

The 'moral equivalence of the Founding Fathers'

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The Counter-Revolution of 1776:

Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America

Gerald Horne

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Since 1976, the bicentennial of the unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) that led to the founding of the United States of America from thirteen originally British colonies, Black History Month has been an officially recognised period – in February – when the descendants of the Founding Fathers acknowledge that the descendants of their slaves also have a history. Also remembered in February is Presidents' Day – initially George Washington's birthday but now a combined birthday celebration for Washington and Abraham Lincoln: the Father of the Country and the Great Liberator. The year starts with Martin Luther King Day in January, when some whites and Blacks commemorate the man who was the highlight of the Great March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 – assassinated in 1968 for saying in 1967:

'I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government.'

Today the United States is governed with a black president. And yet as can be seen by the representations of the man occupying the White House, the black person born in the United States upon whose ancestors – to paraphrase the assassinated Malcolm X – the 'rock of Plymouth' fell, still have no history commensurate with the lives taken from them in the establishment of the American Empire.

Maybe this deficit is in some way a blessing. The token historical commemorations dictated by the psychological

pacification policies of the US regime are based on the attempt – as in the election campaign of that ‘son of Africa’ – to implicate ordinary black Americans in the creation of the present regime.

As James Baldwin so forcefully told William Buckley Jr. and the members of the Cambridge Union in 1965:

‘From a very literal point of view, the harbours and the ports and the railroads of the country – the economy, especially in the South – could not conceivably be what they are if it had not been (and this is still so) for cheap labour. I am speaking very seriously, and this is not an overstatement: I picked cotton, I carried it to the market, I built the railroads under someone else’s whip for nothing. For nothing.’

There is a significant difference between Baldwin’s claim to have built America and the regime’s rulers’ infamy for founding it. Unfortunately this distinction is not very clear in the popular consciousness because the creation of the USA is always presented as the sum of business transactions performed by the white settler elite. The prevailing historical narrative – across the political spectrum – describes the development (conquest) of the North American continent as one endless series of clever, innovative and even enlightened business deals whose frustration by the archaic practices of the British monarchy were challenged by a declaration adopted and promulgated in 1776.

Gerald Horne’s latest book is a continuation of his careful scholarly efforts to correct that historical deficit. Two of his previous books recover the record of how the United States of America was made by the slave labour of black Americans and the fanatical determination to preserve this method of enrichment by the white settlers called the Founding Fathers.¹ Professor Horne goes beyond those who have finally acknowledged that slavery was fundamental to the economy of the original colonies. He shows that slave resistance forced the settler elite to declare independence from Britain. In doing so he makes black Americans the drivers of the revolution and

¹ *Negro Comrades of the Crown* (2012) and *The End of Empires* (2009).

white Americans the motor of counter-revolution. Taking Professor Horne's thesis seriously not only restores the historical dignity of blacks – more than a month of history – it shows that Africans throughout the Western hemisphere were joined in a liberation struggle whose defeat in mainland North America relied upon the 'isolationism' and 'exceptionalism' that continue to govern the US regime even today.

The myth of the Mayflower and the first Thanksgiving are still the stories that shape the way US history is understood on both sides of the Atlantic.² They are central events in the pageantry used to prove that the Founding Fathers were the precursors of the anti-monarchical revolutions in France and elsewhere. Slavery in the US is thus considered to be a minor defect in the long march of whites toward what are today called 'human rights'. This massive distortion has done much to confuse people throughout the world as to what the US regime really represents.³ It has made more than one revolutionary leader shake his or her head at the curious relationships the regime has maintained with the white regimes in Africa nearly two centuries later. It has kept millions wondering why the US regime has been a consistent supporter of dictators throughout the world. It has kept US citizens frustrated by the highest rate of black incarceration in the world, despite the recent election of a black president.

These inconsistencies have always been defended or excused by the claim that complexities and contradictions in history itself have merely diverted Americans – white Americans – from perfecting the ideals of the Founding Fathers. Professor Horne's work provides the data necessary to show that these defences are simply false. His careful

² Just like its Afrikaner equivalent, *Geloftedag* (English: the *Day of the Vow*), Thanksgiving in the US was originally celebrated out of gratitude for a divinely granted military victory over the indigenous. In 1994, the Afrikaner holiday was renamed 'Day of Reconciliation'. US President Lincoln proclaimed Thanksgiving a holiday of 'reconciliation' in 1863, during the US Civil War.

