in both historical sociology and international relations as heralding the beginnings of a global shift away from pre-modern polity types and towards the modern nation-state.[6] However, when looking more carefully at the revolutionary upheavals at the turn of the nineteenth century, and especially at the political reforms and reorientations of their immediate aftermath, it becomes clear that this is less the story of a groundbreaking shift in perceptions and more one of continuity and experimentation within existing modes of political ordering. While European political thinkers gradually began to operate with the nation-form as a central unit of analysis, political thought and practice outside the narrow confines of Western Europe looked quite different. What revolutionaries and republicans in the Caribbean and the Americas championed was not a new political entity easily recognizable as the nation-state of the twentieth or twenty-first century. Autonomy did not mean nationhood and revolution did not spell the end of empire.

Constitutional thought and political experiments

The major revolutionary powers of the Western Hemisphere – the United States, Haiti, Gran Colombia, the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata, and Brazil – all followed distinct paths to independence and adopted quite disparate strategies once autonomy had been achieved. The US endeavoured to build a new empire to rival those of the European powers, with multiple different

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[6] E.g. Hobsbawm (1962), Giddens (1985), Mayall (1990), Mann (1993), Reus-Smit (2013). In their account of the political transformations of the nineteenth century, Buzan and Lawson avoid making a similar claim by limiting most of their discussion of the nation-form in the international system to the last decades of the century (2015, 35, 117-118).

centres and interests in partial competition with each other; the Spanish American states struggled to forge new alliances, both with each other and with foreign imperial actors, simultaneously resisting and welcoming outside influences, while experimenting with federation and autonomy in the process; Brazil attempted to replace Lisbon as the centre of the Lusophone colonial world; and Haiti created an autonomous space not driven by ambitions of nationhood or expansion, but rather by notions of racial equality and abolition, whether within the French Empire or outside of it. Despite these differences, they all shared a number of common features in their approach to fashioning a stable political order.

The historiography on US empire has been far more developed than any of the other cases here examined, in part because of the very visibility of imperial ambitions in American politics during the early republican period. Indeed, notions of empire were built in to the US Constitution itself, positioning the young republic as a political contender among the powers of the earth while retaining important continuities with the legal and political framework of the British Empire in North America (Lawson and Seidman, 2003; Hulsebosch, 2005, 203-258). In one influential reading of this founding document, the Constitution is seen as a "peace pact" between the disparate polities that made up the United States, ensuring that they would unite as a single empire, rather than wage war against one another over the territory and resources of North America (Hendrickson, 2003). This imperial ambition was carried forward into the administration of the third US president, Thomas Jefferson, who put both expansion and intervention at the heart of his foreign policy with the Louisiana Purchase, the Barbary War, the "civilizing program" of assimilating Native Americans into the empire, and continued westward expansion being prime examples (McCoy, 1980; Hendrickson and Tucker, 1990; Golay, 2003).

The Monroe Doctrine, a set of policy propositions authored by American President James Monroe and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams in 1823, became a turning point of sorts for the nineteenth century political division of the Atlantic world into a western and an eastern half. This document made it clear that the Western Hemisphere was first and foremost a space of new world empires, and would from now on be outside the reach of old world colonialism:

> … with the Governments who have declared their independence and maintain it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration and on just principles, acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their destiny, by any European power in any other light than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States.[7]

The doctrine would, of course, later become a rationale the for the United States' own interventions in Latin America, but even in its original form it was arguably more about demarcating spheres of influence than about rejecting the notion of imperialism (Murphy, 2009).

The US was an interesting example of a multicentric imperial polity. Given its origins as thirteen distinct colonies and the reading of the constitution as a peace pact given above, it should come as no surprise that there were different centres of political power in the early republic. At the turn of the century, three cities in particular competed over the informal seat of imperial power – New York, Philadelphia, and Washington – the country's newly erected capitol. Each of these cities presented their own ambitious imperial projects, focusing in particular on major infrastructure and legislation meant to project American power across the continent (Kanhofer, forthcoming). Later, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the internal competition for empire shifted to the north-south divide that would become so critical for the future of the union.

