

Once again in defense of the American Revolution: A reply to a Brazilian historian

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The WSWs posts below a letter from Brazilian historian Mário Maestri followed by our reply. Maestri is a specialist in the history of slavery in southern Brazil, whose works include studies of colonial slavery, abolition, race and politics in Brazil. He is also a veteran of the Pabloite movement, having participated in the Morenoite Convergência Socialista and the Mandelite Democracia Socialista, both of which joined the Workers Party (PT). He was later a founding member of the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), and his last political affiliation was with the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB).

Dear comrades,

I am a Brazilian historian—Trotskyist—and an avid reader of the excellent World Socialist Web Site, on which I congratulate you. Although I have—regrettably—never dedicated myself to a deeper study of the social formation of the United States, I have spent decades studying colonial slavery in Brazil, the longest-lasting and most fully developed system of its kind in the Americas. I would emphasize that ‘slaveholding liberalism’ not only governed but sustained the colonial slave order in Brazil for decades. I have followed with surprise the WSWs’s insistence on characterizing the U.S. independence movement as something more than an unfinished bourgeois-national revolution—given that it failed to destroy the slave order, a feat accomplished only during the Civil War. Arguments citing the liberal universalism found in the declarations of the so-called “American Revolution”—while ignoring the lack of any class-based transformation and, conversely, noting the movement’s opposition to every advance made by the exploited classes (both free and enslaved)—limit any definition of those events, at least from a Marxist analytical perspective, to precisely what I have described: a bourgeois-national revolution that handed full political power to the U.S. ruling classes—capitalists and slaveholders—who had previously existed in a subordinate relationship with the British colonial order. Breaking colonial dependency did not alter the internal relations of exploitation. I am not referring here to the Civil War, which certainly had a different character regarding the South. Similarly, the independence of Brazil from Portugal in 1822 and of Argentina from Spain in 1810 were not revolutionary events, as they did not revolutionize the social structure of domination.

Revolutionary greetings, Mário Maestri

Dear Prof. Maestri,

We thank you for your letter, for it offers a chance to clarify questions of great historical and political significance. At the same time, we must note at the outset that you do not take up, much less refute, the arguments the *World Socialist Web Site* has developed over the past seven years on

the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the struggle against the falsifications of the *New York Times* 1619 Project. Though you say you are an avid reader of the WSWs, your criticism proceeds as if this body of work does not exist.

Indeed, your argument differs in no essential respect from that of the 1619 Project. Both deny the revolutionary character of 1776. The warmongering “newspaper of record” for American liberalism denounces the American Revolution as a counter-revolution waged to defend slavery. Similarly, you dismiss it as the “so-called ‘American Revolution’” because it “failed to destroy the slave order,” allegedly achieved no “class-based transformation,” did not “alter the internal relations of exploitation,” and merely transferred power to “capitalists and slaveholders.” You then equate it directly with Brazilian independence under Emperor Dom Pedro I, on the grounds that neither event “revolutionize[d] the social structure of domination.”

These objections can be reduced to this: That the American Revolution failed to destroy slavery, and that it therefore belongs, with Brazilian independence, to a single category of non-revolutionary events.

The revolutionary content of 1776

Such a verdict can be sustained only by ignoring what the American Revolution actually accomplished. We have discussed these objective achievements in numerous articles and interviews over the years, and most recently in the webinar *The American Revolution and Its Place in History: From the War Against Monarchy to “No Kings,”* which brought together leading historians of the American Revolution and Civil War to examine the historical legacy of 1776 and its significance for the political struggles of the present.

We will nonetheless restate the central features of this transformation here.

The American Revolution shattered the remnants of aristocratic and feudal property law: primogeniture and entail were abolished, quitrents eliminated, the inheritance of public office as personal property ended, and royal and proprietary claims to immense tracts of land swept away. This transformation was bound up with the mass character of the Revolution. Tens of thousands of Loyalists—including many of the richest, most politically powerful and largest landowning families in the colonies—were driven into exile, their estates confiscated and in many cases broken up and sold. The Navigation Acts, Crown monopolies and mercantilist restrictions that had subordinated colonial economic development to Britain were overthrown. The old system of royal patronage and privilege was dismantled. Land and commerce were freed from the restraints of the colonial order, while inherited rank and relations of personal dependency suffered powerful blows, clearing the way for the

rapid development of capitalist relations and the elevation of free labor in the early republic. Changes reached into the very language of the people. The word “master,” common before the Revolution throughout the colonies, vanished from the northern states, replaced by the Dutch-derived neologism “boss.”