³ For example, English textbooks used in German schools still portray the relationship between the founders of the Bay Colony and the indigenous as one of friendly co-operation, free of animosity or the violence of land expropriation.

perusal of the contemporary record reveals that the real principles 'held to be self-evident' were those that defined Blacks in the original colonies as *property* and not as people. The Founding Fathers were first and foremost capitalists who, like their descendants, believed that freedom was inherent in the right to own property and dispose of it as one sees fit.

To understand this argument it is necessary to go back at least to 1688 and the so-called Glorious Revolution in Britain. This change in the relationship between the British mercantile class and the monarchy catalysed the transformation of British possessions in North America and the Caribbean. It was the first step in the development of what was called 'free trade', the central economic doctrine of the US. Free trade in the 17th century meant the ability of merchants, bankers and landowners to engage in unrestricted profit-seeking for private as opposed to state benefit. For the British mercantile class it meant expansion of the slave trade to extract as much wealth as possible from colonies with wage labour.

However, the expansion of the slave-based economy caused a serious problem. Slaves soon outnumbered Europeans in all of the colonial possessions. Africans soon took notice of this fact and revolted – causing Europeans to invest ever more resources in suppressing the black labour force. Despite inducements and even impressment, the colonisers failed to lure enough Europeans to the colonies to create a balance of power/terror sufficient to keep slave populations docile. Here official American history focuses on the failure of revolts in the Caribbean and downplays the impact these revolts had on British colonial policy. In fact, well before 1776, Britain was being forced to consider an end to slavery. At the same time competition among the colonising countries intensified. Wars in Europe arose among the colonisers and these wars became world wars in which colonial possessions changed hands between Spain, France, and Britain. These wars further reduced the profitability of colonial enterprises. By the mid-18th century, every European colonial power was trying to find an accommodation with their

black populations, especially since these wars could not be fought in the colonies without arming them. Black soldiers were not willing to fight for slavery so they had to be freed if they were to bear arms in European wars. As a result Caribbean blacks were being allowed into the colonial regimes – a process which would transform British possessions forever, except in North America. Colonial rivalry created a class of blacks who were not only no longer slaves but who were willing to fight in very disciplined regiments against anything resembling slavery – wherever it still prevailed.

As Britain was forced to make concessions in the Caribbean, settlers in North America became increasingly anxious. These concessions induced hard-core slaveholders in colonies like Barbados to abandon their plantations and move to the mainland where British control was beginning to wane.⁴ At the same time anti-slavery activism was growing in Britain itself. Professor Horne points to *Somerset's case* (*Somerset v Lewis* of 1772, 98 ER 499), a well-reported British King's Bench decision in which the court held that chattel slavery was inconsistent with English common law. The extension of this precedent to the original colonies would have meant the end of slavery and with it the wealth machine driving Yankee merchants and Southern *latifundista*. Ironically this had followed Britain's expensive victory in the French and Indian War (Seven Year's War of 1754–63), after which the British government decreed a limit to territorial expansion on the North American mainland. Professor Horne treats the British victory as a catalyst in the process of secession. On the one hand, Britain freed its mainland colonists from the threat of European competition thus allowing the colonies to expand economically. On the other, it frustrated the colonists by

⁴ This occurred again in the wake of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). Spain successfully suppressed the independence movement among the creole elite in Cuba for decades by threatening to abolish slavery. White Cuba – concentrated in the western half of the island – included many who regularly agitated for annexation by the US in the hopes of protecting their plantation economy from abolition. The Spanish crown had threatened Cuban independence advocates with abolition of slavery. See, *inter alia*, CLR James *The Black Jacobins* (1963) and Louis A. Perez Jr. *Cuba Between Reform and Revolution* (New York, 1988), p. 101 *et seq.*

limiting their insatiable demand for indigenous lands to work with slave labour. Horne implies that had the settler regime been forced to remain within the confines agreed by treaty, the rate of black population growth would have created 'Caribbean' conditions. In other words, slave-driven growth would have been stymied as the resistance by the black population increased.