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[7] Message of President James Monroe at the commencement of the first session of the 18th Congress, 2 December 1823, Records of the United States Senate 1789-1990, the National Archives.

Imperial expansion was of particular importance to the southern states, as this provided an opportunity to spread the institution of slavery to new parts of the growing American empire, especially important given the rising power of northern abolitionist movements. The most obvious targets for colonial enterprises of this sort were the plantation islands of the Caribbean, but southern elites also had their eyes on expansion into Central and Western America and the remnants of New Spain (May, 1989). This coalesced with the general American trend of westward expansion, culminating in the late 1830s and 1840s with the notion of manifest destiny, a particularly American form of settler colonialism that came to dominate much of the country's political discourse (Graebner, 1955; Haynes and Morris, 1997; Rifkin, 2009).

While the different political centres of the US had competing visions of what an American empire ought to look like, these ambitions often came together to shape what was in general an outward-looking policy of intervention and expansion. In this way the US proved to be both a competitor with and an inheritor of the British Empire to which its founding colonies had belonged. The obsession with empire building continued within influential strands of US policy throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, with practitioner-theorists at various times looking eastward to the Caribbean, south towards Central America, and westward to the Pacific Ocean (Heffer, 1995; Hendrickson, 2009; Magness and Page, 2011). [8]

The revolutions in the Spanish Americas were not initially about rejecting empire as much as about contesting the centres of legitimacy and authority within the empire itself. The initial impetus for the revolutions was the fall of the House of Bourbon during the Napoleonic Wars and the establishment of the Supreme Central Junta of Seville in 1809, which claimed to

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[8] A different but parallel strand of US imperialism was carried out by relatively autonomous agents on the ground, stretching from Panama to Canton, with little direct involvement by political authorities (e.g. Warren, 1943; Brown, 1980; Downs, 1997; Blaufarb, 2007; McGuinness, 2009). For the long trajectory of US interventionism abroad, see Williams (1980).

rule all of the Spanish Empire overseas. Several competing juntas were established across the colonies, growing rapidly following the defeat of the Central Junta by Napoleon's forces in 1810, and a decade of conflict between the various juntas and between the juntas and the Spanish Empire took place over the next decade. The early state projects of Latin America were wrought by internal tensions between loyalists and republicans – those who saw a the old European metropoles as disseminators of political legitimacy and those who would replace those symbols with a new world republican federalism, itself evolved from an older imperial political imagination (Adelman, 2006).

These conflicts brought together a diverse cast of political actors, including influential creole revolutionaries such as Simón Bolívar, born in Caracas, and José Gervasio Artigas, born in Montevideo, as well as many royalists who continued to see themselves as imperial subjects first and foremost and who, while ready to reject a Napoleonic puppet regime, were less eager to embrace complete independence from the empire. Such men came to the ascendance during the brief but bloody Reconquista – the Spanish Empire's attempt to regain control of its American colonies following the restoration of Ferdinand VII in 1814. As defeating the returning Spanish forces, the majority of who were American royalists rather than Europeans, became the key aim for republicans, revolutionary regimes moved towards consolidating their power and forging new continental alliances amidst these internal conflicts. This consolidation led to more organized experiments aimed at replacing the formal imperial authority of Spain with new unitary cosmopolitan federations, gathering together provincial juntas and city-states who shared similar visions of autonomy and self-control.

In attempting to consolidate power and establish a sustainable post-revolutionary political order in the former Spanish territories, men such as Bolívar and Artigas acted as practitioner-

theorists in their own right. While they did not leave behind large bodies of tracts and monographs, as some of their predecessors and contemporaries in North America had done, they nonetheless formulated clear theories of statecraft and governance, visible in declarations and speeches such as Artigas' Instrucciones del año XIII or Bolívar's Angostura Address (Street, 1959; Bushnell, 2003).

