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Atlantic Reconstruction: Democracy, Abolition, and the Making of Political Personhood¹

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Sociological theories of democratization have long centered the role of the bourgeoisie and class conflict within European nation-states, often treating race, enslavement, and empire as analytically peripheral. This article offers a Du Boisian corrective by adopting an imperial unit of analysis to examine English democratization through the racial politics of abolition. Based on archival research on British Jamaica (1830–66), the article traces how the formerly enslaved were transformed first into “improvable,” then “incorrigible” subjects. This work demonstrates how, while liberal rights enabled political expansion in the metropole, these same frameworks contained Black freedom in the colonies and foreclosed alternative visions of freedom rooted in land-ownership and autonomy. A Du Boisian approach to democratization, I argue, uncovers and theorizes the contingent but embedded racial and imperial politics of liberal democracy.

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INTRODUCTION

We often recount the political transformations of the 19th century through the lens of European democratization. Political power was concentrated in elites—safeguarded by hereditary monarchy, divine providence, or the privileges of property ownership—before a wave of popular movements sought to wrest this power from elites, locating it instead in “the people” (Sewell 1996). Sociologists have long studied these struggles for democratization, analyzing how excluded groups gained concessions from political elites and moved closer to the levers of political power (Moore 1966; Marshall and Bottomore 1992; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Tilly 1992, 2004; Turner 1993). Sociologists of rights have emphasized the historical conditions that shaped the legal extension of rights as well as their substantive political practice (Somers 1995; Somers and Roberts 2008). And scholars of political economy have traced how working-class men—and later women—won the franchise, which then also opened a formal political path to push for economic redistribution (Acemoglu and Robinson 2000; Boix 2003; Usmani 2018).

However, these accounts overlook the concurrent struggles of enslaved and colonized peoples, who are frequently relegated to a separate, premodern temporality (Mintz 1986; Robinson 2000; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Williams 2021; Danewid 2023). In fact, studies of rights formation have typically centered England as a paradigmatic case (Giddens 1987; Marshall and Bottomore 1992; Ziblatt 2006; Gellner 2008; Somers 2008) but erased the centrality of Britain’s colonial project, disregarding its role in enslavement and colonial rule (Cox 1948; James 1989; Du Bois 1999, 2007; Williams 2021). The literature tends to approach political rights formation within the bounds of the nation-state—even though England, so often treated as a model case (Krause 2021), was not a nation-state, but the metropole of an empire.

The spatial and analytical bifurcation between metropole and colony stems from deeper theoretical assumptions. We often treat colonialism as “external” and “outwardly oriented,” distant from democracy and political modernity (Gilroy 1993; Bhambra 2007; Hesse 2007; Lowe 2015; Hall 2017; Go 2020; Meghji 2023). These assumptions could be the result of presumed legal distinctions between metropolitan and colonial subjects or from

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the enduring pull of methodological nationalism (Calhoun 1996; Goswami 2002; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Yet the outcome is a conceptually limiting separation between the making of political rights in the metropole and the denial of freedom in the colonies, erasing both the agency of enslaved and colonized people as well as the political processes that positioned them outside democratic life.

Offering a corrective to these erasures is the work of W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois saw the global color line as central to modern political formations. "The problem of the twentieth century," he noted at the first Pan-African Conference as early as 1900, "is the problem of the color line"—the question of whether racial difference would continue justifying the denial to "over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization" (Walters et al. 1900, p. 10). Where most theories of democratization begin with the expansion of formal political rights—suffrage, civil liberties, democratic institutions—Du Bois begins elsewhere: with the racialized and imperial assumptions shaping access to democratic political life. He compels us to ask: How was the capacity for political inclusion constructed? Taking seriously the agency and political thought of enslaved and, later, freedpeople, he asks which political practices and imaginaries emerged among enslaved and colonized people and how they were denied.

In *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880*, Du Bois's most elaborate treatment of democratization, he frames the struggle against enslavement as a moment of political possibility in which US democracy could have been fundamentally remade (Du Bois 1998). Reconstruction could have initiated a new social and political order rooted in Black freedom and material redistribution. But the interests of "property and privilege" reproduced a sociopolitical and economic structure that would deny these more expansive democratic futures. Where some democratization scholars might see a linear story of progress, Du Bois's approach is instead animated by rupture, contestation, and foreclosure.

Drawing on *Black Reconstruction*, I distill four analytical insights that could help reframe the study of democratization. First, for Du Bois, the central political question was whether democracy could serve as a counterweight to a racialized economic order—that is, could democratization disrupt the logic of racial capitalism? Second, he makes clear that the moment of abolition marked the legal end to enslavement, but it also contained a bigger struggle over how Black freedom was conceptualized and instituted. Third, the denial of Black political claims was not a predetermined structural outcome but a contingent process that required political work—processes apt for sociological analysis. Fourth, racial domination was not a residue of a premodern past but a dynamic modern project that was reconstituted in the postabolition world.

