Creole Languages as a Reaction to Political Economy, a Mechanism for Afro-descendants to Gain Political Agency and a Vehicle to Obtain Freedom from Colonizers

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Abstract Haiti was the only European colony to successfully execute a slave-led rebellion. This paper aims to demonstrate the strength of the Haitian people and the maneuverability to use colonialism against colonists. This goal of this paper is to provide evidence to demonstrate the impact that creolization had on the Caribbean, in that, out of colonialism came a unique and unprecedented culture and that the very goal of colonialism, to subjugate Africans in order to leverage the European economy, would be the reason for the downfall of the colonialist project in Haiti. Through document analysis, literature review, and examining relevant data, this paper demonstrates the ability of materialism to revolt against colonialism, the use of creativity as a demonstration of agency, the connection between linguistic history and emancipation, and finally that creolization was a vehicle for the independence and freedom of the new Haitian people.

Keywords Creolization, Political Agency, Political Economy, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-American, Afro-Descendant, Creative Ingenuity, Materialism, Marxism, Capitalism, Colonization, Liberty, Freedom, Racism, Periphery–Semi-Periphery–Core, Revolution, Hegemony

1. Introduction

In this paper I am arguing that the creolization of the Caribbean, specifically Haiti, was a development that came out of the political economy of colonization. Moreover, creolization was a mechanism for the increased political agency of Afro-descendants and a vehicle for obtaining freedom. This paper will have four sections: Materialism as the driving force of culture that yields creative ingenuity; creativity as an expression of agency; linguistic history related to political agency; and creole as a vehicle for independence and freedom. In sum, my argument is as follows: the development of the Haitian Creole language was a transformative creative ingenuity that occurred as a result

of the intermixing of Afro-descendent cultures and European populations in the Caribbean. It was a cultural development that gave agency to periphery people that were exploited for the economic gain of the dominant society of the core [2]. Furthermore, creolization, in general, was a way for periphery countries to mediate the political economic development of the core, through challenging the structure that the core global powers enforced, in this case the hegemony of Europe. What challenged the hegemony of Europe was the unprecedented creative ingenuity of the intermixing of cultures. This ingenuity was the shared language of Haitian Creole. Creole gave Afro-descendants or Afro-Caribbeans their own ability to communicate, organize and develop a new way of life separate from the generations of institutionalized and systemic oppression at the hands of colonial powers. Creolization would ultimately lead Afro-Caribbeans to the Haitian revolution.

2. Materialism and Creative Ingenuity

The accumulation of wealth in Haiti prior to the revolution depended on the exploitation of human labor. This system was a representation of the Marxist political economic theory that human labor, such as slavery, was instrumental in producing a successful economy in Europe. This is why creolization was so important. It was a way to symbolically and practically break from the dominating European powers. Furthermore, it was utterly unprecedented. It took colonizers by surprise, for as you can imagine, they had little regard to the humanity of their slave populations. The first part of my research paper will focus on Sidney Mintz's "Afro-Caribbeana" and his argument for creative ingenuity as a result of the intermixing of cultures. Using Mintz's argument, that despite the fact that slavery was detrimental to those who were exploited, it sparked this creative ingenuity that changed the Caribbean indefinitely, I am arguing that creolization such as Haitian Creole language gives Afro-Caribbean's political agency. It was a way for Afro-Caribbean slaves to deny the power of their colonizers

to ultimately give agency to themselves and reject the authority of the Europeans symbolically, “Instead we see that culture is used...cultural forms confirm, reinforce, maintain, change or deny particular arrangements of status, power, and identity” [1].

Mintz posits a Marxist theory in his article that materialism is the driving force behind culture. In other words, Mintz believes that our economic system is what shapes our cultural systems. This demonstrates that Mintz is not a cultural determinist, for he argues that our political economy is primary and culture is secondary. This theory is the basis of my argument to understand creolization as a medium for political agency. The creolization of the Caribbean comes from the notion that Afro-descendants were transplanted into the Caribbean in order for European powers to leverage the European economy on the backs of exploited labor and raw materials of periphery regions. This is how we can analyze the existence creole because it was a result of an economic decision that mixed African, European, and indigenous cultures together. Thus, resulting in a new and persisting cultural system of creolization. Mintz uses this understanding of Marxism to give a humanistic account that creolization and the intermixing of cultures in the Caribbean, gives Afro-descendants political agency. For Afro-descendants in the Caribbean were able to mediate their experience as oppressed human labor, to create a new language and cultural system that gives them more power within the core-periphery system. This manipulation led to creole language as the ultimate symbolic expression of defiance against their oppressors.