To avert these consequences the North American colonists had to challenge the mother country. They had to circumvent British prohibition of territorial expansion and ultimately end British jurisdiction to prevent impending abolition of slavery by the Crown. There could be no Caribbean solution.

This is where the sympathy among settler regimes of the 20th century originates. While Britain was being forced to modernise its capitalist system in favour of 'free labour', fanatical Protestant extremists – the core of the Northern settler elite – were opportunistically abandoning their institutionalised discrimination against Catholics and lower order Europeans like the Irish and Scots (later also extended to despised Southern Europeans) to compose a race-based regime that could expand to fill the still to be conquered territories and keep the slave population in check. The Somerset case was the 18th century equivalent of Harold Macmillan's 1960 'Winds of Change' speech.⁵ Hendrik Verwoerd's Afrikaner republic and Ian Smith's Rhodesian National Front were by no means distortions of the American ideal which both claimed to follow in their attempts to inaugurate explicitly white states based on the exploitation of

⁵ Harold Macmillan addressed the Union parliament in Cape Town at the conclusion of a one-month tour of British Africa. He told the South African parliament, then led by Hendrik Verwoerd's National Party, that '... the growth of national consciousness in Africa is a political fact, and we must accept it as such. That means, I would judge, that we've got to come to terms with it' and that Britain's opposition to apartheid (not explicitly named) was based on the necessity of maintaining its co-operation among the (non-white) Commonwealth countries, especially in Africa. Macmillan was emphatic. Mr Verwoerd responded sharply that this was a South African matter concerning the 'white Africans'. In 1961, South Africa declared itself a republic and withdrew from the Commonwealth (before it could be expelled).

African labour. Both regimes even made concerted efforts to replicate the US model of privileged immigration for Europeans in the hopes of dominating black majorities – albeit unsuccessfully.⁶

The obvious objection to Professor Horne's thesis is that it is anachronistic. By applying current models of historical analysis to 17th and 18th century North America, he could be accused of imputing intentions to the Founding Fathers based on current definitions of human rights. Thomas Jefferson is often held out as a fig leaf. His supposed attitude toward slavery is considered by official American history as an alibi for the 'defective' failure to include blacks in the definition of equality. According to this view – still the mainstream interpretation – the demands of the 'revolution' required a compromise between Northern colonies that were willing to abolish the slave trade and powerful Southern slaveholders. In other words, the race-based regime founded in 1776 was merely flawed because it would otherwise have been impossible for the colonists to continue the march toward freedom if they could not unite against Britain. This argument is echoed in later events like the Missouri Compromise.

Another principled objection from official history – again across the political spectrum – is that the final abolition of slavery in 1865 exonerated the American pageant. The US Civil War is endowed with a teleology that is then applied to vindicate the Founding Fathers motives. They are further excused because after all slavery was prevalent throughout the Western hemisphere at the time.

The Counter-Revolution of 1776 successfully rebuts both arguments. First, it documents thoroughly that the key players

⁶ In 1965, Ian Smith's Rhodesian National Front proclaimed its Unilateral Declaration of Independence which opened with the words: 'Whereas in the course of human affairs history has shown that it may become necessary for a people to resolve the political affiliations which have connected them with another people and to assume amongst other nations the separate and equal status to which they are entitled: And Whereas in such event a respect for the opinions of mankind requires them to declare to other nations the causes which impel them to assume full responsibility for their own affairs...'

The allusion to the 1776 UDI was not accidental.

in the 1776 UDI were almost without exception major slaveholders or slave traders. For instance, John Hancock was Boston's largest slaveholder – perhaps the real reason for his ostentatiously large signature on the Declaration. James Madison was a staunch defender of slavery – going so far as to introduce the second amendment to the US Constitution in order to secure the autonomy of state slave patrols. Copious correspondence demonstrates that the Yankee and Southern oligarchs knew that Britain was being forced to abolish slavery. That would have been financial ruin for the merchants and plantation owners. Even more serious was their fear that blacks would claim their rights with vengeance as they had been doing in the Caribbean and in the border wars between Florida and South Carolina/Georgia. They made no secret of either.