These insights invite an approach to democratization that centers the politics of the color line throughout the struggles over the democratic polity. This article follows Du Bois in sociologically examining abolition as strife over the terms of Black freedom. But while Du Bois focused on the US South, I extend his framework to Britain's imperial context. Across the Atlantic world, formerly enslaved people made expansive claims to land and claimed autonomy against their European colonial powers. And yet, because the sociology of democratization narrowly pursues institutional questions of democratization, it misses these sweeping struggles for freedom and alternative political imaginaries throughout Europe's imperial world.

Adopting an imperial unit of analysis, I examine the process of rights formation through the racial politics of abolition. I return to the paradigmatic English case of rights formation, but this time within the frame of the metropole-colony relationship. Based on an archival analysis of abolition and its aftermath between metropolitan England and British Jamaica (1830–66), I examine how formerly enslaved people, colonial administrators, and metropolitan reformers battled over who counted as a political subject and over which visions of freedom would be recognized as legitimate. This analysis traces the imperial making of *political personhood*,² which denotes the making of the subject deemed worthy of rights and freedoms, but is untethered from the nation state. Political personhood serves as a bridging concept to examine how elites constructed political capacity along racial and gendered lines across the metropole-colony space, even as the eventual institutional expressions of that capacity, such as the franchise or other political rights, came to differ across contexts.

The argument proceeds in four steps: First, I show that the making of political personhood spanned the Atlantic as the same cultural frames and protagonists engaged the question of political personhood across metropole and colony. In line with Du Bois, the article's purview includes those who would eventually become rights-bearing persons and those *who could have* but did not. Second, the article explains the cultural frames that defined political personhood, which, in this context, were linked to English liberalism

² The dominance of French political history has produced "citizenship" as the sociological analytical category through which we commonly understand questions of rights formation, freedom, and democratization. Yet legally, citizenship only emerged in Britain in the 20th century—even though many Britons informally referred to rights-bearing British subjects as citizens (Karatani 2003; Paul 2018). However, given my focus on the 19th century, using the term "citizenship" felt exceedingly anachronistic. To avoid this anachronistic baggage, I opted to use the term "political personhood," which denotes a process of evaluating and constructing people as worthy of freedoms. Also, while we may commonly associate the making of freedom in the colonies with collective struggles—from anticolonial nationalism to self-determination—the 19th-century debates concerned the individual: the social construction of a particular political subject, a subject worthy of exercising freedoms.

and gradually came to include metropolitan workingmen. Third, it shows that these same liberal frames also constructed the formerly enslaved. Initially, they were cast as potentially improvable political subjects so long as they submitted to labor discipline and patriarchal responsibility. But when Black resistance challenged these liberal frames, the discourse shifted from that of the “improvable” subject to an “incorrigible” one. Fourth, it reveals how the formerly enslaved put forth alternative imaginaries that challenged liberal personhood, but what ultimately endured was a kind of political personhood that aligned neatly with the demands of capital and the colonial state. In sum, we see how the making of the liberal political person came alongside the remaking of race and the reimposition of the global color line, violently bringing moments of political possibility to a close.

A Du Boisian approach to democratization advances a conjunctural theory that centers not the linear expansion of rights but the historically specific struggles over who was recognized as a political subject. Additionally, by drawing together more contemporary scholarship on race, gender, and empire, we can begin to address the racial and imperial myopias that have shaped the democratization literature. Labor and responsibility were normative measures of political capacity but they also foreclosed alternative visions of freedom and rendered freedpeople’s approaches unintelligible to liberal orders. As such, the making of liberal democracy did not solely contain a process of rights expansion in the metropole but was underpinned by a process that simultaneously managed and constrained Black freedom. In shifting the analytic lens beyond the nation-state and focusing on moments of rupture and contestation, we bring into view the limits of liberal democratization and surface alternative starting points for freedom.

In what follows, I first review sociological approaches to democratization and highlight their silences on race, empire, and the construction of political actors. I then elaborate on Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* to develop a conjunctural approach to democratization that foregrounds Black freedom struggles and the political possibilities they opened. I discuss the concept of political personhood, before turning to the case of British Jamaica to show how these ideals were imposed, contested, and transformed throughout abolition and its aftermath. Finally, I reflect on the potential for a Du Boisian political sociology, highlighting the importance of new research questions and anticolonial genealogies.

POLITICAL PERSONHOOD IN AN IMPERIAL WORLD

Democratization and Rights Formation

Sociological approaches to democratization have traditionally focused on the role of the bourgeoisie and class struggle. Marshall and Bottomore’s

(1992) *Citizenship and Social Class* remains a foundational reference, despite long-standing critiques of its teleological assumptions (Somers 1994a; Alexander 2006; Ong 2013). Marshall presents a sequential rights narrative, based on his reading of English history. Civil rights provided the legal infrastructure for a capitalist marketplace throughout the 18th century, political rights followed in the 19th century with the franchise for working men, and social rights emerged in the 20th century, which paved the way for redistributionist and welfare policies.