Perhaps the clearest and most famous example of such texts was Bolívar's so-called Jamaican Letter, a letter written in 1815 to one Henry Cullen of Jamaica. In it, Bolívar not only analysed the recent history of the Latin American struggles for independence, including the failure of the Second Republic of Venezuela the previous year, but framed these conflicts within a wider context of trans-imperial upheaval across the Western Hemisphere, aligning the fates of Caribbean, South American, and North American subjects. The letter also highlighted the unequal and unfair differentiation of subject groups by the Spanish Empire, while making it clear that this colonial legacy would continue to play a central role in the new Latin American polities:

> … we, who preserve only the barest vestige of what we were formerly, and who are moreover neither Indians nor Europeans, but a race halfway between the legitimate owners of the land and the Spanish usurpers – in short, being Americans by birth and endowed with rights from Europe – find ourselves forced to defend these rights against the natives while maintaining our position in the land against intrusion of the invaders.[9]

There was thus little space for the rights of indigenous populations in Bolívar's America. Indeed, the ideology shaping these new state projects was not so much a universal liberalism as it was a certain kind of constitutionalism, one that drew directly on and contributed to the growing body of federalist and confederalist thought coming out of the American Revolution.

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[9] "The Jamaican Letter: Response from a South American to a Gentleman from This Island," printed and translated in Bushnell (2003, 18). The letter is of further interest because it had as its secondary subject the government of the British Empire, serving as a call for recognition and support of the new Spanish American polities.

One of the key components of this federalism was also an important characteristic of earlier imperial rule – the notion of divisible and layered sovereignty. The principle of layered sovereignty was built into the constitutions of both Gran Colombia, the republican successor to the Spanish colony of New Grenada, and the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata, which replaced the colonial Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata following the May Revolution of 1810. Cities and provinces such as Buenos Aires and Santa Fe in the Río de la Plata and Bogotá and Quito in Gran Colombia were autonomous or semi-autonomous political units in their own right, enjoying a degree of sovereign control layered below the overarching sovereignty of the political federations to which they belonged.[10] While the political experiments of the new world ran from relatively revolutionary republicanism to monarchical neo-authoritarianism, all of these state-building projects thus involved ideas of multi-layered sovereignty and were founded on remnants of the imperial administrative order of the ancien regime (Rodríguez, 1998; Chiaramonte, 2004). In the words of Benton and Ford, these were "Republican visions built on structures of colonial and imperial bureaucracy, including and especially law" (forthcoming).

As new republics emerged out of the ruins of the first Latin American federations in the 1830s, the involvement of old European empires on the continent also became more formalized. While the initial involvement of especially the British Empire in the Americas had been a matter of strong dispute within creole elites, with arguments ranging from ambivalent rejection by Artigas to the very direct embrace of imperial interventions by Carlos Alvear (Benton and Ford, forthcoming), the 1830s saw a more unambiguous invitation of European commercial power into the Western Hemisphere. While European policy-makers did their best to use this opening to

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[10] Such relationships were not always without tension, of course, and led to multiple internal conflicts in the 1810s and '20s, resulting ultimately in the demise of these large federations. For the long-term rivalries of regional hubs such as Montevideo and Buenos Aires that carried over into the republican period, see Prado (2015).

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influence Latin American political processes in what has often been termed a strategy of "informal empire" (Gallagher and Robinson, 1953), such diplomatic manoeuvrings were rarely very successful and the American republics generally managed to retain a great deal of independence while gradually becoming more integrated into emerging global markets (Mclean, 1995, 39-65).

Parallel to and at times entangled with the struggles over autonomy in Spanish South America was the internal strife that shook the Portuguese Empire in the 1810s and '20s. During Napoleon's occupation of Portugal, the seat of the Portuguese monarchy relocated to Brazil. As Portugal regained its independence following the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, a schism broke out between those in the royal family who returned to Europe and those who remained in Brazil, namely the Prince Regent Dom Pedro (Adelman, 2006, 220-257, 340-342). This schism was in part a struggle between the older generation, favouring a continuation of absolute monarchy, and the younger supporters of constitutionalism, eventually leading to the revolution of 1820 and to the establishment of the Empire of Brazil by Dom Pedro, now Pedro I, in 1822.

