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Empire of Liberty

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INTRODUCTION

THE LECTURES COLLECTED here were delivered at Dartmouth College in the spring of 2007 to inaugurate the Freedman Humanities Lecture Series. With the exception of the second essay, “Race, Historical Trauma, and Democracy: The Politics of a Historical Wrong,” the essays have been edited only to reflect the different format in which they are now presented. It has been a delicate balancing act, keeping to the narrative style of a lecture or conversation while editing so that a reader may follow the arguments. The second essay reflects material from a lecture titled “W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*, Slave Emancipation, and American Democracy,” delivered at Dartmouth College for the Futures of American Studies Institute in June 2008. So in a deep sense all the essays and ideas presented here were made possible by the creative intellectual space which Dartmouth College has afforded me over the past few years, first as a visiting humanities scholar and then as a regular summer faculty member of the Futures of American Studies Institute.

My theme for the Freedman Humanities Lecture Series was “Empire of Liberty: Power, Desire, and Freedom.” I chose this theme because, for the past five years or so, I have been thinking about what it means to live *inside* an empire. Living in Jamaica for many years, I was preoccupied with the nature of imperial power and the external drives of that power as it impacted the Caribbean and Africa, particularly its military interventions and its none-too-subtle

economic coercions through multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. My political experiences made me aware of the capacity of an imperial power to wield undue political influence through either overt or covert means. Living in the Caribbean, I came of age in the early aftermath of Jamaica's political independence. Thus I was very aware of the operations of colonial power. In Jamaica, constitutional decolonization had created a juridically independent nation-state, but hundreds of years of colonial domination had left stubborn structural legacies. Of those many legacies one of the most powerful was the effort by colonial power to reform the so-called native mind. I considered this feature of colonial power to be the ideological weight of colonial domination. I always felt it was a critical feature because it illuminated an aspect of power which, in the heat of radical political activity, we did not pay sufficient attention to. It was not just a matter of the ways in which dominant ideas worked by setting limits or establishing horizons that were then taken for granted. Instead, those ideas were inhabited and then came to map our social world. Years ago, Louis Althusser argued that the materiality of ideology produced subjects in what Stuart Hall, invoking Ernesto Laclau, described as a "chain of linked interpellations that constitute the Imaginary."¹ If one of our human labors was or is always upon ourselves, then it seemed to me that power always has to find ways in which it can capture that labor. Over time, but particularly when I moved to the United States, it became clear to me that my initial preoccupations with questions of ideology were insufficient for grappling with the present constitution of power. This insufficiency became acute as I listened carefully to discussions and debates about the Iraq war and the responses to the tragedy of 9/11. It was at this point that I began a study of American political thought as I had never done before.

In this enterprise I discovered that the most perceptive writer and scholar on American society was W. E. B. DuBois. Whether it was *The Souls of Black Folk*, *Black Reconstruction*, the hundreds of es-

says he wrote, or the many books he published, DuBois's life and work represented a most remarkable attempt both to understand America and to change it. It was only then that I came to fully understand C. L. R. James's assessment of DuBois, which I had read some twenty years before. James remarks of DuBois, "There is no need to subscribe to all that Dr Du Bois has said and done. But long before the rulers and the leaders of thought in the United States grasped the essentials of the world in which they lived Dr Du Bois did, and to look upon him just as a great leader of the Negro people or just a true son of Africa is to diminish the conceptions and mitigate the impact of one of the greatest citizens of the modern world."² There was another reason why DuBois appealed to me. Not only was he a person of both word and deed and was a scholar with what we call today deep activist commitments, but DuBois moved seamlessly across many disciplinary fields. In this effort what drove him was seeking answers to questions that troubled him. But it was not a self-interested effort, it was one guided by a commitment to changing the world. It became clear to me as I reread and listened afresh to DuBois as well as many of the novelists, thinkers, musicians, artists, and writers of what can be called the radical black intellectual tradition that what had made that tradition distinctive were the questions it had posed.