What underpins this framework—and much of the democratization canon—is a methodological nationalism that treats European polities as self-contained nation-states, subsequently erasing imperial and racial processes. This is particularly problematic because the paradigmatic cases of the “first wave” were imperial powers,³ whose colonial projects were treated as external backdrop and rendered irrelevant for theorizing (Go and Lawson 2017; Go 2020; Bhambra 2022; de Leon and Rodríguez-Muñoz 2022). As a result, scholars considered democratization processes as solely national and class-based processes, divorced from the global racial structures within which they took place. Failing to view European cases as empires, they highlight rights expansion over the differential production of political personhood, therefore producing a myopic view of what precisely this democratization was and could achieve.

Further entrenching the national and class-based frame, democratization debates have largely focused on which political actors or classes drive the democratization process. Barrington Moore (1966) emphasizes elite conflict and the role of the bourgeoisie in transitions to democracy. While Moore references the US Civil War, he centers the defeat of the planter class while overlooking the political agency of enslaved people as well as political party work in shaping democratic politics (de Leon 2008). Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) challenge this elite-centric view, arguing that working-class mobilization, often in alliance with middle classes and farmers, played a decisive role. While offering an important bottom-up corrective, their framework, too, bypasses how the struggles of enslaved and freedpeople shaped political orders.⁴ Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) propose a rational-choice model in which elites concede rights to avert revolution. But their theory presumes already-legible political actors and lacks an account of how entire populations, historically excluded through enslavement or colonization, were

³ The terminology of “waves of democratization” stems from Samuel Huntington’s (1991) “The Third Wave.” Although Huntington’s work has been much criticized, the “waves” framework, as well as its implicit temporalities, has remained (see Kurzman 1998).

⁴ Rueschemeyer et al (1992) do note that the pattern of working-class mobilization is muted in the Caribbean and Latin America. They even reference the Morant Bay uprising in Jamaica (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992, p. 239), although they deemphasize it as a mobilization, instead stressing the overdetermining power of the plantocracy.

made to appear unfit for political life. Charles Tilly, in turn, made significant interventions by framing democratization as a nonlinear, conflict-driven process, shaped by social movements and contentious politics from below (Tilly 1992, 1993, 2000, 2004).⁵ Yet, as Go (2020) points out, even Tilly's account omits the agency of enslaved and colonized people.

What unites these frameworks—whether elite centered, class based, institutionalist, or rooted in contentious politics—is a shared set of assumptions that renders the racial and imperial foundations of modern political orders outside the frame of analysis. First, the political economic focus comes at the expense of cultural frames, often leading these literatures to presume the existence of political actors.⁶ Categories like “workers” and “citizens” appear as self-evident and there is little account of how political subjects are historically constructed—or of how entire populations were made unintelligible as political persons through processes of racialization and colonial rule. In short, these accounts trace the institutional expansion of rights but do not offer a theory of the political subject. In turn, “class” often becomes a universal proxy for political identity. But this analytic flattening obscures the racialized conditions under which political claims were recognized or denied. It cannot explain why Black claims to land, labor rights, or self-rule were treated as illegitimate or why whiteness so often became tethered to reason, capacity, and civic worth (Mills 2014). Assuming a ready-made political actor, they miss the processes through which some political actors gain recognition, while others remain fundamentally outside this realm—even when occupying similar class positions.

Second, these accounts risk reinscribing a teleological narrative of democratic progress, treating the “first wave”—institutional rights expansion in Britain, the United States or France—as “model cases” of political development

⁵ Building on Tilly and countering the almost exclusive focus on Europe and the United States, subsequent work has extended this lens to the postcolonial world (Paige 1998; Foran 2005; Heller and Evans 2011; Kadivar, Usmani, and Bradlow 2020; Kadivar 2022; Heller 2022). These studies demonstrate that democratic expansion takes different forms in different contexts (Kim and Fallon 2020) and emphasize how countries' positions in a global order shape their democratic trajectories (O'Donnell 1994). However, although the focus on the postcolonial world is welcome, the problem in the literature is not just the lack of empirical work outside the United States and Europe. Rather, the problem is the almost complete absence of the colonial world in accounts that focus on the era of European rights formation.

⁶ Filling the discursive gap, cultural sociologists have studied the cultural construction of political actors and imaginaries (Thompson 1966; Steinmetz 1999; Suny and Kennedy 2001; Eley 2002; Hall 2016). Sewell (1996) famously shows how the French Revolution produced cultural scripts that rendered “the people” visible as political agents. Somers similarly argues that rights emerge from embedded struggles and meaning systems, not from abstract legal entitlements (Somers and Gibson 1993; Somers 1994b, 1996; Somers and Roberts 2008). But even in these approaches, the legibility of the enslaved and colonized remains undertheorized.