The Braganza monarchy in Brazil became independent of the Portuguese branch of the royal dynasty, ruling over its own version of a federal empire in the Americas and rivalling Lisbon as a seat of power and authority in the wider Lusophone world (Hamnet, 2013). The Brazilian Empire was thus, despite its embrace of constitutional rather than absolute monarchy, a new world inheritor to one of Europe's longest-lived anciens regimes and no less imperial than its older Portuguese progenitor (Paquette, 2013). Crucially, it continued to operate within an imperial register of rule, relying on differentiation of subject groups and a hierarchical political order internally and expansionism and colonialism externally.

The revolution in Saint-Domingue was not initially an attempt to forge a new polity independent of the French Empire. Rather, it was an attack upon the social order of the colony, founded as it was on systemic racial violence, the exploitation of black slaves, and the partial disenfranchisement of the island's free people of colour. This was a multifaceted revolution with different groupings and different aims, which were not always entirely overlapping. After a tumultuous decade of fighting and infighting, which included interventions or attempted interventions by both Spanish and the British empires, the revolutionary leader and former slave Toussaint Louverture took control of the island colony at the turn of the century.

Louverture's initial constitution was in some ways a radical document, but it did not break with the fundamental institution of empire. It was drafted by the constitutional assembly of Hispaniola, mostly consisting of white planters, and was approved by Louverture in July of 1801. This was not in any way a call for national sovereignty, but specifically a constitution for "the French colony of Saint-Domingue," which together with "other adjacent islands constitute the territory of a single colony that forms part of the French empire, but which is subject to particular laws." A colony with a certain level of legal and political autonomy, in other words, but a colony nonetheless, to be administered by "a governor, who will correspond directly with the metropolitan government regarding everything concerning the interest of the colony." In one important area this was, however, a radical document: the third article stated, with no caveats or exceptions, that "there can exist no slaves in this territory; servitude therein is forever abolished."[11]

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[11] *Constitution de la colonie française de Saint-Domingue*, Paris, 1801. This print is held at the Rare Book Division, New York Public Library. Even emancipation in Haiti was a long-term process with important antecedents in the period of French colonial rule, and the debates over slavery and liberation in the 1790s and 1800s frequently referred to the older Code Noir, underscoring the continued relevance of imperial legal frameworks (Ghachem, 2012).

After a brief period of restoration of French imperial authority in Saint-Domingue, enforced by Napoleon's forces and resulting in the deportation and death of Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines declared Haitian independence on the first of January 1804. In contrast to the relatively conservative constitution of the Louverture government, Dessaline's constitution of May 1805 definitively severed Haiti's ties to the French Empire, declaring in Article 12 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."[12] Perhaps more interesting for the issue of imperialism in general, as opposed to the specifics of European powers, was the Haitian commitment not to engage in any expansionist or interventionist policies. Article 36 of the Dessaline constitution thus read: "The Emperor shall never form any enterprize with the views of making conquests, nor to disturb the peace and interior administration of foreign colonies." While Haiti was to be the first black empire of the Western Hemisphere, it was deliberately designed by its founders to be a non-expansionist and non-interventionist power, in part to reassure the other powers of the Atlantic world.

These self-imposed restraints on expansionist policies were eventually abandoned, with then-President Jean-Pierre Boyer's invasion of the Eastern half of Hispaniola in 1822 signalling a new and more aggressive role in the region. The Spanish colony of Santo Domingo had gone through its own revolution the previous year, with the revolutionary junta of what was now known as the Republic of Spanish Haiti (later the Dominican Republic) attempting to join forces with Gran Colombia and the government of Simón Bolívar. This union never materialized, however, and following a bloodless military invasion all of the island of Hispaniola came under

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[12] This translation is taken from the *New York Evening Post,* 15 July 1805. Dessalines' declaration of 28 April 1804, which was in many ways a predecessor to the constitution proper, put it in even clearer terms vis-à-vis empire: "Never shall any colonist or European set foot on this land as a master or a proprietor." (Jean-Jacques Dessalines to the Inhabitants of Haiti, in the National Archives of Britain, Colonial Office 137/113). For more on the constitution in general, see Gaffield (2007, 81-103).

