



Freedom, Equality, Violence and International Relations: Ethiopia and Haiti in Comparative Perspective

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(Hybrid)



At the turn and end of the 19th Century the Haitian Revolution and the Adwa Victory, respectively, redefined the place of black people on the world-stage.

For more than two centuries, Haiti's status among post-colonial societies, particularly in the post-slavery Americas, has been problematic: all colonial powers and slaveholding societies conspired to suppress the Haitian revolution and relegate Haiti to the margins of history, while simultaneously questioning its viability as a nation-state founded by "black people." The Haitian revolution (1791-1803), challenging three centuries of slavery and colonialism, took place during the Enlightenment period. Haiti's emergence in the modern world at the onset of the 19th century (1804) defied the dominant paradigm of racial difference and hierarchies well-ingrained in modern Western thought and narratives. The revolution that transformed the colony of Saint-Domingue into Haiti is a product of an imagined political and humanist project in which all citizens of the new nation were to enjoy liberty and equality of rights. Yet, this project, formulated by the country's founders, codified in Haiti's Declaration of Independence, and enshrined in its Constitution, has never materialized for most Haitians, particularly peasants, women and girls of all social classes, and marginalized urban dwellers.

In the Ethiopian case, sustaining the hard-won victory and political freedom from colonialism could not be sustained for more than four decades. Fueled with a sense of vengeance for the humiliation of a white man losing a war to colonise a Black African nation, the Italians used all the means at their disposal to occupy Ethiopia for five years. This occupation was resisted by patriotic guerrilla movements in various corners of the country internally, and through discourse, prayers and resource mobilization in various western cities, primarily by Black movements. Sadly, the post-occupation period saw the imperial government to discard tradition and indigenous knowledge and values in pursuit of modernity. The younger aspirants were even more against tradition, and the political project became a task of 'copy pasting' externally, from the 'East' or 'West'. In the process, the gallant fight for freedom was lost to the generation and current interpretations and politics of memory depict Adwa variously, ranging from 'an African exception' to 'a war between colonial forces.' No significant effort was exerted to design a humanist project on Adwa, and the victory itself has degenerated into a moment of bickering and fighting between political groups.



These key achievements brought hope and motivation to black, oppressed and colonized people and societies, while frightening the establishment. The white-dominated capitalist world sabotaged efforts to further broaden freedoms within the two countries as well as in the black world in general through a range of neo-imperial interventions, including by military force. The appendageing of Haiti and Ethiopia to the US dominated global politic-economic order did not benefit neither, nor other African and Caribbean states.

Then and now, Haiti and Ethiopia as sovereign political entities and humanist projects were deemed unacceptable, as they challenged the legitimacy of the colonial powers because it did not fit the “project of men” as defined in Western thought, even though liberty and equality were and still are the ideals pursued by western thinkers. Indeed, the emergence of these sovereign Black Republics was an impossible contradiction. In the 19th century, dominant Western narratives characterized Haiti as a “state of exception” in that the very existence of a former slave, black African-run republic tapped deeply into the contradictions that undergirded the Rights of Man proclamation – a belief in human equality that was in stark conflict with prevailing beliefs about the inequality of races and racial hierarchies. Likewise, the discourse of black exceptionality permeated Western narratives that portrays the victory of Adwa in Ethiopia. And, from this perspective, it was necessary to discredit both Haiti and Ethiopia in order for Europeans and Americans to substantiate their notion of civilization. Surprisingly, because of appeals to power and wealth, the elites of both countries and of all creeds and shades have, for the most part, embraced these views and channeled them through an oppressive state apparatus and its institutions to further marginalize the masses and control all vital sectors of Haitian and Ethiopian societies.

Rather than experiencing the expansion of freedoms and building equality of rights across the decades after the Revolution and Adwa, Haiti and Ethiopia faced and continue to face severe challenges in their socio-economic orders. The political front is not better, with both countries succumbing to decades of authoritarian rule. As such, the potential of expanding freedoms and building paths for equality was dashed in the immediate decades following their respective military victories against colonial powers and their rule.

Neither do we see the Haitian Revolution and Ethiopia’s Adwa sufficiently utilized as defining moments in the movement towards empowerment of black, oppressed and colonized people and societies. The ideals which could be drawn from these two critical events have seldom informed modern social movements nor found their way into texts or key global discourses. References to the Haitian Revolution are often relegated to the status of an anomalous “slave revolt” and absent from larger historical discussions of world revolutions, while Adwa is lost to the minds of many African youth (even increasingly so among Ethiopian youth) after the inspiration drawn from it during the independence struggles. These developments have threatened to make the hard-won



politico-military victories hollow depriving today's marginalized youth important historical references that might serve as a blueprint for contemporary struggles and a source of hope for the future.

This Round Table aims to interrogate this sad state of affairs, in a comparative approach, by bringing together renown experts on each:

Chair: Dr. Dereje Feyissa (Addis Ababa University)

- Prof. Louis HERN Marcelin (University of Miami and INURED)
- Dr. Toni Cela (University of Miami and INURED)
- Prof. Bahru Zewde (Emeritus Professor, Addis Ababa University)
- Dr. Yonas Ashine (Addis Ababa University)
- Dr. Fana Gebresenbet (Addis Ababa University)
- Dr. Semeneh Ayalew (The Africa Institute, Sharja: *online*)
- Dr. Netsanet Gebremichael (The Africa Institute, Sharja: *online*)
- Dr. Eyob Balcha (University of Bristol: *online*)
- Dr. Daniel Mekonnen (SOAS: *online*)

The key topics of discussion are:

- The historical significances of the Haitian Revolution and Adwa
- What are the reasons for not building on momentum gained during the 19th Century
- What role do the Haitian Revolution and Adwa play in regional and international politics, can it be more instrumentalized?
- How can one use these in the struggle of black, oppressed and colonized people and societies for freedom and equality?
- How can we understand the entrenched violence in the two countries and regions against the backdrop of the gallant fight for freedom and independence in the 19th Century?
- What does the condition of the two countries tell us about the capitalist order built and consolidated over the 19th and 20th centuries.