(Krause 2021). Through this narrative, enslavement is a sign of a premodern past, while abolition becomes a moral achievement of political modernity and liberal reform. But this story depends on the erasure of alternative trajectories. For instance, the Haitian Revolution not only preceded British abolition but, following a successful revolutionary struggle, enslaved people themselves made real the possibility of Black freedom and that of a Black, anticolonial state. Yet, despite its world-historical significance, the Haitian Revolution bears little weight in the democratization canon and is often rendered invisible (Trouillot 1995; Fischer 2004; Lawson 2015; Bhambra 2016). This exclusion affirms Euro-American timelines as normative and treats revolutionary Black politics as outside the bounds of democratic struggle and thought. In this view, democracy can only ever extend from the metropole—but cannot be reimaged from the margins of modernity.

Third, democracy is often defined narrowly as the formal extension of rights. But when we interrogate the conditions under which political actors gain access to a democratic polity in the first place, it becomes clear that democratization is not solely about institutional inclusion but also about the historical construction of political personhood. Who is constructed as unfit for political inclusion? This process becomes visible throughout the moment of abolition, in which the future of Black freedom and political life were actively contested and remade. While the democratization canon positions abolition as a theoretically insignificant event, Du Bois insists it is foundational. In *Black Reconstruction*, he reframes abolition as a political reordering: a moment when the formerly enslaved claimed not just rights but the very power to shape what democracy could mean. They demanded land, education, and autonomy, thus pointing to a historical opening of *what could have been*. Abolition made new political futures imaginable and therefore intolerable to the existing order. The next section turns to this conjuncture, not as the sole aftermath of enslavement, but as an analytic beginning, which could remedy some of the problems of prior approaches to democratization.

Du Bois's Conjunctural Analysis of Abolition

While the sociology of democratization has traditionally treated race and racism as peripheral, Du Bois insists that race, enslavement, and the struggle over Black freedom must be seen as central to the making of modern democracy. It is, he notes, “the great and primary question which was in the minds of the men who wrote the Constitution of the US and continued in the minds of thinkers down through the slavery controversy” (Du Bois 1998, p. 13). He sees the formerly enslaved as political actors and theorists of freedom, rather than as eventual beneficiaries of its progress. Du Bois does not ask whether Black people were capable of democracy; he presumes it. As C. L. R. James notes (2000), Du Bois did not set out to *prove* that enslaved people could be

modern political subjects, but he begins from his premise. "I am going to tell this story," Du Bois opens *Black Reconstruction*, "as though Negroes were ordinary human beings," fully aware that such a methodological orientation would "from the first seriously curtail my audience" (1998, p. xix).

From this starting point, Du Bois studies Reconstruction as a moment when newly freed people attempted to construct democracy from the ground up: They built schools, formed political organizations, voted in elections, held public office, and demanded access to land, education, and democratic life (Glenn 2009; Davis 2011; Foner 2013). Their political vision exceeded the demand for mere legal equality; their political aspirations were grounded in material redistribution, collective autonomy, and land redistribution. "They wanted land to work," Du Bois writes, "and they wanted to see and own the results of their toil. . . . All they needed was honesty in treatment, and education" (1998, p. 67). This was the radical promise of abolition, bringing with it the possibility of remaking US sociopolitical orders. What might have US democracy become had the claims of the formerly enslaved been realized?

But the possibilities that emerged during Reconstruction were actively foreclosed, and Du Bois gives us a sociological account of how this more expansive Black freedom was denied. Within two decades, a counterrevolutionary coalition of planters, capitalists, and a white working class that could not conceive of class solidarity dismantled the democratic gains of Reconstruction. Through legal disenfranchisement, racial terror, and institutional rollback, this bloc denied a more expansive democracy. "The slave went free," Du Bois writes poetically, "stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery" (1998, p. 30). His theory of democratization, then, is not animated by the progressive expansion of rights but by the political struggle over whose visions of freedom are made possible and whose are denied and rendered unthinkable.

Building on recent readings of Du Bois as a sociologist of democratization (Itzigsohn 2013; Jung 2019; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; de Leon and Rodríguez-Muñiz 2022; Morris 2022; Green and de Leon 2025), I use Du Bois's account of Reconstruction to highlight four key insights. First, for Du Bois, the stakes of democratic struggle were whether it could address racial capitalist orders. The US, he notes, was built on a system that commodified persons and rendered their labor foundational to capitalist accumulation. Given these material conditions, the abolition of enslavement posed a structural threat to economic and political orders. It raised an unavoidable question: Could property and privilege survive a genuinely multiracial democracy for all? As Du Bois put it,

The true significance of slavery in the United States to the whole social development of America, lay in the ultimate relation of slaves to democracy. What were to be the limits of democratic control in the US? If all labor, black as well

as white, became free—were given schools and the right to vote—what control could or should be set to the power and action of these laborers? Was the rule of the mass of Americans to be unlimited, and the right to rule extended to all men regardless of race and color, or if not, what power of dictatorship and control; and how could property and privilege be protected? (Du Bois 1998, p. 13)

For Du Bois, the meaning and limits of democracy hinges on whether it can challenge the power of property and privilege. This becomes the lynchpin of his sociology of democratization.