the rule of Boyer for the next two decades. Not surprisingly, given Haiti's own history, one of the first acts by Boyer's government was the total and unconditional emancipation of the slaves of Santo Domingo.[13] While this period of Haitian rule was closer to territorial expansion than colonial occupation, it did result in decidedly hierarchical political relations between the two constituent polities, with considerable internal pressure for independence brewing among Dominican elites.[14]

Haitian independence had important reverberations, both in the Western Hemisphere and in Europe. Haiti's influence on the ideas of certain European political philosophers, in particular Hegel, has been well documented (e.g. Buck-Morss, 2009), but the more practical political consequences of Haitian independence have only recently been scrutinized by historians. One of the first comprehensive accounts of the Haitian Revolution to appear in Europe was Michael Rainsford's *An historical account of the Black Empire of Hayti*, which painted Louverture as an idealistic revolutionary and a benevolent emperor. As the title of his book implies, Rainsford described Haiti not as a nation or a colony but as a black Atlantic empire (Rainsford, 1805). This sympathetic narrative represented one end of the spectrum of European reactions, with the majority of commentators and onlookers being far more hostile toward the very notion of an empire forged by slaves. European imperial elites were particularly worried, as the prospects of further slave uprisings in the wake of 1801 loomed large (Mulich, 2013). Such fears led to some Caribbean colonies moving in the opposite direction, imposing tightened control over their populations and moving towards ever more draconian and hierarchical rule (Ferrer, 2014).

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[13] This had previously been done in 1801 when Louverture took control of the territory, but was quickly reversed by the Spanish Empire.

[14] The clearest example of these sentiments was the formation of La Trinitaria, a Dominican secret society with the aim of overthrowing Haitian rule over eastern Hispaniola. It is worth noting that once this goal had been accomplished in 1844, the new ruler of the Dominican Republic, Don Pedro Santana, almost immediately betrayed La Trinitaria and invited the Spanish Empire to return to the island, in effect recolonizing Santo Domingo (Matibag, 2003).

The Haitian governments of the first decade and a half of independence were themselves important in spreading notions of black liberty and emancipation throughout the region, in part through their dealings with other revolutionary leaders. Indeed, rulers such as Alexandre Pétion demanded from their allies, namely Bolívar, that they emancipate the slaves of their own territories as well as those enslaved Africans they captured through privateering (Ferrer, 2012). In this and other ways, the ideals of Haiti were not just important influences on Atlantic and Caribbean political thought, but were advanced concretely and strategically by Haitian elites in their dealings with foreign powers (see also Smith, 2014; Gaffield, 2015).

Haitian relations with the French Empire shifted over the course of the post-independence period. Initially refusing to accept Haitian independence at all, the French government eventually agreed to recognize the former colony as a sovereign republic only if it would pay France 150 million francs as compensation for the loss of men and territory incurred by the revolution. Importantly, this claim for compensation was based in part on the claims made by individual plantation owners who demanded recompense for land and slaves lost to the revolution.[15] Haiti also landed in trouble with the Spanish Empire, as the government granted asylum to Bolívar and assisted him with resources during his fight against the Spanish Empire. Yet despite all these struggles with the old European empires, and despite the betrayed promises of political liberty within the territory of Haiti itself, the very idea of the Haitian state remained a beacon of hope in the black Atlantic. In the 1840s a commentator in the *Jamaica Tribune*, witnessing Spain's recolonization of Santo Domingo, put it thusly: "Where, we ask, is France? Or England, the champion of universal freedom? … Haiti is without a doubt the only place on earth that can truly be called the homeland of the African race." (Quoted in Smith, 2014, 109).

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[15] These claims mirrored similar ones made by British slave owners during the 1830s when the British Empire abolished slavery within its colonies. In the British case such demands were met, with compensations totaling twenty million pounds sterling.