In 2002 I began to write a series of essays exploring this tradition.³ By the time I was asked to deliver the Freedman lectures, I was in a position to speak and think *with* and *through* this tradition while taking into account other questions posed by thinkers not operating within the tradition. I owe the reader this brief intellectual history because it situates these lectures and the concerns that drove them.



In the late 1970s and '80s the political axis of the West shifted with the electoral victories of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and

Helmut Kohl. The emergence of these three figures at the same moment signaled a decisive shift in electoral political terms and in ideological framing ones. These political figures set out to change the terms of contemporary political discourse and for a time successfully defined those terms. At the heart of this change was the elevation of the market into an ethic. As an ethic the market became, in Antonio Gramsci's phrase, "common sense." Ronald Judy reminds us that common sense is the "designation for that agency which organizes and enables intentional purposive human activity."⁴ However, for this common sense to consolidate itself, a language had to be found that could stabilize the primacy of the market ethic for at least some time. The organizing language for this new ethic was a conception of "freedom." Thus, as neoliberalism became the dominant ideology of imperial power, it worked through an ideological space in which "freedom" became the "common sense." It was a remarkable deployment of a term invested with a particular conception of freedom, which could conjure up the deepest feelings that organize our lives.

My sojourn in America coincided with the Bush regime's biopolitical settlement and an attempt to institute a profoundly neo-conservative project.⁵ Under the rubric of "the American Century," this project called for America to exercise benevolent global hegemony. It advocated a mixture of positions requiring America to control the international commons of cyberspace and the development of global missile defense systems that could secure American power around the world. These lectures were delivered against the backdrop of the falling apart of this project as the consequences of the Iraq war created fissures amongst the leading figures in the project. These fissures could also be seen within significant segments of the American population, who began to question the legitimacy of the war.

In these lectures I attempt in broad strokes to understand this neoconservative project not as an aberration of American civilization but as one of its many logics. These logics are rooted in a his-

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torical trajectory of dominant practices in America's political history. The lectures therefore are not concerned with the cut and thrust of the Bush bio-political settlement and its unraveling but rather seek to understand a different logic which may have been operating. My goal has been to think about the character of American hegemony and to ask: what does it presently illuminate about power? As I grappled with this question it became clear to me that American power, while functioning in the conventional ways of all imperial powers (for instance, through military interventions, economic domination, and civilizing missions), had a unique quality about it. This was not strange. All imperial powers have unique features. America was an empire, but what kind of empire was it? During the Bush regime many pages were written on the subject. However, it was Thomas Jefferson's phrase "empire of liberty," appropriated from Edmund Burke, which gave me insight into what I consider to be a special feature of American imperial power.

Jefferson began to use the phrase "empire of liberty" while arguing for the expansion of the Union. Merrill Peterson has suggested that for Jefferson, "Liberty was the ultimate value, the Union the means to be cherished only so long as it furthered the end of its being."⁶ Thus, it seems to me a couple of things are clear. First, at the moment when "freedom" was being constructed as "common sense," it was not a rhetorical cover for imperial adventure, but rather imperial power was developing a technology of rule that had been deployed during previous colonial empires. It was a technology of rule in which the creation of new subjectivities was paramount. Second, this configuration of power was occurring in a global context in which radical ideas and movements had generally declined. I therefore felt that Jefferson's "empire of liberty" was not a metaphor for something else but was a description of a project of power in which the possibility of total domination was the horizon.

The four lectures presented here center on a set of questions and issues about "empire of liberty" and its significance as a project of power: the issues of race and history, the questions of violence, and,

finally, critical thought today. In all of the lectures, there are some words that serve as keywords, bringing together ideas and arguments into a network of reflections upon the time we presently inhabit. Of course, the questions of how power can be resisted today and of what possibilities exist for a different kind of freedom than imperial freedom haunt these lectures. In thinking about these questions, I found it useful to return to the theories and practices of radical anticolonial thinking as one possible basis from which to develop critical thought. Not that all other currents of radical thought are exhausted, but important insights may be gleaned from radical critiques that begin their analysis from the ground on which the native or racialized body had to construct the human with new meanings.

