

## IS THIS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE?

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How do social movements move? *Tiqqun*, the French collective that authored *The Coming Insurrection*, suggests that “movements do not spread by contamination,” but by “resonance” between radical moments, and that is certainly what we have seen with the upsurge of popular resistance in recent years. <sup>1</sup> If the autoimmune spreads by contagion, autonomy spreads by resonance. In this spirit, I would like to suggest that there is a chain of resonance from the Haitian revolutionaries through the US Abolitionists and Reconstructionists down to today’s critiques of the prison-industrial complex and the global justice movements. Specifically, while those who campaign against debt are often told that there is no precedent for their ideas, the history of these radical moments in the Americas suggests that any democracy worthy of the name is also an economic transformation that takes into account the racialization of debt. Running through this chain is what Toni Morrison called the “re-memory” of slavery, a physical or visual evocation of the past that “comes back whether we want it to or not.” <sup>2</sup> Each of these moments returns periodically, repeatedly, because justice has not yet been served. <sup>3</sup> Abolition, whether of chattel slavery or debt, is not a simple event or a moment but a chain of interwoven and interactive events. Far from being a neutral tool of accounting, debt is always a method of racializing subjects, whether into “whiteness,” “blackness,” being “indigenous,” or otherwise. Any campaign against debt thus becomes a campaign for a democracy comprised of free subjects.

Within the Occupy movement, the call for debt abolition began with the recognition of unprecedented levels of student indebtedness and the formation of the Occupy Student Debt Campaign in October 2011. As the movement developed, increasingly all kinds of household debt were targeted by a new campaign calling itself **Strike Debt**. <sup>4</sup> A critique soon arose that debt is paradoxically an “elite” phenomenon, because only people of means, usually “white” people, have access to debt. In *The Debt Resisters’ Operations Manual*, Strike Debt has collectively responded to this critique, asserting that “debt is a calculated attack on the very *possibility* of democracy.” <sup>5</sup> As ever in the Americas, this assault targets people of color first, leading to the designation of debt as an “economic hate crime.” <sup>6</sup>

Data varies from study to study but a clear pattern emerges overall. Home ownership has plummeted among African Americans, leading to a dramatic drop in median net wealth and an increase in the “wealth gap” between “whites” and African Americans. The Pew Center reports that “white” households have twenty times the net wealth of African American households, the largest multiple in over a century. From this perspective, it’s as if the Civil Rights movement never happened. It has become increasingly clear that a transformation of current economic practice so thoroughgoing that it could be called a form of abolition would be required in order to salvage any form of meaningful democracy. In this respect it is useful to consider historical examples of similar kinds of choices. In this essay, I want to find the resonances in the debt abolition campaign with the abolition of slavery in the Americas and the Reconstruction effort that followed. In so doing, we can compare the replacement of slavery, an economic system that was held by many to be indispensable right until the moment of its extinction, with the current status of debt today.

The discussion around debt is not, then, simply one of repayment or default. It concerns democracy, land, and, now, the future viability of the biosphere. The freed in the Americas saw clearly that land reform was the economic vehicle for wealth redistribution and the reconfiguration of the economy. The need for this kind of program is still all too evident in underdeveloped nations, where land monopolies are a primary political problem. With climate change and food supply issues altering the planetary sense of what a strong economy might mean, away from growth and towards sustainability, debt abolition becomes a moral requirement and a sensible choice. For in order to “pay back” debt, the economy has to grow, creating a parallel rise in carbon emissions within the current energy-generating framework. The choice is not between debt abolition and “responsibility” so much as it is between abolition and extinction. Already, extinction rates are

so high that scientists are referring to this era as the Sixth Great Extinction, with the difference being that the present one is caused by human beings.

## Abolition Democracy

Much of Occupy practice was sustained by the principle of autonomous action and self-rule. This ethos was in direct opposition to a capitalist culture so self-destructive that it appeared to be the victim of an autoimmune disease, like AIDS in which the system's own defenses turn on itself. To reclaim the democratic "self" away from capital requires a refusal of the present order that is abolitionist in nature. Implicit in the Occupy movement was the renewal of what W. E. B. Du Bois called "abolition democracy."<sup>7</sup> Over the period of abolition democracy, which begins, in his account, with the Haitian Revolution in 1805, a tension has played out between "free" meaning nonslave, "free" as "able to enter into contract," and finally "free" being without price. Any autonomous claim to selfhood is contested within capitalist ideology.