Moreover, the official history relies on an assumption that blacks in North America were essentially docile and unaware of either their humanity or the struggle waged among white elites over their status. If blacks were passive property, then the entire struggle was only between colonists and the mother country. This has never been true. Despite the alienation and deliberate attempts to destroy cultural cohesion among the slave population, there was never a period when blacks did not organise resistance. That resistance was successful to the extent that it persisted in all of Britain's colonial possessions. When Caribbean plantation owners attempted to pacify their slave holdings – deporting unruly ones to other colonies – this only served to expand the consciousness of blacks as to what was really happening. The recruitment of slaves to fight European wars not only produced cadre of seasoned warriors but discredited efforts by whites to prove their superiority.

Jean-Paul Sartre argued at length that the French Revolution as past is inaccessible.⁷ Thus there is no point in writing history 'as if'. Gerald Horne does not propose such a history. Instead he is quite consistent with Sartre when he analyses the data available for constructing the past. His is

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, (London: NLB, 1976).

not an appeal for some new found sense of guilt that white America is based on a lie – even if it is. At the same time his analysis is quite consistent with those traditionalists who constantly rave about strict construction and the intentions of the Founders. The Federalists – then as today – assert unabashedly that they were and are guided by the firm principles and intentions of the Olympian slavocracy that founded the US.⁸ If they are right and the US regime is to be judged by the traditions maintained today as the foundation of the republic, then Gerald Horne has merely provided the full brief. If the Founding Fathers intended to create the republic that is today the paragon of capitalism and the ‘greatest *purveyor* of violence in the world’ (which in terms of weapons exports and military expenditure it still certainly is), then the Founding Fathers certainly intended a counter-revolution.

When the dead US president, now beatified, spoke to the Conservative Political Action Conference two hundred and ten years later he said:

‘They are our brothers, these freedom fighters, and we owe them our help. I’ve spoken recently of the freedom fighters of Nicaragua. You know the truth about them. You know who they’re fighting and why. They are the moral equal of our Founding Fathers and the brave men and women of the French Resistance. We cannot turn away from them, for the struggle here is not right versus left; it is right versus wrong.’⁹

He was criticised severely by liberal and left-liberal opponents of US Latin America policy, supporters of the Sandinista Front government in Managua and aid organisations in the US caring for the refugees who had fled the US-sponsored and managed counter-insurgency and terror wars in the region. (It was estimated that approximately 15-20 per cent of the

⁸ The authors of the *Federalist Papers* (1787-88), written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay *et al.*, as well as the followers of the Federalist Society (founded in 1982), an extremely influential association of scholars, jurists, and legal professionals, including members of the US high judiciary, that considers itself to be conservative and libertarian.

⁹ Ronald Reagan, Remarks at the Annual Dinner of the Conservative Political Action Conference, 1 March 1985.

Salvadoran population was either killed or forced into exile by 'freedom fighters'.) Since Ronald Reagan had long been dismissed as senile at best and a lunatic at worst, remarks like these were treated as offensive but more or less right-wing boilerplate. Mr Reagan remained objectionable but the outrage over his statement arose from the belief held from centre to left that he had *maligned* the Founding Fathers and soiled the original ideals of the USA by associating them with CIA-trained and funded terrorist bands.

As Gerald Horne, explains in *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*, this indignation is seriously misplaced. In fact, Ronald Reagan should have been taken at his word since what he said was historically accurate. Unfortunately most critics of the Reagan regime, its predecessors and successors either do not know or do not understand the actual historical basis for the war of independence from Great Britain started by the British colonial settler elite in 1776. As Gerald Horne notes:

'Ironically, the US in a sense has emulated today's Cuba insofar as the operative slogan seems to be "within the Revolution everything, against the Revolution nothing". In other words, one can quarrel about the destiny of the republic but – generally – not the eternal verity it is said to have created. Of course, left wing republicans tend to emphasize the role of less grand Europeans in 1776 (those not of the left wing tend to stress the role of the Olympian Founding Fathers). Some of these historians tend to see the plight of Africans as the "original sin" of the republic (which begs the question of dispossession of the indigenous). In any case, I suggest in the concluding pages of this book, the left wing's misestimating of the founding is of a piece with their misestimating of the present: this includes a reluctance to theorize or historicize the hegemony of conservatism among the Euro-American majority – an overestimation of the strength of the left wing among this same majority – which has meant difficulty in construction of the kind of global movement that has been essential in rescuing Africans particularly from the violent depredations that

have inherited in the republic.'

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