The first lecture, titled “Empire of Liberty: Desire, Power, and the States of Exception,” sets the stage and establishes the grounds for some of the arguments in the rest of the lectures. Not only does it discuss the meanings and operations of this “empire of liberty,” but it argues that, if at one time power worked through ideology as interpellation to create subjects, today power strives to capture desire and imagination. This lecture is followed by “Race, Historical Trauma, and Democracy: The Politics of a Historical Wrong,” in which I think about democracy not as an absence or a formal theory of rights but rather as an intense and intimate experience within a polity. In this lecture I complicate Aristotle’s notion of the *zoon politikon* by arguing that human beings are not made for life in the polis in some innate way but rather must struggle to construct and invent *ways of life* that allow us to practice forms of democracy. I argue that our concern with ways of life enables us to make democracy. In this lecture I also suggest that the voyages of Vasco da Gama and Christopher Columbus inaugurated an epoch of human history in which both colonialism and racial slavery profoundly shaped our ways of life for many centuries. Both these voyages shattered St. Augustine’s conception of the fabled antipodes where human beings lived hanging upside down. While overturning this Western con-

ception, the voyages opened the way for the institution of a hierarchical system of classification of human beings. In this system, difference and discontinuity in the gaze of the Western observer became linked to conceptions of historical progress, and race became a determining factor for human status. Therefore we should not think about questions of democracy without acknowledging DuBois's epigraph to the first chapter of *Black Reconstruction*: "How Black men coming to America in the 16th and 17th centuries became a central thread in the history of the United States and at once a challenge to its democracy."⁷ The second lecture does not argue that race and colonial power created the conditions for democracy to be an unfinished project, an argument which assumes that democracy is really constructed around issues of inclusion and exclusion. Rather it suggests that if democracy requires intimacy then it has to reckon with the sustained legacies of historical injustice and historical trauma. In the end I argue that democracy is not really about procedures but, as Jacques Rancière notes, is embodied "in the very forms of concrete life and sensible experience."⁸ The third essay, titled "Death, Power, Violence, and New Sovereignities," attempts to think about death as a form of politics. Death has become a haunting specter in the contemporary world. In this essay, I reflect on genocide and violence in general. I also review the character of violence in the postcolony. Reflecting on both genocide and violence, I argue that death and violence are linked to performances of power as a further illustration that power itself is performative. As power seeks to become a totality, it desires to *command life itself*. In this form of domination, the bio-political moment is not one, in Michel Foucault's phrase, of "make live" or "let die," nor is it about the exercise of power as the right of the sword. Instead, it is about creating conditions of life where death is acceptable. In such a context, violence does not evacuate power—it is power.

The final lecture asks the perennial question, an ethical, intellectual, and political one. What resources do we have today that may allow us to think our way out of the various conundrums that we

currently face? Working through the title “The End of History or the Invention of Existence: Critical Thought and Thinking about the Human,” this lecture takes up the question of humanism in critical thought from the perspective of a twentieth-century, radical, anti-colonial tradition. Arguing that conventional critical theory has been epistemically blind, I invoke the writings of Frantz Fanon as a starting point to begin thinking differently about the world today. I argue that there is a politics of imagination that is central to any contemporary project of human freedom. So while the essays begin with Thomas Jefferson’s phrase “empire of liberty” in an exploration of the nature of American imperial power as empire, they end with a discussion of freedom. It is freedom seen from the perspective of those who were unfree, from what the Latin American intellectual Enrique Dussell calls the “underside of modernity.” In the end, the concerns in these lectures center on the human practices of thinking about and trying to live ways of life that are constructed around forms of freedom that are about human creativity instead of domination. If the essays provoke discussion and reflection by the reader about what these freedom practices might look like, then their publication has been worthwhile.