

UNIVERSAL HISTORY

The Project of Universal History

This approach to human universality values precisely the "unhistorical histories" dismissed by Hegel, including the collective actions that appear out of order within coherent narratives of Western progress or cultural continuity, class struggle or dominant civilizations. Historical anomalies now take on central importance—for example, the fact that not only did the freed slaves resist under Toussaint's new system of "military agrarianism" when told to resume plantation labor as before, but women made the unprecedented demand of equal pay for equal work (rather than the two – thirds ratio that was considered the European, "civilized" norm), arguing that their tasks, hours, and conditions were the same as those of men. "Simply stated, the women saw themselves as individual and equal workers"—and the men did not object.¹ The French representative Poverel felt compelled to appeal to more primitive ideas of gender to convince them otherwise.²

If on the one hand, the anomalies of the Haitian experience are seen as its progressive moments, on the other hand, the brutalities of slavery prove to be historically routine. We are obliged to attend to Métraux's comment in 1960 that "the atrocities committed on the plantations might seem incredible if Europeans themselves had not, in turn, fallen victim to the same practices under totalitarian

¹ Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 170. Fick pays attention to this demand as part of a comprehensive understanding of the idea of human freedom. The Haitian historian Fouchard also acknowledges this moment, when "Black women had the temerity to claim equal salaries with men," and criticizes the fact that "this initial feminist demand was listened to with only half an ear and drowned in considerations about inequality in physical strength" (Fouchard, *Haitian Maroons*, 223).

² "Africans, if you want your women to listen to reason, listen to reason yourself" (Pomerel, cited in Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 171).

regimes."³ By the same token, while we may easily share Salamoelin's moral outrage, discussed in "Hegel and Haiti," at the way European Enlightenment philosophers railed against slavery *except where it literally existed*, we cannot deny that a comparable moral outrage is occurring at this moment, one that future generations will find just as deplorable (this is our moral hope), the fact that political collectives proclaim themselves champions of human rights and the rule of law and then deny these to a whole list of enemy exceptions, as if humanity itself were the monopoly of their own privileged members- their war a just war, their terrorist acts a moral duty, their death and destruction legitimated by reason, or progress, or the divine.

Universal history engages in a double liberation, of the historical phenomena and of our own imagination: by liberating the past we liberate ourselves. The limits to our imagination need to be taken down brick by brick, chipping away at the cultural embeddedness that predetermines the meaning of the past in ways that hold us captive in the present. We exist behind cultural borders, the defense of which is a boon to politicians. The fight to free the facts from the collective histories in which they are embedded is one with exposing and expanding the porosity of a global social field, where individual experience is not so much hybrid as human. Liberation from the exclusionary loyalties of collective identities is precisely what makes progress possible in history, which is not to say that global trade fosters understanding, peace, or universality (it connects directly with the sale of arms, the initiation of wars, and the degradation and displacement of laboring people). Instead, it is to argue that one of the feared "risks" of long-distance trade (exploited by imperialists and anti-imperialists alike) is the fear of

³ Métreau, *Voodoo in Haiti*, 16 .

UNIVERSAL HISTORY

falling off the cultural edge of one's own world and its self-understanding. This fear may one day appear as childlike and primitive as clinging to the belief that the earth is flat.

Nothing keeps history univocal except power. We will never have a definitive answer as to the intent of historical actors, and even if we could, this would not be history's truth. It is not that truth is multiple or that the truth is a whole ensemble of collective identities with partial perspectives. Truth is singular, but it is a continuous process of inquiry because it builds on a present that moving ground. History keeps running away from us, going places we, mere humans, cannot predict. The politics of scholarship that I am suggesting is neutrality, but not of the nonpartisan, "truth lies in the middle" sort; rather, it is a *radical* neutrality that insists on the porosity of the space between enemy sides, a space contested and precarious, to be sure, but free enough for the idea of humanity to remain in view.

Between uniformity and indeterminacy of historical meaning, there is a dialectical encounter with the past. In extending the boundaries of our moral imagination, we need to *see* a historical space before we can explore it. The mutual recognition between past and present that can liberate us from the recurring cycle of victim and aggressor can occur only if the past to be recognized is on the historical map. It is in the picture, even if it is not in place. Its liberation is a task of excavation that takes place not across national boundaries, but without them. Its richest finds are at the edge of culture. Universal humanity is visible at the edges.

There is no end to this project, only an infinity of connecting links. And if these are to be connected without domination, then the links will be lateral, additive, syncretic rather than synthetic. The project

of universal history does not come to an end. It begins again, somewhere else.