The political transformation was no less far-reaching. Thirteen colonies governed under a hereditary monarchy became independent republics. Royal governors, Crown authority and inherited political privilege were abolished. Written constitutions grounded political authority not in dynasty or divine right but in claims to popular sovereignty. Political participation expanded dramatically among free men, property qualifications were weakened or abolished in a number of states and soon in all, and the Revolution unleashed a mass democratic political culture hostile to hereditary rank and aristocratic deference. Thus the Revolution destroyed the political framework of the colonial *ancien régime* and created new forms of republican government resting upon a radically different conception of the source and legitimacy of political power.

That political culture made slavery—the focus of your criticism—a political problem for the first time in modern history. During and after the Revolution, the first organized antislavery movement in world history emerged in Philadelphia, where the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, founded in 1775 and reorganized after independence under the presidency of Benjamin Franklin. Northern states enacted gradual emancipation and, one by one, abolished slavery. Yet even as slavery receded in the North, the rise of cotton as a global commodity—the key to British industrialization—entrenched slavery ever more deeply in the South, setting a slave economy against a rapidly expanding free-labor economy within the same republic, an antagonism that intensified over the following decades and culminated in the election of Lincoln and the secession of the southern states in 1860.

It is in this historical context that the Civil War assumes its full significance. Contrary to your claim about our “insistence on characterizing the US independence movement as something more than an unfinished bourgeois-national revolution,” we have repeatedly emphasized that the bourgeois-democratic revolution reached completion only in what historians have long called the Second American Revolution. The error is yours. Your letter treats the American Revolution and the Civil War as separate, discrete historical episodes rather than successive phases of a single revolutionary process.

That revolutionary process destroyed slavery in North America “four score and seven years” after independence and contributed decisively to its destruction throughout the Atlantic world. The principles of the First American Revolution passed into the French Revolution of 1789 and, through it, into the largest and most far-reaching slave revolt in history, the Haitian Revolution of 1791. American independence also shattered key elements of the mercantilist system linking Britain’s mainland colonies, Caribbean plantations and the Atlantic slave trade. As Eric Williams demonstrated in *Capitalism and Slavery*, it “marked the beginning of their uninterrupted decline.” The resulting weakening of the West Indian interest, combined with the rise of industrial capitalism, created the conditions for the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and slavery throughout most of the British Empire in 1833. The Civil War then struck the final, decisive blow against slavery in the New World in 1861–65. Had the slaveholders’ rebellion succeeded, there is no reason to suppose slavery would have disappeared from the hemisphere when it did in Cuba in 1886 and Brazil in 1888.

Brazilian Independence in the period of monarchical reaction

This brings us to the comparison with Brazilian independence in 1822. Let us state the matter categorically: Brazilian independence was not a triumphant bourgeois revolution at all. It was, in its outcome, a political reorganization carried out by the existing ruling class to preserve its own position. Measured against the democratic tasks that the classic bourgeois revolutions set themselves and, however unevenly, accomplished, the contrast with 1776 is stark.

The Portuguese monarchy and the old colonial aristocracy were compelled by the crisis of the colonial order to make concessions to the times. Independence was one of them. The regime that emerged preserved the monarchy, preserved the privileges and the vast landed property of the slaveholding elite, and preserved the de facto colonial status of Brazil, transferred from a decaying Portugal to an ascendant Britain. The Brazilian state was born in continuity with the absolutist structure of the Portuguese empire, not in rupture with it.

The crisis of colonial rule in Brazil had been developing for decades, nurturing revolutionary currents drawn to the principles of the American and French revolutions. In 1789 came the Minas Gerais Conspiracy, whose leaders had established direct contact with Thomas Jefferson. Nine years later the Bahian Conspiracy of 1798 broke out, carried out by artisans, soldiers and free men of color who looked to the Haitian Revolution. In 1817 the Pernambucan Revolution established a republic in that province, which lasted two months and issued a constitution modeled on the documents of the American Revolution. None of these movements were able to break out of their local boundaries and take on a national character. They tended toward conciliation with the old order and were violently suppressed by the Portuguese state—a recurring pattern whose social roots we examine further on.