Whatever the future(s) of Occupy and democracy will turn out to have been, we will miss the full historical significance if we fail to recognize the continuing resonance with abolition. Wall Street, it should be recalled, was the site of New York's old slave market. Its "wall" was a barrier against the indigenous population, and the future citadel of financial speculation fed the profits from slavery and land grabs. Transatlantic slavery was a system heavily dependent on debt financing.<sup>8</sup> The slavers borrowed money for the costs of the voyage and for the trade goods they exchanged for human property in Africa. These goods were far from worthless and their exchange developed into a form of money based on copper. The enslaved were themselves purchased by American planters buying on credit. It was only with the sale of the products of the plantation back in Europe that apparent profit entered the system. But this profit was spectacular: one ship, called the *Lively*, left Liverpool in 1737 with cargo worth £1307 and returned with £3080 in cash, plus a cargo of sugar and cotton. In short, that one journey brought a profit of at least 500%, unavailable anywhere else in the early modern financial system. As Adam Smith himself observed: "The profits of a sugar plantation in any of our West Indian colonies are generally much greater than those of any other cultivation that is known." The French colony of Saint-Domingue, now Haiti, was the wealthiest place on the planet when its revolution began in 1791.

Having fought for independence from France for fourteen years, the new nation of Haiti declared in its Constitution of 1801 "Slavery is forever abolished."

In four words, the sentence encompasses past, present, and future (abolished/is/forever). It provides no authority for the abolition, not even a tautology like "truths held to be self-evident." No less than the US Declaration of Independence, so often eulogized, that short Haitian sentence was the announcement of a world-historical revolution. Having abolished the primary political distinction between "free" and "slave," Haiti then made itself into the scandal of modernity by decreeing in Article 12:

No whiteman of whatever nation he may be, shall put his foot on this territory with the title of master or proprietor, neither shall he in future acquire any property therein.

This clause undid colonialism, neocolonialism, race, and segregation. If the rest of the document reinstated other masters and proprietors, it nonetheless insisted, against the highly complicated racial hierarchy of miscegenation created by slavery, that all such persons were to "be known only by the generic appellation of Blacks." In short, if you were in Haiti, you were Black. "Race" became a correlative of residence, not some transcendental "essence." As a result, the spectre of Haiti, its revolution and its example, haunted the nineteenth century.

This moment of apparent success contained a key element of failure. In 1801, Toussaint Louverture was able to issue a

constitution for the new nation. For Toussaint, large-scale cash-crop agriculture was vital both to the formation of the nation-state in general and to its ability to repay its debts to the United States in particular. The formerly enslaved were to work as wage laborers. In response, the subalterns revolted against their own revolution, preferring to secure small plots of land they could farm collectively and create a long-term guarantee against re-enslavement. Toussaint felt compelled to suppress the revolt, and even assassinated his own nephew Moïse who was its leader. Writing in 1938, the Trinidadian radical C. L. R. James saw this as the decisive moment of the revolutionary movement's failure because it could not reconcile the desire of the subaltern for "land," meaning autonomy, and the perceived needs of the nation-state. So while Lenin and other revolutionaries argued for the right of nations to self-determination, the more radical goal inherent in the subaltern desire for autonomy was really the abolition of borders and states, leading to a globalization of and for people.

In the early nineteenth century, President Alexandre Pétion did initiate significant land redistribution in Haiti, but it was so thwarted by the imposition of a massive indemnity on the country by France in 1825. The indemnity of one hundred and fifty million French francs—intended as reparations for the loss of slave owners' "property"—is widely held to have decimated Haiti's nascent recovery from the revolutionary wars and pushed it towards the poverty with which it is now synonymous. Another reading is possible: that Haiti assumed the indemnity, in exchange for French recognition of its independence, with no serious intent to repay and indeed President Jean-Francois Boyer was able to reduce it to 60 million francs after the death of Charles X in 1830. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) nonetheless compounded this debt during the era of structural adjustment policies. By the time of the disastrous earthquake in 2010, Haiti had accumulated external debts of about \$1.1 billion, much of it due to the corruption of the US-backed Duvalier dictatorship. The IMF and World Bank were pressured into cancelling about \$250 million of that sum, which was followed by the InterAmerican Development Bank, Haiti's largest creditor, abolishing \$450 million worth of debt in September 2010. In 2010, a group of intellectuals, led by Etienne Balibar and Noam Chomsky, reiterated President Jean-Baptiste Aristide's 2003 call for the cancellation of sums equal to the amount demanded in reparations by the French. <sup>9</sup>