Second, Du Bois reframes abolition from seeing it as a discrete legal event to studying it as a historical conjuncture, a contingent moment in which competing visions came into view. If we solely position abolition as the *end of or in contrast to* enslavement, we miss the struggle inherent in abolition: a struggle over what freedom could mean and what democracy might have been. One interpretation of abolition followed the liberal script: freedom as formal equality, tethered to wage labor, individual self-sufficiency, and market participation. But freedpeople imagined something more expansive. They demanded access to land, autonomy, and education. They insisted that democracy must be materially grounded, not just declared in law. Conceptually then, abolition becomes a political battleground over what democracy could mean, and for whom.

Third, Du Bois challenges the dominant narrative that attributed the collapse of Reconstruction to the individualized inadequacy or “unreadiness” of freedpeople themselves (Du Bois 1998, pp. 711–12). Instead, he locates its failure in a deliberate and coordinated counterrevolution, where the problem was not Black incapacity but, in fact, the possibility of Black success. Schools, land cooperatives, and political organizing were not read as signs of political maturity but as evidence of dangerous ambition. In the face of this political activity, an alliance of planters, capitalists, and the white working class mobilized to reassert racial hierarchy and protect material privilege. This reactive bloc prevented the democratic visions and practice of freedpeople, and the outcome was a political order that preserved the interests of capital and whiteness.

Fourth, Du Bois demonstrates that racial domination is not a residue of the past but a dynamic and modern political project. It would be too simplistic to state that the collapse of Reconstruction restored an old order. Instead, the end of Reconstruction rearticulated the terms of democratic exclusion through renewed racialized discourses. Freedpeople were recoded as disorderly, dependent, and unfit for self-rule. “They are black and poor and ignorant,” Du Bois ventriloquizes the reactionary response. “How can they rule those of us who are white and have been rich and have at our command all wisdom and skill?” (1998, p. 633). Racism allowed for the redrawing of the boundaries of political personhood precisely to contain emancipatory potential. While grounding the analysis of Reconstruction in a structural awareness of racial

capitalism, Du Bois homes in on the active political work necessary to produce these oppressive orders.

Taken together, these insights recast how we understand democratization. Du Bois rejects the presumed linearity of democratic development, the fiction of inevitable progress (Ray et al. 2017), and the ontological myopias that separate democratization from the racial formations that constitute it (Hesse 2007; Rodríguez-Muñiz 2015; de Leon and Rodríguez-Muñiz 2022). In their place, he offers a conjunctural theory that centers the agency of the formerly enslaved, foregrounds the racial and economic foundations of political order, and insists that democracy must be examined through the position of those outside it. To focus only on the expansion of rights or to take as fact democracy's exclusions is to miss the deeper stakes, such as the contested terms of political life and the struggle over whether democracy can serve as a buffer against racial capitalism. The question is not only whether rights have expanded, but whose visions of freedom have been realized and whose have been foreclosed in the name of responsibility, order, and diligent work. The tragedy of abolition then was less the failure to deliver on liberal ideals, but more that it briefly opened a different, more expansive horizon, only to be violently shut.

Empire, Racial Capitalism, and the Making of Political Personhood

Building on Du Bois's approach to democratization, we can take his insights to the imperial world. Western Europe's structures of racial domination are inseparable from its colonial projects, although this relationship is often obscured through a spatial division that treats metropolitan politics as distinct from colonial rule (Lowe 2015; Wekker 2016; Hall 2017; Carby 2021; Coenders 2024). Rethinking democratization through a Du Boisian lens overcomes these bifurcations and moves beyond the methodological nationalism that restricts our analyses to the metropole. This allows us to capture the full scale of political struggles and cultural frames that simultaneously enabled inclusion for some in metropolitan politics, while rendering colonial others, and their political visions, illegible.

Long before the term existed, Du Bois rejected methodological nationalism, situating enslavement and colonial rule as foundational to modernity (1894, 1947, 1998). He described the "problem of the color line" as a global condition, shaping "the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea" (Du Bois 2008, p. 15; see also Quisumbing King 2019; Edwards 2020; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Morris 2022; Meghji 2024). He derided the contradictions of European democracies that extended political rights at home while maintaining despotism in the colonies (Du Bois 1999). For him, democratic gains for white workers were materially underwritten by imperial conquest and racial domination.

The foreclosure of Black freedom in the colonies was thus not peripheral but deeply constitutive of how democratization took shape in the first place.

