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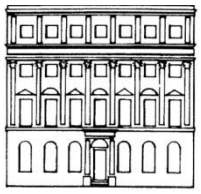

BULLETIN

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Raphael Hörmann:
Slave Revolts and (Anti)-Imperialism: From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century. Conference Report
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Slave Revolts and (Anti)-Imperialism: From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century, workshop organized by the German Historical Institute London and held at the GHIL, 7–8 Mar. 2010.

This two-day interdisciplinary international workshop, convened by Raphael Hörmann (Rostock), aimed to provide a survey of slave revolts from antiquity to the nineteenth century. In particular, it wanted to inquire into their relation to imperialism and colonialism. Records of slave rebellions reach back to antiquity and revolts have affected almost all societies in which the socio-economic system of slavery was practised. By now it has become almost a truism in slavery studies to emphasize the role of slave resistance in the overthrow of slavery. One of the problems with the notion of 'slave resistance', however, lies in its very broad scope. It encompasses extremely diverse forms of resistance, ranging from ubiquitous, everyday manifestations such as indolence, faked stupidity, insubordination, and so forth to the more exceptional (but still relatively frequent) instances of armed resistance. While aware of the various other types of slave resistance and the often fluid boundaries between them, this workshop considered the most spectacular and often extremely violent examples of slave resistance: slave revolts.

After a warm welcome by Benedikt Stuchtey, the first panel considered the role of slave revolts in antiquity. Although focusing on the largest and most dramatic slave revolt in antiquity, one that posed a severe threat to the Roman Empire, namely, Spartacus' Revolt (73–71 BC), Keith Bradley (Notre-Dame) also provided a panoramic picture of slave revolts in the Roman world. In his presentation he fleshed out both the similarities and differences between antique and modern slave revolts. While he asserted that individual and—less frequently—collective resistance to enslavement was already widespread in antiquity, he insisted that antique slave revolts never questioned the institution of slavery as such. Even Spartacus' Revolt did not aim to destroy slavery, but to secure freedom for his army of slaves. Drawing on Eugene Genovese's thesis of a paradigm shift from revolt to revolution that took place in the eighteenth century, Bradley maintained that, by contrast, New World slave revolts since the Haitian Revolution had aimed to eradicate the socio-economic institution of plantation slavery. Bradley's thesis was criticized by some of the participants, who argued that a massive

slave revolt, such as that of Spartacus, would have been inconceivable without a certain consciousness of the injustice of slavery. In the second paper in the panel Piotr Wozniczka (Trier) philologically investigated a fragmentary narrative on the first Sicilian slave war (138?–132 BC), presumed to have been written by the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus. As Wozniczka argued, a comparison with other surviving parts of his forty-volume world history, the *bibliotheke*, suggests that Diodorus was indeed the author of this debated text. Wozniczka indirectly supported Bradley's thesis, as he illustrated that the narrative strongly condemns the abuses of the Sicilian slaves, considering them to be the principal reason for the revolt. But it never debates the validity of the institution as such.

The unfortunate illness of Mary Turner (London) and Jochen Meißner (Berlin) meant that the panel on slave revolts in the Americas had to be modified. Gelien Matthews (St Augustine, Trinidad) attacked the dominant scholarly opinion that slave revolts were entirely counterproductive to the campaign of the British abolitionists. She compellingly argued that even the mainstream abolitionists around Wilberforce gradually learned to employ Caribbean slave revolts to advance their propaganda against the slave trade and chattel slavery. In the ensuing discussion, however, it emerged that there were limits to this strategy of rhetorical–ideological incorporation of slave revolts. In particular, the Haitian Revolution as an extremely violent anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggle for black self-emancipation remained incompatible with paternalistic–liberal ideas of an emancipation that was to be granted to slaves by the British government. The repercussions of the Haitian Revolution, this time on the Spanish Caribbean, more precisely, in Puerto Rico, constituted the focus of Antonio Jesús Pinto Tortosa's (Madrid) paper. As he illustrated, the foiled Epiphany Day rising of 1812 was both modelled on the Haitian Revolution (the plan to burn all the plantations and kill the colonists) and conjured up its spectre. He insisted that in contrast to the later stages of the Haitian Revolution, however, the conspirators on Puerto Rico did not pursue any anti-imperialist or anti-colonialist goals but 'solely' wanted to destroy plantation slavery. Yet following the revelation that the conspiracy also crossed colour lines and even involved a number of white Creoles, the question was raised in the discussion of whether some of the white participants had not also been swayed by separatist sentiments?

