



**INSTITUTIONEN FÖR SOCIOLOGI  
OCH ARBETSVETENSKAP**

# **Interpreting the Haitian Revolution**

## **From the Rights of Man to Human Rights**

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### Abstract

In recent decades, a ‘Haitian Turn’ has emerged as both academic and public readerships in the anglophone sphere have been flooded by a wave of essays, articles, and monographs on the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804). At the epicentre of the present study is one of the major interpretations of the Haitian Revolution in the Haitian Turn, which I call the ‘universality paradigm’. The universality paradigm highlights that while the three great revolutions towards the end of the eighteenth century – the American Revolution (1776), the French Revolution (1789), and the Haitian Revolution (1791) – all mobilised the political categories of freedom and equality against old-regime privilege and naturalised inequality, only the Haitian Revolution achieved the long-term abolition of slavery. Therefore, insofar as we are interested in the history and origins of human rights and universalism, the adherents of the universality paradigm assert, we need to attend to the Haitian Revolution in particular, which more fully realised universalist ideals.

However, severe objections have been raised against the way in which the Haitian Revolution is connected to universality and human rights in our own time. The major ‘sceptical responses’ interpret the revolution in terms of authoritarianism instead of universalism and human rights, or they focus on continuities between old-regime labour conditions and inequality on the one hand and post-revolutionary conditions on the other. Other critics emphasise that contemporary human rights differ radically from rights in the late eighteenth century.

The study takes advantage of arguments made in the sceptical oeuvre against the universality paradigm together with the critical resources found in the Marxist critique of right to offer a minimal defence of the universality paradigm. I defend the conclusion that the abolition of slavery in the Haitian Revolution adjusted the imbalance between the dominance of the commodity form and the absence of the legal form in pre-revolutionary Saint-Domingue, and that the revolutionary results therefore pertain more to the age of the legal form of equality and freedom in capitalism than to the age of privilege and self-evident inequality.

However, to settle with inclusion, universalism and human rights according to the premises of the universality paradigm implies that the legal form is accepted uncritically, that historical continuities of inequality are underrated, and that the difference between political equality and social inequality becomes concealed. Moreover, differences between the revolutionary rights of man in the time of the Haitian Revolution and contemporary human rights matters, not least since the former event was anchored in a class of enslaved workers.

Then again, to cling to inequality and concrete differences between past and present rights in the sceptical vintage entails that the legal form is sidestepped altogether, alongside an underestimation of revolutionary change and of the split of the absolute inequality of slavery into legal equality and socio-economic inequality. Thus, against the universality paradigm and the sceptical turn alike, I stress that both the rights of man and human rights nonetheless relate to the legal form of equality and freedom as two of its major politico-legal contents in the era of capital. In this constellation, universalism and rights on the one hand and socio-economic inequality on the other hand are not so much theorised in terms of paradoxes, tensions and contradictions but rather as compatible.

Lastly, I argue that our comprehension of human rights today becomes sharper if we have a clear idea of our assumptions about where human rights come from, how they have been utilised, and what effects and functions they have had. In this respect, the radically different interpretations of universal human rights offered by the Haitian Turn represents a significant limit as regards the historical case and indeed much the same can be said of discussions about human rights today. Ultimately, therefore, through the minimal defence of the universality paradigm, this study adds a small piece to the much broader puzzle of the status and politics of human rights in general.

**Keywords:** The Haitian Revolution, Marxist critique of right, the concept of abstraction, the legal form, social movements, human rights, universalism, inequality