The making of political personhood—who is seen as capable of freedom and democratic participation—was not a national question but an imperial one. Political personhood was constructed at the same time in metropole and colony, often by the same political actors. The same liberal frameworks that enabled political inclusion for some in the metropole were deployed to constrain and foreclose Black freedom in the colonies. Through this process, political elites sought to assess whether the formerly enslaved were “fit” for freedom, and abolition became a search for liberal qualities, such as industriousness and responsibility, as conditions for political inclusion. While democratization scholars have traditionally focused on who receives political rights, this focus on institutional expressions of political rights elides a theory of political personhood—of how certain groups come to be seen as capable of political participation, while naturalizing others as ineligible. Rather than viewing this as a story of static inclusion and exclusion, I focus on the political struggle over the criteria for inclusion and the active processes of foreclosure.

Feminist and critical race scholars offer essential tools for this task, showing that the criteria for political personhood were never neutral or universal but deeply gendered and racialized. Feminist historians and sociologists have shown that political inclusion was modeled on the figure of the respectable patriarch. White working men gained rights by presenting themselves as heads of households and productive wage earners; their claims to “independence” rested on the constructed dependency of others, especially women, thus anchoring the family as both a moral and a political foundation for the liberal contract (Pateman 1988; Rose 1988; McClintock 2013). “Independence” emerged as a civic virtue, while “dependency” was pathologized—excluding those deemed dependent from full political recognition (Orloff 1993; Fraser and Gordon 1994; Somers and Block 2005). White men were admitted into democratic life by aligning with these norms of self-governance, while white women were cast into roles of domesticity and moral guardianship of the social order (Fraser 1990; Clemens 1997; Hall, McClelland, and Rendall 2000; Levine 2007). Black women, in turn, were expected to perform these roles in racially specific ways—submissive wives and household laborers—rendering respectability a racialized gender script for managing Black freedom (Hartman 1997, 2019).

Scholars of race and empire show how these norms became the benchmark for political personhood for enslaved and colonized people. If freedom came to mean industriousness and responsibility, then these traits became normative expectations imposed on the newly freed (Stanley 1998). Hartman (1997) highlights how abolition came as a conditional gift—granted only if freedpeople proved themselves worthy through displays of gratitude, restraint, and self-mastery. They were subjected to what she calls “pedagogical

and legislative efforts aimed at transforming [them] into rational, acquisitive, and responsible individuals,” producing, in her words, a “collar with a guilty conscience” (Hartman 1997, p. 6). The question shifted from whether one was free to whether one could embody the affective, moral, and economic codes of liberal personhood. Scholars have since asked whether liberalism permanently reconstituted Blackness as a sign of lack, deficiency, or disorder—an ontological excess that the liberal order could neither absorb nor recognize (Jung 2019; Wilderson 2020).⁷

Sociologists of empire and colonialism demonstrate how these processes operated across imperial space. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2002) illustrates how the citizen—defined as a self-sufficient, wage-earning man—emerged in contrast to freedpeople, immigrants, and indigenous communities.⁸ The same norms that expanded rights for white working men were repurposed to cast nonwhite subjects as permanently “not yet” or “never-to-be” democratic actors (Cooper 2014; Boatcă and Roth 2016; Hammer 2020; Quisumbing King 2022, 2024). Embracing this imperial relationality, Magubane (2003) notes how colonial images of Blackness traveled between South Africa and Britain, shaping the figure of the rational, rights-bearing citizen through contrast with the “ungovernable native.” Matlon (2022) highlights that racial capitalism produces aspirational masculinities—the wage laborer, patriarch, breadwinner—only to structurally deny them to Black men. Scholars have further shown that colonial rule worked not just through domination but also through tutelage—a civilizing mission that indefinitely deferred the political capacity of the colonized (Hall 2002; Lowe 2015; Go 2007, 2017), a form of rule Anthony Bogues (2018) calls pastoral coloniality: governance that produces racialized subjectivities through perpetual deferment.

Despite these insights, democratization scholarship—focused on class-based and nation-centric processes—has largely missed this deeper story. In privileging institutional questions, such as suffrage or the expansion of rights, the field has abdicated analyses of the political subject and erased the imperial relations that shaped who could count as a political actor. Bringing these approaches into conversation, this article challenges traditional democratization models by showing that democratization in the metropole was not just temporally prior to democracy elsewhere—it was materially and politically underpinned by the active foreclosure of Black political futures in

⁷ For an important rejoinder to Afropessimism, see Wacquant (2023).

⁸ As many political and cultural theorists have shown, liberal debates over freedom, rights, and citizenship—became sites where elites articulated the very standards that positioned colonized populations as incapable of realizing them (Gilroy 1993; Wynter 1995, 2003; Eze 1997; Mehta 1999; Goldberg 2002; Mignolo 2002; Hesse 2007; Buck-Morss 2009; Pitts 2009; Bogues 2010, 2012; Román 2010; Hesse 2014; Mills 2014; Rana 2014; Jung 2015; Lowe 2015; Gani 2017; Ince 2018).

the colonies. The liberal political order that encompassed rights for metropolitan workingmen, in the very same historical conjuncture, denied land, autonomy, and self-governance to Black and colonized peoples. Taken to its most extreme conclusion, this means that the construction of liberal political personhood was about shaping the global distribution of political capacity to stabilize racial capitalism and imperial governance.