This crisis entered a new phase with the Napoleonic Wars—themselves an extension of the French Revolution into the international arena. Faced with the French invasion of Portugal, the royal court fled to Rio de Janeiro under British escort at the end of 1807. The opening of the ports to direct trade, above all with England, an economic power of an entirely different order from Portugal, strained the colonial system of restrictions to its breaking point. At the same time, it installed the Braganza dynasty on Brazilian soil, giving the royalist forces gathered around it a base from which to take hold of the situation as the colonial edifice came apart.

The nearly half century separating American and Brazilian independence saw a decisive shift in the international situation. The America of 1776 and the France of 1789 had acted at the flood tide of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. By 1822 the revolutionary wave was at its lowest ebb, and Europe was ruled by the triumphant counterrevolution organized at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Engels described the order it established:

The treaties of Vienna are the epitome of the great victory of reactionary Europe over revolutionary France. They are the classic form in which European reaction ruled for fifteen years during the Restoration period. They restore legitimacy, monarchy by divine right, feudal aristocracy, clerical rule, and patriarchal jurisdiction and administration. But since victory was won with the help of the English, German, Italian, Spanish and especially the French bourgeoisie, concessions had also to be made to the bourgeoisie. While the sovereigns, aristocrats, priests and bureaucrats divided the rich spoils among themselves, the bourgeoisie was put off with promissory notes drawn on the future, which were not honoured and which nobody had any intention of honouring.

This was the international context in which Brazilian independence took its shape. It was proclaimed by Dom Pedro I, who had governed Brazil as

prince regent ever since his father, King Dom João VI, returned to Portugal in 1821 to confront the constitutionalist uprising that had broken out the previous year in Porto. The same man who had stood at the apex of Portuguese royal authority in Brazil transferred that authority to himself as emperor. Sovereignty was not seized by a rising class from below; it passed from one representative of the Braganza dynasty to another.

Brazilian independence developed, nonetheless, as a violent political and military struggle involving masses of people. Portuguese garrisons had to be fought out of Bahia, Maranhão, Pará, Piauí and the Cisplatine province in campaigns running well into 1823. This civil war was waged by provincial militias and *ordenanças*—untrained, unpaid, amateur reserve forces raised by the plantation lords—drawn overwhelmingly from the free poor and backed by a navy under foreign mercenary command. The siege of Salvador, Brazil's first planned city and first official capital, alone mobilized some 22,000 combatants, and hundreds were killed. But neither the scale of that mobilization nor the bloodshed made it a genuinely popular revolution. Brazil produced no equivalent of the Committees of Correspondence, Sons of Liberty, and Committees of Public Safety which organized the popular masses of the American colonies into an independent political force.

“Inviolable, Sacred, and not subject to any responsibility”

The leadership of the Brazilian movement, representing the colony's slaveholding ruling class, turned from the first moment to the prince regent as the necessary guarantor of political order and national unity. José Bonifácio de Andrada, hailed to this day as Brazil's “Patriarch of Independence,” located the founding act of Brazilian sovereignty not in “the people” as the American Revolution had proclaimed, but in a prince through the so-called Dia do Fico (“I Stay Day”) of January 9, 1822, when Pedro refused the order of the Lisbon Cortes to return to Portugal. It had fallen to the prince, he wrote, “to create with the words—I stay—a new Empire.”

You dismiss the “liberal universalism found in the declarations of the so-called ‘American Revolution,’” counterposing to it the absence of any “class-based transformation.” This is an entirely anti-Marxist approach, which denies the dialectical relationship between the historical development of ideas and the material conditions upon which they rest. But the Brazilian propertied classes of 1822, for their part, did not trivialize the revolutionary implications of such universalist concepts.

When Bonifácio and the Brazilian enlightened reformers gathered in the Constituent Assembly of 1823, they borrowed the vocabulary of the great bourgeois revolutions while emptying it of content. The resulting document earned the derisive nickname “Cassava Constitution,” since it proposed to calibrate citizenship to the annual output of cassava flour—a measure of the land and slaves required to produce it. As the historian Caio Prado Júnior observed, the Assembly's ostensible liberalism was not remotely troubled by the question of slaves, whom it proposed to regulate through the euphemistic device of recognizing “contracts” between masters and slaves.