No response was forthcoming, but in the interim, public intellectuals writing in op-ed pages began to endorse the push for small-scale sustainable agriculture as the way ahead for the country—a direction that Haitians themselves had favored for centuries earlier. Local activists are making slow progress in groups like the Mouvement Paysan de Papaye (Peasant Movement of Papaye), working with clusters of peasant farmers on irrigation techniques, health care, and sustainable agriculture. Multinational mining enterprises on the island are moving much faster, buying up mineral rights for gold and copper in the mountains and taking over key watersheds for industrial use. In many respects, it's 1801 all over again, with a struggle between those who want to see large-scale revenue generation at the elite and (multi)national level and those who advocate local and commons-based production. However, the tropical storm season of 2012 has proved devastating to those who hoped the island could become sustainable. Weakened by Hurricane Isaac, Haiti was then saturated with rain from Hurricane Sandy, leading to the almost total loss of the harvest, widespread soil erosion, and the macabre drowning of some sixty-five thousand livestock. At the time of writing, relief organizations are warning that half a million people face starvation. Meanwhile, Haiti's external debt has climbed back up to six hundred million dollars, about half the official government budget.

### **"I would prefer not to."**

From the outset of OWS through the May Day demonstrations of 2012, it was common to see stickers and fly-posters bearing the phrase: "I would prefer not to." Taken from Herman Melville's 1853 story *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, the slogan showcased the resonance between a past abolitionist era and the present-day one. Bartleby, the Wall Street clerk who "would prefer not to," decides not to take on additional clerical work assigned by his employer. He is, without ever saying so, on strike. His assigned work entailed copying contracts. According to the literary scholar, Tal Kastner, *Bartleby* displays "the tensions in the notion of contract as a paradigm of freedom, which become evident in the latter part of the nineteenth

century as wage labor, as an asymmetrical relation of power, comes to symbolize the opposite of slavery.” <sup>10</sup> For slavery was literally an affair of contracts in which human property was exchanged, mortgaged, bonded, and redeemed like any other form of property.

Not surprisingly, after the abolition of slavery, Reconstruction was thus centrally concerned with questions of contracts and the debts they enshrined. At the radical South Carolina Constitutional Convention of 1868, many days were spent debating the legality of contractual debts. In the decade from 1868–1877, the governance of South Carolina, in Du Bois’ view, amounted to nothing less than a “dictatorship of the Black Proletariat.” He did not mean this in the classic Leninist sense; rather, he was simply asserting that those without wealth were able to determine how the state should be run and duly “dictated the forms and methods of government.” <sup>11</sup> The Convention had been charged with drawing up a new state constitution in light of the Reconstruction statutes, and to bring the state into line with the rest of the Union. Whites boycotted the election for the Convention, with the exception of antislavery factions and some canny former Confederates seeking to limit the damage to their interests.

The *Proceedings* of the Convention are a remarkable document, over a thousand pages of debates, motions, and discussions, with a distinctly familiar feel to Occupiers. There was a great deal of discussion about process, even more about money, and the participants ended up renaming the sessions of the Legislature as the General Assembly, which is still their name. <sup>12</sup> Here the resonances with Occupy are striking. The freed occupied land and refused to leave, or else they worked on their former plantations but declined all wages, claiming the land was theirs. They also voted, because this was a form of direct action in 1867. The direct action outside the Convention clearly shaped what happened inside, just as the characterization of the proceedings as a “menagerie” by the Charleston *Mercury* gave solace to the white minority. <sup>13</sup> Consider how it was all depicted in D. W. Griffith’s 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, often presented as a classic of early cinema. Griffith showed African American delegates (played by actors in blackface) eating, drinking, taking off their shoes, propositioning women, and otherwise acting out the worst stereotypes. The result is so offensively racist that I can’t show it to young people without very careful contextualization.