Akin to the Marxist theory that materialism drove culture and embedded in Mintz’s “Afro-Caribbeana,” [1] is Wallerstein’s world-system theory. This theory argues that different regions of the world are linked through a single economic system based on capitalist exploitation that creates a disparity between powers based on wealth [4]. World-system theory saved Marx’s idea of the proletariat rising up to destroy the oppressive bourgeois by restructuring the way we need to assess social class and wealth disparity on a global scale. While Marx was addressing the British industrial revolution and its consequences, Wallerstein is addressing the post-colonial era of Western imperialism and how the core manipulates the periphery into submission. World-system theory is helpful in understanding how it was possible for Afro-descendants to negotiate the hegemonic system during colonialism. For instance, creative ingenuity, such as the development of Haitian Creole language, is what undermines this system and what will hopefully redefine globalization.

First, Mintz argues that the African slave trade was intrinsically bound up with European and colonial power in order to provide capitalistic agricultural production, “nearly all slaves were allocated in terms of the needs of large-scale agriculture” [1]. This first addresses the notion that Africans were oppressed, which is needed as the base of my argument. It then also addresses the part of my claim that posits Afro-Caribbean’s as a part of world-system theory in which

their labor is exploited in order to strengthen the European economy. Mintz further develops this claim by arguing that the plantation system is based on coercion, slavery, investment and entrepreneurship and was necessary for Europe’s rise in economic power, “the growth of slave-based economies in the New World was an integral part of the rise of European commerce and industry,” [1]. This is important because it demonstrates not only the continued connection of slavery to world-system theory through slave-based economies, but also demonstrates that Caribbean cultures were constructed in terms of economic growth. Therefore, the basis of the development of culture is rooted in materialism. This Marxist theory, that materialism drives culture, is helpful to the development of my claim that creolization, which develops out of an oppressive political economy, is an expression of human creative ingenuity that gives marginalized groupings of people political agency.

Furthermore, Mintz continues by arguing for a humanistic understanding of the repressive conditions of slavery by understanding the creative process of the slave through the voice of Ralph Ellison. This creative process that redeveloped culture in the Caribbean stems from the Marxist theory of materialism. In order for creolization to occur, African populations were subjugated by European powers to support the economic growth of core regions. Mintz argues for the representation of creative ingenuity first through the creation of jazz music, “A slave was, to the extent that he was a *musician*, one who expressed himself in music, a man who realized himself in the world of sound” [1]. The tension between the need to be heard and the repressive conditions of slave labor that continued to deny any human expression is what led to creolization, such as the emergence of jazz techniques. This emergence is important in recognizing the ability of enslaved Africans to assert their individual and collective power in spite of the repressive conditions they were in.

Mintz continues his argument that supports the claim of creative ingenuity emerging through oppressive conditions through the emergence of Creole languages. The existence of different tongues spoken by Afro-Americans demonstrated in “Haitian Suriname, the Dutch Leeward Island, the British and French Lesser Antilles, and Louisiana” [1] is because of the commitment enslaved Africans had towards their cultural heritage and the continued ability of slaves to maintain their individual and collective agency in the face of near-absolute oppression. The development of creole language came out of both social and linguistic circumstances. On one hand, formations of creole language was a reaction of social interaction between a small grouping of people who spoke European languages and a large population of people who spoke a wide array of African languages. On the other hand, the process of language formation was the adaptation of old content (European languages) to new content (African languages) that transitioned into a synthetic cultural construction based on the intermixing of culture [1].

All this content leads to Mintz’s ultimate argument that understands Afro-American culture not as simply an

inevitable cultural construction but as a direct result of human collective activity, “The argument here, then, is that we must conceptualize Afro-American cultures not simply as historically derived bodies of materials, but also as materials actively employed by organized human groupings in particular social contexts” [1]. This is for me is the crux of Mintz’s argument because it demonstrates his understanding of materialism as the driving force of culture and it represents the humanistic nature of his understanding of slavery in the Caribbean. Mintz does not re-enforce the power of coloniality and re-victimize Afro-descendants through deeming slavery as an absolute repressive system. Rather Mintz tries to demonstrate the ability and power of the slave population by explaining how they were able to manipulate and defy the oppressive system [1]. Moreover, Mintz refuses to give colonial powers credit for cultural production in the Caribbean but rather repeatedly gives recognition to Afro-Americans for their ability to develop long-lasting cultural composites such as jazz music and creole language [1].

3. Creativity as an Expression of Agency

The second part of my research paper will focus on the argument of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, in his article “Culture on the Edges: Creolization in the Plantation Context” [8] that Creole languages are a representation of cultural creativity, which is a demonstration of the agency of Afro-Caribbean people. Michel-Rolph Trouillot also argued for Creole languages as a representation of culture and creativity [8]. Trouillot was astonished that creolization actually emerged considering it developed against all odds and under oppressive conditions [8]. Trouillot also gives credit to the creativity of Afro-descendants and Africans during the existence of slavery, which further argues for the increasing humanistic approach of the experience of African slaves during colonization [8].