The continuity of empire

Throughout the age of revolution, empire continued to be the dominant mode of ordering the political sphere, both within and between polities. The political imagination and theoretical framework of many policy-makers and intellectuals in the Western Hemisphere continued to be characterized at least in part by imperial structures well into the nineteenth century, even within the most ardently independent polities of the Americas. What took place at the dawn of the nineteenth century, then, was not a shift away from imperial states and towards nation-states, but instead a messy process of replacing the repertoires of ancien régime empires with those of the newly autonomous polities of the new world, many of which were expansionist empires in their own right. What drove these breaks with the old order was not a newfound desire for nationhood in any of the cases here examined – rather, the breaks were driven by a complex set of causes and pressures that came together to spark social and political revolutions. These factors included the desire for increased political representation and a reconfiguration of colonial ties in North America; a demand for a more just racial order in Saint-Domingue; and clashes over the sources of sovereignty in the Spanish and Portuguese Americas. In the messy aftermath of such upheavals, new modes of organizing were forged and many old ones were retained.

The four cases examined in the previous section displayed different degrees of parting with the old order, from the staunchly conservative Brazilian Empire to the more radical Haitian governments, but all of them shared aspects of the political modality of empire. In terms of racial parity, Haiti was no doubt the most revolutionary, followed by the republics of the Spanish Americas, at least in their first years of independence. In terms of democratic constitutionalism and narrowly dispersed civil rights, the United States was arguably the most innovative, drawing

on both new and old world political philosophy. Even when clear breaks were made with imperial and colonial forms of government, the first half of the nineteenth century saw several polities undo such ruptures. The clearest and most startling example to contemporaries was the Spanish recolonization of Haiti's eastern neighbour, Santo Domingo, but a more widespread trend was the reneging on earlier promises of emancipation across much of Latin America and the Caribbean. While the Law of Wombs was passed in the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata in 1813, promising that no one could be born into bondage, general slavery was not ended in the region until it was written into the Argentine Constitution of 1853, a full four decades later. Similar protracted processes of abolition and emancipation took place in Gran Colombia, Venezuela, and Mexico. Brazil, for its part, remained one of the last bastions of slavery, refusing to enact full emancipation until the adoption of the so-called Golden Law in 1888.

At the centre of the forging of new states in the western hemisphere stood a particular breed of revolutionary practitioner-theorists. Through their actions, policies, and writings these leaders drew on and contributed to new notions of republicanism, constitutionalism, and federalism. The circuits through which such ideas travelled were inherently transboundary, facilitating dialogues that not only crossed the divide between North and South America but also crossed the Atlantic, shaping political and intellectual landscapes on both sides of the ocean. The experiments of leaders such as Artígas, Bolívar, and Louverture were born out of necessity, forged in the fires of transboundary conflict and crisis, but they were also influenced by novel ideas of how to organize polities and how to govern colonial and postcolonial societies. This marriage of pragmatism and ideology in many ways formed the foundation of new world state-building.

At the constitutional level, political experimentation did not preclude the continuation of empire. The new polities of Spanish South America were republics to be sure. But as the United States had already shown in recent memory, and the Dutch and Roman empires had proven decades and centuries before, there was no inherent dichotomy between republicanism and imperialism. More radical, perhaps, were the experiments with city-states and continental federations, which dominated Latin American politics in the first two decades after independence, especially on the eastern coast, but even these creative endeavours carried with them particular notions of composite polities and layered sovereignty inherent in imperial modes of ordering politics.

Other experiments within the new Atlantic polities were of a fundamentally conservative or authoritarian nature, concerned with enacting social control rather than with bestowing new political liberties. These new imperial repertoires included first and foremost a reaffirmation and partial rearticulation of the hierarchical racial order. Slavery persisted for considerably longer in the new world empires than in most of the old European empires, not because of a newfound benevolence on the part of slave owners or any less desire to throw off their shackles on the part of slaves, but in no small part due to innovative new systems of control and violence.[16]