In the actual Convention, a serious if at times highly charged set of debates took place, the longest of which by far were about debts, or, more precisely, whether debts contracted by those selling and purchasing slaves during the war had to be honored. These debts were the result of the mortgaging of the enslaved to raise money for the Confederate war effort. There were thousands of such debts outstanding, totaling millions of dollars. Debtors were said to be on the verge of selling their plantations in order to recoup some of the money. In the midst of a postwar recession, with no established labor system, land was very cheap and these sales would not in many cases have raised enough to clear the debtors. They would, however, have provided an opportunity for the freedmen (as they were known at the time) to purchase land and establish an economic foothold. Initially there was a proposal to freeze the debt. The transparent hope was that three months later, if and when the Union army departed, the debts would be quietly forgotten. Delegates rejected this by a large majority. The motion was reframed as if it was motivated by antislavery sentiments. The revised argument was presented as follows: as there is no “right of property in man,” no debt could have been incurred, since that which was being mortgaged was not owned in the first place.

One of the most eloquent opponents of the slave owners’ efforts at debt annulment was the Rev. Francis L. Cardozo, the son of a free black woman, Lydia Weston, and a Portuguese-Jewish man. Cardozo described the effort at debt annulment as a transparent “class measure,” designed to protect the slave owners’ interests. After all, as he pointed out, they had known the “precarious tenure” of slavery when they took on the debt during the war. More importantly, he saw this moment as the only chance to break up the “plantation system” through land sales to freedmen. Indeed, a hundred of them formed the Charleston Land Company, and, buying shares individually, they collectively purchased six hundred acres of land for \$6600 that would formerly have sold for \$25,000–\$50,000. Cardozo declared:

Men are now beginning not to plant cotton but grain for food, and in so doing, they are establishing a system of small farm

by which not only my race, but the poor whites and ninety-nine hundredths of the other thousands will be benefitted . . . [Planters] do not want that a nigger or a Yankee shall ever own a foot of their land. 14

Is this perhaps the first use of the 99% meme? His vision encompasses a future of sustainable local agriculture as an alternative to the single cash-crop of the plantation business—exactly the kind of agrarianism being promoted today by food activists, environmentalists, and de-growth economists. But Cardozo and his allies lost the vote to a majority comprised of African Americans opposed to slavery in all forms and self-identified “whites.” While the debt freeze was voted down as being a patently pro-planter measure, framing debt abolition as a refusal of the principle of slavery proved to be an effective combination of the desire to conciliate the planters, who had boycotted the Convention, and the conviction that it was necessary to deny any legality to slavery, produced this paradoxical gift to the oppressors from the oppressed. Finally, there was a quid pro quo in the minds of the African American delegates that we can formulate as: if we forgive your debt you give our people land.

For the freed wanted above all to own land, as a means to form autonomous communities. They clearly saw that the alternative was poverty and/or the penitentiary. All the new labor systems that were subsequently developed by planter elites were, as Angela Davis puts it, “dramatic evidence of the persistence of slavery.” That is to say, sharecropping, tenant farming, the scrip system, and the convict lease system of imprisoned labor all depended on a new series of connections between debt, labor, and penal confinement. Sharecropping meant that the farmers were entitled to only a portion of the crop they produced, usually a third. However, as they were paid only once a year, they had to make purchases on credit for the rest of year at the notorious crossroads or company stores. Very often, the annual payment would not cover this debt, meaning that the sharecropper could never escape being tied to the land. In fact, wage laborers were often not paid in cash but in scrip, a paper form with which to buy necessities, at inflated prices, in the company stores. Even this kind of labor was too expensive for the planters. The new Black Codes passed in the South after Reconstruction criminalized minor financial transgressions. In Mississippi, for example, any person who “handled money carelessly,” an action very clearly defined in the eye of the beholder, could be declared a vagrant, and imprisoned. Simple theft, whether of bread or an animal, was turned into a grave felony and those convicted were certain to be imprisoned. This new prison population, almost wholly African American, was cherished as a virtually free labor force by a lease system which made convicts available to employers to work for almost nothing. Even today, the presumed liberal University of California gets its office furniture from prison workshops.

Thus, the African American minister Richard Harvey Cain, who later served two terms in Congress as a Republican, proposed an alternative solution to the South Carolina Convention: Congress should be petitioned for a loan of one million dollars to buy land for resale to the freed and poor whites. The ensuing debate was the nastiest of the Convention and the tenor of it clarified to African American delegates that the Confederates still believed that a “negro would never own a foot of land” in the state. Cain defended his proposal to sell plots of land over a five-year period like this:

We want these large tracts of land cut up . . . What we need is a system of small farms . . . I believe there are hundreds of persons in the jail and penitentiary cracking rock today who have all the instincts of honesty, and who, had they the opportunity of making a living, would never have been found in such a place. 15

The fate of Reconstruction, as Cain and others saw clearly, lay in the emergence of the prison-industrial complex, and from the determination of planters to offer only starvation wages to make sharecropping seem preferable to the use of the state apparatus to confound the efforts of ex-slaves to buy land.