Trouillot’s argument continues to support my claim that creole languages were a reaction to the political economy during colonization, which led to an increased political agency of Afro-Caribbeans. He continues to acknowledge that Afro-Caribbean cultures are a miracle because they were never meant to exist and the general public continually marginalizes and ignores them, “Because Afro-Caribbean cultures were not meant to exist, many observers came to believe that they did not exist, in spite of all evidence to the contrary” [8]. This is what makes creolization revolutionary and important to the history of the Caribbean. Creolization was never meant to occur and it continues to persist as the dominant culture in Caribbean societies. This further represents the argument that creolization is a form of agency because Afro-Caribbeans continue to defy the western understanding and representation through persisting when they are not expected to.

An example of Trouillot’s humanistic approach to conditions that sparked cultural creativity in the Caribbean is Trouillot’s argument that creolization had an effect on

European languages by stating that because of the intermixing of cultures, including Afro-descendants with Europeans, European languages were never the same [8]. Thus, Trouillot’s deconstruction of creole languages as cultural creativity, gives agency to Afro-Caribbeans by acknowledging the power they managed to maintain during colonization and under repressive conditions. Trouillot further explains this by claiming that languages took on a new life form that incorporated not only just new sounds but also the experiences of the people who were speaking them, “More interesting is the fact that, once taken over by the slaves and their descendants, European languages did not remain the same. They acquired sounds, morphological and syntactic patterns unknown in Europe. More important, they were shaped to express the joys, pains and reflections of hundreds of thousands of humans” [8]. In other words, slaves and their descendants were able to acquire and maintain some degree of control while subjected to repressive conditions that gave them a sense of power and demonstrates their ability to persist even while oppressed. This argument demonstrates the defiance of the European standard and by doing so supports my claim that creolization served as increased political agency for Afro-descendants, Afro-Caribbeans, and African slaves.

A question that arises out of this conversation surrounding the agency of Afro-Caribbeans is: how could Africans and Afro-Americans develop entirely new cultures out of the intermixing of European and African values? [8]. This question represents the understanding that the political agency of Africans and Afro-descendants allowed both Africans and Afro-Descendants to gain power through their own cultural construction. The question also represents the absolute creativity of creolization and how it would lead to freedom. Trouillot attempts to answer this question through turning to the complexity of the plantation system [8]. Afro-American cultural practices emerged on plantations, for plantations were a place where slaves could gather, organize and communicate. Plantations were also the literal representation of the oppression of Afro-Americans for it was both a rigid institution that functioned as a prison and an imposed context that constructed their lived experience. Thus the slave-system that developed during colonization failed to anticipate the inevitable. It failed to anticipate its failures. One of which was the mixing of European and African values that allowed Afro-Americans challenge dominance. And not challenge dominance through the way Europeans would be accustomed to such as warfare and violence, but rather through a creative development of a new culture. This new culture was the way in which the Afro-Caribbeans of Haiti achieved freedom.

4. Linguistic History and its Relation to Political Agency

The third part of my research paper focuses on the linguistic analysis of Haitian Creole and how that relates to political freedom. Using Schieffelin and Doucet’s “The “real”

Haitian Creole: Ideology, metalinguistics, and orthographic choice,” [7] I will argue that Haitian Creole is important to the political freedom and agency of Afro-Caribbeans because it is a cultural practice shared by all Haitians and the history and ideology of the language has tremendous political and social implications. The origins of Haitian Creole are a result of colonization, “By-products of European colonization of the New World, the creole languages developed on plantations from the forced contacts between the European masters and their African slaves” [7]. The origins already implicate a particular historical situation that still defines the use of the language today. However, the development of this language is demonstrative of the agency that Africans, Afro-decedents, and Afro-Caribbeans maintained under a repressive system.

The linguistic history of creole and the effects of creolization are an integral part of the identity of Haitians. As Schieffelin and Doucet put it, “Why is the issue of kreyól orthography so important to Haitians? The underlying issue is about representations of self (“Haitianness”) and representations of the nation” [7]. The agency of Haitians is transmitted through their ability to communicate in creole for it is a direct defiance against the French language of the colonizers. Thus, the representation and continued usage of creole is important to the identity of Haitians, a community of primarily Afro-descendants and Afro-Caribbeans. Schieffelin et al. [7] argue the importance of creole to the “Haitianness” of the nation, which represents creolization as an emancipatory principle within Caribbean societies. Therefore, affirming that, because creole usage is tied to identity, it is a mechanism for Afro-descendants to gain political, social, and economic agency.