The third panel shifted to literary representations of slave revolts. Ulrich Pallua (Innsbruck) looked at eighteenth-century British stage adaptations of a foundational literary text on slave revolts, Aphra Behn's 1696 novella *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave: A True History*. Pallua showed that even the later stage adaptations could not overcome the aporia of Behn's text: the simultaneous 'ennobling' of its tragic heroic black protagonist and the condemnation of violent resistance against slavery to which Oroonoko is driven. Peter J. Kitson (Dundee) investigated another literary text that is beset by ideological ambiguities: John Thelwall's Jacobin Gothic novel *The Daughter of Adoption* (1801), a third of which is set in the French colony of Saint-Domingue shortly before and during the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution. While Thelwall is adamantly opposed to both slavery and imperialism, he casts doubt on the success of revolutionary self-emancipation. Moreover, his vicious portrayal of a mixed-race character as the novel's Gothic villain, contrasting starkly with the heroic black rebel slave who sacrifices his life to prevent the rape of his mistress by fellow rebel slaves, begs questions about Thelwall's politics of race, and especially his fears of miscegenation.

The first panel of the second day continued the topic of literary representations, starting with a talk by Adrian Knapp that compared portrayals of two rebel leaders in British literature after the British abolition of slavery: the depiction of the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint Louverture in Harriet Martineau's historical romance *The Hour and the Man* (1839) and of the Xhosa prophet–warrior Makanna, who threatened British rule in the Cape Colony in 1819, in the anonymous eponymous novel *Makanna; Or the Land of the Savage* (1834). In the section on Martineau's novel, Knapp drew on the theoretical framework of the so-called 'Haitian turn' in the humanities: the notion that the Haitian Revolution lies at the crux of transatlantic modernity. As he illustrated, Martineau symbolically 'castrates' Toussaint, turning him into a pious, conscience-ridden Christian. Deprived of his blackness and any 'African' traits of character, Martineau's idealized Toussaint becomes a model for emancipation within the liberal–humanist paradigm. He not only epitomizes the civilized and Europeanized ex-slave who has shed all 'savageness', but also functions as a shining example for the future emancipation of the British working class through (self)-education. While not a slave, the literary figure of Makanna in his diabolical savagery serves

almost as an antithesis to Martineau's Toussaint, Knapp insisted. Returning to the Haitian Revolution, Raphael Hörmann (Rostock) investigated the role of the Gothic mode in narratives of the revolution. He showed that similar tropes of 'horror' and 'terror' have been employed in both fiction and non-fiction texts from the eighteenth century to the present day, albeit to different ideological ends. While most contemporary narratives could be considered as belonging to the 'conservative' anti-revolutionary Gothic that demonizes the Haitian Revolution and the rebel slaves, several narratives use it to endorse violent self-emancipation. Here the radical black abolitionist Robert Wedderburn (1762–1834?) is of key importance, as he takes the conservative demonizations of the slave rebels and recasts them as anti-imperial menacing visions of slave and proletarian self-emancipation. In a final section Hörmann demonstrated how the uncritical appropriation of historical atrocity stories about black violence in the revolution by Madison Smartt Bell in his historical novel *All Souls Rising* (1995) threatens to reiterate the same racist allegations of unbound black savagery that characterize his historical sources.

Because of the cases of illness, the final panel consisted of only one speaker, Alan Rice (Preston). However, his intriguing paper with its great historical and thematic scope more than made up for the lack of a co-panellist. Investigating transatlantic remembrance of slavery, slave resistance, and abolitionism since the nineteenth century, he identified the blind spots and cases of conscious repression in historical and museological memory culture. Despite the boom in slavery studies, radical abolitionists such as Robert Wedderburn are still often marginalized in official celebrations of abolition and emancipation. Even a highly canonical figure such as Frederick Douglass only becomes palatable for official memory culture if he is deprived of his radical edge. By contrast, present-day black visual artists, such as Ellen Gallagher in the USA and Lubaina Himid have reinstated African Atlantic working-class figures as central to the narrative of black resistance in works beginning a 'guerrilla memorialization' that will, it is to be hoped, alter future interpretations of black radicalism.

As the workshop suggested, the relation of slave revolts to imperialism and colonialism largely remains intangible. While major revolts from Spartacus' Revolt onwards did pose severe threats to empires, it is only in a number of rare instances, such as the Haitian Revolution or some Jamaican slave revolts, for example, that a pro-

nouncedly anti-colonial agenda emerged openly. Both the high quality of the presentations and the engaged discussions by the audience contributed to the success of the workshop.

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