The resolution to request a loan from the Bureau of Freedmen passed but was ignored in Washington, so, in 1869, the state established its own Land Commission to buy and resell land. The freed made all the efforts they could, but, for the most part, their ventures in land ownership did not end well. The repayments proved beyond them, in an era when mortgages were on average three to five years long, especially when the Wall Street crash of 1873 depressed prices for

all produce. Among the success stories was the Charleston Land Company itself, which created a community now known as Scanlonville, in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, after its leader Robert L. Scanlon (or Scanlan). The land was first settled by Seewee Indians, colonized by the British as early as 1680, and later belonged to a plantation called Remley's Point, a name still used by local realtors. In Scanlonville, the freed bought the land in parcels and then redivided it into farm plots and town plots, where it has remained in place since Reconstruction, one of four such collectives in the state. Cain himself established a settlement called Lincolnton with six others, and the town is still there today. Other communities survived in what had long been liminal spaces along the coast.

### For Democracy, Strike Debt

This Carolina case study can be seen as a determining moment for the future of American democracy. Much would have been different had the plantations been broken up to make way for a system of communal agriculture. But what does this story portend for Strike Debt? It is a complex, but prescient, example—a reminder that there are many precedents for considering debt annulment. The South Carolina case was an early example of what modern finance labels as “odious debt” created under circumstances so morally repugnant that repayment cannot be enforced. That is why most of the African American delegates voted for debt cancellation, even though it may have deprived them of the opportunity to purchase land cheaply from their former masters. Three years after the end of the war, nailing slavery's coffin shut was of the utmost importance. At the same time, the prospect of getting land to the landless and establishing a democratic economic system was critical to achieving long-term freedoms, but those goals were largely passed over. Exceptions like Scanlonville show how well similar efforts could have succeeded.

At the same time, this example makes clear that debt is never just about money. From the Haitian Revolution to US Abolition of slavery to the 2008 foreclosure crisis, property, land, and debt have been tightly intertwined. The product of that interaction has been racialized segregation and impoverishment. It can now be argued that what we call “debt” in the Americas is the political economy that results in the formation of “race,” given that we understand race to be a social hierarchy with no biological grounding. The notorious mass incarceration of people of color, especially African American men, in the United States is both the cause and the consequence of this impoverishment. In each case we have looked at, the majority has had its interest suppressed by the minority in the name of national or state solvency. Each situation depended on appeasing Wall Street, or at least US-based lenders, rather than fulfilling a democratic mandate. By taking debt as a central tactic in its anticapitalist campaign, Occupy thus confronts the formation of a nation-state that uses poverty as a means of sustaining racialized hierarchy. When we speak of a “Rolling Jubilee” to abolish debt, it also implies that debt abolition will have to confront these other disciplinary structures that both enable and are sustained by the debt society. This has always been precisely the strength of Occupy, that it does not compartmentalize issues but seeks a radical reformulation of the social order as a whole via the interfaces of the economic, with identity, history, and temporalities. For democracy, strike debt.

### Footnotes:

1. Tiqqun, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2009), 12. ↩
2. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 14. ↩
3. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994). ↩
4. See the Strike Debt website: <http://www.strikedebt.org>. ↩
5. Strike Debt, *The Debt Resisters' Operations Manual* (New York: Strike Debt, 2012), 2. ↩
6. *Ibid.*, 44. ↩
7. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: PUBLISHER, 1935). ↩

8. Figures and quotations in this paragraph from Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (New York: André Deutsch, [1944] 1964): 36 and 107. ↩
9. "France Urged to Pay Haiti's Huge 'Independence Debt,'" BBC News Europe, August 16, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-10988938>. ↩
10. Tal Kastner, "Bartleby," *Law and Literature* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 390. ↩
11. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 381–430, quotes from 381 and the footnote on 381. ↩
12. J. Woodruff, ed., *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of South Carolina, Held at Charleston SC. beginning January 14th and ending March 17th 1868* (Charleston, SC: Denny and Perry, 1868), 2 vols. ↩
13. Woodruff, *Proceedings*, vol. 1, 107. ↩
14. Woodruff, *Proceedings*, vol. 1, 117–18. ↩
15. Woodruff, *Proceedings*, vol. 1, 380. ↩