A prominent example of such regimes was to be found in the US, where a series of slave uprisings and the spectre of the Haitian Revolution led to an increased obsession with race and a large-scale expansion and reinforcement of the institution of slavery itself (White, 2010; Johnson, 2013; Baptist, 2014). Legal reforms restricting the mobility and political agency of black subjects, and outlawing miscegenation, grew over the course of the nineteenth century, especially in the Southern states, eventually resulting in the one-drop rule, which legally defined

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[16] Other crucial factors leading to the divergence of slave regimes in European and American empires in the early nineteenth century were related to the politics of abolitionist activism and the strength of public moral and religious movements in Europe (Brown, 2006).

anyone with even a single ancestor of African descent as "black." Thus the Florida Assembly passed an act in 1865 that legally defined "every person who shall have one-eight or more of negro blood" as a "person of color."[17]

Other polities in the Western Hemisphere not directly touched by revolutionary upheavals went through similar authoritarian reforms, often increasing or extending the reach of their state apparatus to stave off the potential for political instability. Cuba was an obvious example of this process, witnessing its own "counterrevolution of slavery and racism" during the last part of the Haitian Revolution, providing the colonial "antithesis" to that new black empire (Ferrer, 2014, 187, 338). Similar examples of racial prejudice infusing political and legal regimes could be found throughout the Spanish Caribbean, including Puerto Rico (Kinsbruner, 1996).

Given these circumstances, it should come as no surprise that Haiti was the polity of the ones here examined that struggled the most with gaining interstate recognition following its successful bid for independence. It represented an explicit dismissal of white supremacy and became a beacon of black empowerment within a political region that was explicitly built on racial hierarchies and violence enacted upon black bodies.[18] Haitian leaders continued to speak words of liberty into a political vacuum that refused to listen. While empire and sovereignty were malleable and flexible categories with room for experimentation and interpretation, the racial dimensions of social ordering in the Atlantic world proved much harder to disrupt. The window of emancipation that had opened up in the years surrounding the turn of the century soon closed,

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[17] "An act in addition to an act entitled an act to amend the act entitled an act concerning marriage licenses approved January 23, 1823," passed during the Fourteenth Session of the General Assembly of the State of Florida, 1865.

[18] In the eyes of white practitioner-theorists in the nineteenth century, the notion of a Black Atlantic did not stretch any further than the coastal waters of West Africa. See in particular the work of Trouillot on the unthinkable nature of Haitian independence to European writers and philosophers (1995, 70-107). On the notion of the Black Atlantic in general, see also Gilroy (1993), Thornton (1998), and, more recently, Diouf and Prais (2015).

and, as mentioned above, the majority of newly independent polities either reversed or limited their initial moves towards full emancipation, leading to a much longer and more protracted process of black liberation than had initially seemed likely. It would take another three decades after Haitian independence before the slaves of the British Empire were emancipated, in an act that was ultimately framed as one of white benevolence rather than black empowerment.[19]

While this might have been a postcolonial moment for many states in the Western Hemisphere, it was far from a post-imperial one. Unlike the classic narratives of the age of revolution that cast the early decades of the nineteenth century as a new dawn for the international system, this article has argued that the period was in fact characterized as much by continuity as by transformation. What changes did take place in the interstate system had more to do with the specifics of border drawings and centres of power than they did with revolutionizing the state-form itself, and much of the experimentation that took place never fully broke free from the framework of imperial ordering. Only in a few cases did imperial modes of rule collapse entirely, and only after prolonged struggles to return to the status quo. And these cases had, despite their historical significance, relatively little impact on the way in which ruling elites and practitioner-theorists envisioned their political world. As such, the most radical theories of racial equity and black empowerment that emerged out of the wreckage of the age of revolutions were largely ignored and their advocates were, for the most part, speaking into the wind.

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[19] Of course there was a significant disconnect between the way such things were talked about among imperial practitioners and theorists and the way it looked from the ground in many colonial territories. The way in which the slaves of the Danish West Indies were freed – by a desperate act of concession by the local governor-general in the face of a forceful black uprising, later retold as a carefully deliberated and compassionate political decision – is but one example (Hall, 1992, 208-227).

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