Nonetheless Dom Pedro violently dissolved the Assembly in November 1823 and, four months later, imposed a constitution of his own based on the Assembly's draft. Pedro's charter defined the Empire as “the political association of all Brazilian Citizens,” proclaimed that the law “shall be equal for all,” and carried a declaration of civil and political rights that bears comparison with 1776. But the validity of every one of these provisions was undermined from the outset by the investiture of the crown with a Moderating Power, which stood above the three constitutional powers and was declared “the key to the whole political organization.” Its

holder, a sovereign who “shall reign forever in Brazil,” was declared “inviolable, and Sacred,” not “subject to any responsibility whatsoever.” The significance of that provision is underscored by the fact that, 200 years later, it remains the leitmotif of the fascist reaction in Brazil: the declaration of the Armed Forces as a “Moderating Power” served as the central legal argument of the coup plot led by former president Jair Bolsonaro and high-ranking military officers in 2022-2023.

The invocation of a liberal vocabulary by the newly established Brazilian Empire reflected the fact that, by 1824, the bourgeois revolutions had established certain political advances internationally and irrevocably. Dom Pedro's charter accepted them while leaving untouched monarchical and religious rule, aristocratic privilege and the landed property of the slaveholders. Brazil remained under Braganza rule until 1889 and under slavery until 1888. The Declaration of Independence, whatever its unrealized content in 1776, was a weapon directed against monarchy and inherited privilege.

The contrasting class and economic foundations of 1776 and 1822

The two processes are to be measured by what they made possible. The American Revolution of 1776 opened the path to the mighty development of capitalism in the United States and to the completion of the bourgeois revolution in its second act, the Civil War.

Brazilian independence secured the prolongation, for as long as it could be sustained, of the slave-based agrarian export economy and of the country's de facto colonial condition. The tasks that the classic bourgeois-democratic revolutions carried through remain unfinished in Brazil to this day.

Genuine economic independence—a sovereign domestic market and financial system, free of foreign financial and commercial domination—was one of these tasks, and Brazil's independence, in this sense too, was fictional. It was, in the most literal sense, bought. Recognition came not through the defeat of the metropolis, but through British mediation: a series of conferences in London between 1824 and 1825, overseen by foreign secretary George Canning, concluding in a treaty framed as a dynastic donation, by which João VI “transferred of his own free will” the crown to his son. Brazil paid Portugal £2 million in indemnity, of which £1.4 million consisted of the loan Portugal had contracted in London to finance its war against Brazilian independence. The new nation thus assumed the debt incurred to crush it and contracted a further loan in London to meet the obligation. Its negotiators had objected at the outset that neither Holland nor Portugal itself had paid Spain anything upon their own separation from the Spanish crown, and the United States had given nothing to Britain for its own. The objection did not survive British pressure.

Like Argentina, which you also invoke as a condemnatory comparison, Brazil passed after 1822 not into sovereign development, but into Britain's informal empire in Latin America. Preferential tariffs secured for British imports, together with British domination of finance, insurance and trade, constrained the development of an independent domestic market and financial system—a condition that remained the defining feature of Brazilian economic and political life until the early 20th century, when American imperialist capital emerged as a rival to British dominance.

The same British capital that drove the expansion of cotton slavery in the postrevolutionary American South, discussed above, stood equally behind the semi-colonial subordination of “independent” Brazil. But this shared entanglement with British capital points to a real difference, not merely a further parallel. In the South, dependence on the British cotton market coexisted with, and was ultimately subordinated to, the rise of an independent national economy centered in the North, whose industrial capitalist class was strong enough, by 1861, to break the political power of the planters and complete the country's economic as well as political independence. Brazil produced no equivalent counterweight to its own

dependence on British capital, and none would emerge for the better part of a century.

The divergence originated in the class composition of the two societies at the moment of their independence. The revolution in North America drew on a broad stratum of merchants, professionals and traders and, above all, on a vast yeomanry of small farmers who made up the great majority of the free population. As with the French Third Estate in 1789, it was the productive strata struggling against the restraints of the old order, and not an already dominant capitalist class, that carried out the revolution. In both 1776 and 1789, it was the revolution itself—sweeping away monarchy, aristocratic privilege and the legal apparatus of the old order—that cleared the ground upon which capitalist relations could take root. The revolution in North America, completed only by the Civil War, created the conditions for the triumph of American capitalism, not the reverse.