Furthermore, in a society as divided between race and ethnicity as Haiti, language is an important part integrating the two identities of African and European heritage while still allowing Afro-descendants power. Schieffelin et al. [7] explain this, “As Haiti is still in the process of integrating its dual African/European heritage, there are numerous arenas where cultural duality is continually negotiated. Religion is one important locus of this negotiation process, and language (French and kreyól) is another.” They are arguing that in order to resolve the racial divide caused by colonialism and maintained through repression we can turn to two loci to provide support. One way to do that is through religion. The other way is through is language. As stated, in order to overcome the cultural tension between European and African heritage we can look towards language to continue integration and unify nations that were disturbed by colonization. This statement then acknowledges that creole is representative of those of African heritage. Therefore giving Afro-descendants in the Caribbean recognition of the importance of their own agency and how it is important to resolving the racial divide.

5. Creolization as a Precursor to Independence and Freedom

The fourth part of my research paper will focus on the argument that creolization gave Afro-Caribbeans political agency, which was a precursor to the ultimate independence, and agency of Afro-descendent slaves that resulted in the slave-led Haitian revolution. Using both of Crichlow and Northover’s arguments in “Homing Modern Freedoms” [5] and “Questioning Freedoms in the Atlantic World,” [6] I will argue that creolization is a mechanism for obtaining freedom through developing a place for marginalized people to come together to transform their situation. Thus, creole language has been a vehicle for the independence of Afro-descendant Haitians because it was a way to push back against European hegemony and allowed Afro-descendants to gain political and social freedom. Further still, creolization was the framework for the possibility of the occurrence of the Haitian revolution because it was a way for Afro-descendants to organize and recognize their collective ability to act against colonization. This relates to Mintz’s argument that Afro-descendants were not just merely oppressed by colonialism and thus were no longer active agents in their lives but rather in the face of oppression Afro-descendants were capable of transcending the repressive political economy through cultural ingenuity.

In “Questioning Freedoms in the Atlantic World,” Crichlow et. al [6] discuss the concept of home staking as a way of gaining political freedom. Home staking is the ability of marginalized communities to stake claim to the place they call their home in the face of powerful, oppressive powers, which leads to the marginalized community gaining freedom. Crichlow et. al. [6] examine the evidence of political freedom through home-staking with the example of the Haitian Revolution, “These myriad expressions of home-staking strategies and tactics have covered events from slave rebellions, to the formation of maroon communities, the Haitian revolution of 1804...” [6]. The central argument of Crichlow et. al animate the idea that calibrations and recalibrations of freedom come from the marginalized individual’s sense of vulnerability, insecurity, discomfort and unrest that forced the marginalized to stake what is theirs and demand an emancipated future. This argument examining the agency of Afro-American slaves in claim to their freedom supports my ultimate claim of this research topic that the creative production of creolization acted as a catalyst for the Haitian Revolution in the demonstration of Afro-Caribbean agency.

Similarly, Crichlow et. al. [5] discuss this form of obtaining political freedom in their article “Homing Modern Freedoms.” They argue that creolization as a cultural transformation is involved in the process of obtaining freedom through ‘politics of (making) place’ [5]. This is the process of Afro-Americans strategizing to create places for the possibility of hope and change. Furthermore, rooted in creolization, making a place or home staking were creative ways for diasporic populations to defy the hegemonic plantation structure thus giving these populations the sense of being and sense of community it takes to undermine and revolt against a repressive and restrictive regime. Crichlow

and Northover's [5] arguments support my claim that creolization was the drive towards the Haitian revolution because it gave Afro-Caribbeans a sense of community, an ability to organize, and it was a representation of the agency they already possessed. Thus, Creole languages are not only representative of creativity, political agency, and a humanistic approach to examining world-system theory, but creole is representative of the ultimate freedom obtained during the Haitian Revolution of Afro-Caribbean slaves in the New World.

In conclusion, based on the arguments of Mintz, Trouillot, Schieffelin and Doucet, and Crichlow and Northover, creolization was a reaction to the political economy during colonization. Moreover, Creole culture is a creative experience that was developed because of the forced interaction between oppressed Afro-descendants and European colonizers. This is based on the Marxist theory that materialism drives culture, in the sense that Creole originated from the materialistic interaction of the periphery and the core, for economic gain of the core. Furthermore, creolization is a demonstration of the humanistic interpretation of colonization that acknowledges the personal and collective power of Afro-descendants that gives Afro-descendants political and social agency. With social agency, creolization became a mechanism for the independence of Haiti and Haitian Creole was the precursor to the Haitian Revolution. Therefore, Creole was a vehicle for the increased agency of Haitians and the signifier for the ultimate independence of Haitians from their European colonizers.

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