Although the liberal contract foreclosed more emancipatory possibilities, it is important to remember that alternatives—different visions of political personhood—existed. In the European plantation colonies of the Caribbean, enslaved people claimed freedom, land, and autonomy. The Haitian Revolution (1791–1803) remains the clearest rupture: Enslaved people seized their freedom and instituted a vision of Black self-governance (James 1989; Trouillot 1995; Sheller 2001; Dubois 2009; Getachew 2016; Hammer and White 2019; Eddins 2022). Haiti was not *granted* its freedom—enslaved people seized it from below, demonstrating that they could remake freedom on their own terms, forging multiple competing political futures on the ruins of the plantation system (Bogues 2005; Daut 2017; Casimir 2020). The US and European powers responded by isolating Haiti diplomatically, economically, and ideologically (Obregón 2018). Its revolution, in turn, was rendered exceptional, untheorizable, or irrelevant to democratic development—at least in part because it revealed that formerly enslaved people could define freedom on their own terms, thus upending imperial narratives of political modernity (Trouillot 1995; Buck-Morss 2009; Bogues 2012).

In the wake of the Haitian Revolution, imperial powers across the Atlantic mobilized to contain the possibilities it had made visible (Ferrer 2014; J. S. Scott 2018). What they feared was not just abolition, but Black freedom defined on autonomous, collective, and anticolonial terms. In this context, we must see liberal abolition as a political strategy of containment (Shilliam 2013). In the British Empire, abolition was structured as a top-down, gradual process designed to preserve the racial and economic order. It produced an exceedingly narrow vision of freedom, reconciled with capital and empire, a freedom that disciplined, deferred, and foreclosed. Rather than breaking with the plantation world, liberal abolition replaced enslavement with new regimes of labor and responsibility. In this way, abolition became a tool of system-conforming governance, not a pathway to transformative political futures.

Du Boisian political sociology is attentive to the paths not taken. It allows us to examine how liberal frames functioned as a hegemonic framework of political person making in line with capital and empire. It highlights how liberalism did not merely exclude the colonized but worked to discipline, manage, and then delegitimize Black freedom movements and thereby recalibrated the boundaries of political personhood across the empire. And it positions democratization not as a linear process of rights expansion driven by national

class conflict but as an imperial project of differential political person making. In examining the politics of one such moment, this article aims to open new theoretical and empirical pathways to better understand the racial and imperial alignments of liberal democracy.

RESEARCH DESIGN, CASE SELECTION, ARCHIVES

Historical sociology has traditionally gained analytical leverage from comparing social processes across nation-states. However, the focus on nation-states as units of analysis often came at the expense of theorizing relations within cases and their embeddedness in a larger global order. To remedy this, I build on Du Bois's analytical approach, which situates cases within broader global formations and entanglements (Magubane 2005, 2017). In moving beyond early historical sociology's Eurocentric focus, this approach aims to reconstitute the narratives of the modern world by centering empire and colonialism (Gilroy 1993; Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005; Bhabra 2014; Go 2016; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Morris 2022). The Du Boisian turn also aligns with calls for historical scholarship that foregrounds global connections, relations, and movements that might allow us to see the making of the modern world in new ways (Go and Lawson 2017; Quisumbing King and White 2021; Parvulescu and Boatcă 2022; Meghji 2024).

I chose to focus on the English case because it has long served as a "model case" for theories of democratization (Krause 2021). In line with Du Boisian frameworks—and recognizing that struggles for freedom took place within an imperial world—I widen the unit of analysis to examine one such metropole-colony relationship. The link between metropolitan England and British Jamaica lends itself particularly well to such an analysis because British Jamaica was deeply economically, politically, and culturally significant to Britain at large (Patterson 2022). Temporally, this study begins with the abolition of enslavement and the debates that followed. British abolition occurred at roughly the same time as the first Reform Act of 1832—a moment of heightened political activity on both sides of the Atlantic. Drawing on Sewell's (1996) theorization of events, I investigate what freedom meant after enslavement, when these questions were all but resolved (see also Hall and Massey 2010). I end the analysis in 1866, when Jamaica was reclassified as a crown colony, effectively closing the window on this postemancipation political moment.