The Brazilian slaveholding caste commanded a concentration of wealth and coercive power considerably greater than that of its counterpart in the American South of 1776, where the large slaveholders were themselves divided, some backing the Crown and others independence. Brazil's urban middle strata were far thinner, and it had nothing resembling the American yeomanry. The mass of the free poor were not smallholders integrated into a market economy but a propertyless population living on the margins of the plantation system—"without a *raison d'être*," as one historian has put it—within the logic of an export economy built on slave labor.

This ruling class lived under the permanent threat of a popular and slave revolution, and its authoritarianism was the direct expression of that fear. Dispersed across a continental territory, divided by province and by export commodity, bound together by no national market, it was also incapable of governing in its own name. Trotsky's analysis of the Spanish monarchy, developed out of Marx's writings on Spain, describes a situation of striking similarity:

The predominance of the centrifugal tendency over the centripetal in economy as well as in politics undermined the ground beneath Spanish parliamentarism. [...] The monarchy was doubly necessary to the disconnected and decentralized ruling classes, incapable of governing the country in their own name."

The combined and uneven development of world capitalism and Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution

Yet these divergent outcomes reflected not merely national differences but the combined and uneven development of world capitalism, the historical law foundational to Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. The world economy combined advanced and backward forms, fused archaic property relations with modern finance and trade, and placed countries entering capitalist development later under entirely different international conditions than those that had shaped England, France, or the US.

Trotsky insisted that this progressive phase of capitalist expansion had objectively created a global economic organism even before the bourgeoisie, in its later, counterrevolutionary phase, reached backward countries such as Russia. "Binding all countries together with its mode of production and its commerce," he wrote, "capitalism has converted the whole world into a single economic and political organism." Under these conditions, the bourgeoisie of backward countries proved too dependent, too compromised by its ties to imperialism, and too fearful of the masses

to carry through the democratic tasks its class had accomplished in its revolutionary youth.

But the Theory of Permanent Revolution is not merely an explanation of why the bourgeoisie in countries such as Brazil proved incapable of carrying through "its own" democratic revolution. It also explains the historical trajectory of the bourgeoisie in the advanced capitalist countries themselves. Having created the world market and exhausted its historically progressive role, the bourgeoisie everywhere has become an obstacle to the further development of society. In the imperialist epoch, the defense of democratic rights, no less than the completion of unfinished democratic tasks, can be carried forward only through the independent mobilization of the working class, whose struggle for socialism becomes inseparable from the defense and extension of the democratic gains won in earlier revolutions.

That is why Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution possesses such profound contemporary significance. It explains not only why the democratic revolution remained unfinished in countries such as Brazil, but also why, in the US itself, the defense of the democratic conquests achieved in the First and Second American Revolutions now falls to the working class as part of the struggle for a Third American Revolution—the socialist transformation of society. The crisis of democracy is not a specifically American or Brazilian phenomenon, but the expression of a world crisis of capitalism, whose solution lies only in the international struggle of the working class.

Conclusion

It is symptomatic of this crisis that a left-wing Brazilian historian can treat the democratic conquests of 1776 with such indifference, dismissing them, in your own words, as belonging to a merely "so-called" revolution. This is not a personal idiosyncrasy. It is characteristic of broad sections of the contemporary pseudo-left, for which the great democratic revolutions of the bourgeois epoch, precisely because they were bourgeois, are regarded as politically irrelevant, and their defense as no essential task of socialists. Such indifference is the opposite of Marxism, which has always insisted that the struggle for socialism begins not by repudiating the democratic conquests of the past, but by assimilating, defending and transcending them.

This question assumes particular urgency as the United States marks the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The Trump-led extreme right seeks to appropriate the anniversary and the legacy of the American Revolution in the service of imperialist world war and a fascistic assault on democratic rights, while broad layers of the pseudo-left repudiate the Revolution altogether on the basis of identity politics and ahistorical moralism. Against both falsifications, the WSWS has advanced an analysis of the American Revolution and its enduring significance grounded in historical materialism.

We raise these criticisms in that same spirit, because the questions at stake bear directly on the political tasks facing the working class today. We would urge you to take up a closer study of this history along the lines set out above, and we welcome your continued engagement with the WSWS.



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