Du Bois's historical sociology did not aim to establish generalizable causal mechanisms or ahistorical abstractions. Instead, he embraced the interplay of structure and contingency—or in his words, "law" and "chance"—and emphasized the in-depth study of historical conjunctures—moments when the existing order was unsettled, and other futures were possible (Hall 1986; Du Bois 2000; Decoteau 2018; Paret and Levenson 2024; Hammer

and Itzigsohn 2025). Building on this analytical approach, I see the postemancipation period as a key conjuncture in which the meaning of political personhood was both contested and remade. Here the article follows a long tradition of cultural historical sociology, which traces the emergence and making of social phenomena and categories by centering context and historicity (Burawoy 1989; Somers and Roberts 2008; Hirschman and Reed 2014; Pacewicz 2020).

Political personhood requires operationalization and must be studied as a historically situated construct. To do so, I began by reviewing the historiography on 19th-century English democratization and working-class struggle, as well as the rich historiography of British abolition, postemancipation colonial governance, race science, and the cultural politics of empire. I then conducted archival research across England and Jamaica. In England, I consulted collections located at the British National Archives, the British Library, the Black Cultural Archives, the West India Committee Archives, the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, the Missionary Collections at SOAS, and the Senate House Library; in Jamaica, at the Institute of Jamaica and the National Library of Jamaica. I also used online repositories, including the Hansard database and the British Newspaper Archives.⁹

In these collections, I paid particular attention to how protagonists commonly associated with metropolitan political struggles appeared in the colonial state archives, noting how the same actors traversed the metropole-colony space (Cooper and Stoler 1997; Lowe 2015). I built a database of primary materials, bringing together testimonies from political elites, which included roughly four different groups: colonial state actors, planters, abolitionists, and missionaries. These accounts came from parliamentary debates in London, government reports, colonial office correspondence between London and Kingston, dispatches, planter committee debates, labor and penal codes on the management of plantations, missionary reports, abolitionist writings, travel monographs and ethnographic texts, and newspaper coverage spanning London and Kingston newspapers across the ideological spectrum. In examining these documents, I also paid particular attention to the voices of enslaved and newly freed people. I will discuss my analytic strategy for these sources in turn.

First, I read state and parliamentary documents, reports, debates, and correspondence to get at the construction of colonial rule. I treated the colonial archive as a repository of the state and read these documents “along the grain” (Stoler 2002; Fuentes 2016; Santos 2023), keeping in mind the state’s interest in political control. Colonial archives reveal not only the objects of

⁹ Hansard: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/>; newspapers: <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>.

state concern but also the political subjects they sought to produce—who must be surveilled, reformed, and ruled. Influenced by cultural theories of the state (Steinmetz 1999), I saw state action not as a series of policy choices but as embedded in wider cultural discourses. To account for this, I drew a wide net to capture colonial governance strategies and studied public lectures, anthropological publications, and social scientific association meeting notes. These debates give insight into how cultural discourse shaped the political governance of the colonies.

Second, the historiography makes clear that the ideal liberal political person is linked to economic considerations and patriarchal ideals of the family. To understand the construction of what it meant to be an industrious laborer, I turned to planter manuals, plantation letters, and penal codes in British Jamaica. I then examined missionary accounts and missionaries' pedagogical materials, which brought to bear how the ideal political person was predicated on domestic, religious, and social concerns.

Finally, to contextualize these materials and track shifts in discourse, I conducted a newspaper analysis of the London and Kingston press. Newspapers not only reported events but also staged debates over political legitimacy and governance. I used this material most extensively in reconstructing the 1865 Morant Bay uprising and its aftermath—an almost four-year-long debate over colonial rule, violence, and political subjecthood. I mapped key arguments assessing colonial repression and read press coverage to see how Jamaicans' political agency was interpreted, questioned, or denied. The voices of the newly freed were often quoted in all the above materials, and to establish their validity, I aimed to search for these quotes in secondary historical literature. While these documents limited how I could get at the lived experience of the newly freed themselves, elites' consistent anxiety over rebellion, the frustrations over their ungovernability, and the eventual outright revolt highlights the centrality of continuous resistance.

Taken together, these sources allow me to trace the construction of the political person: what freedom meant, what political work was necessary to create subjects who were "improvable," and when elites deemed populations "incorrigible." I begin with an account of the metropolitan liberal frameworks of personhood before widening the lens to British Jamaica. I then trace how political elites, reformers, and colonial administrators redefined Black political personhood in the decades following abolition. Initially framing British Jamaicans as "improvable" subjects whose freedom would be earned through labor discipline and responsibility, these same actors later recoded Black political claims as evidence of "incorrigibility" and political unfitness, especially in the wake of the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion. This shift from conditional inclusion to active foreclosure reveals how imperial governance recalibrated liberal personhood criteria to contain Black political agency throughout the moment of metropolitan democratization.

ABOLITION, FREEDOM, AND POLITICAL PERSONHOOD

Metropolitan Frames, Liberal Terms, and the Inclusion of Workingmen

The 19th century in England was defined by the struggle for rights. While prior political arrangements safeguarded the protection of property and the landed gentry, the mid-19th century ushered in a political transformation. A wave of mobilization from below presented political elites with the choice of franchise reform or the threat of revolution (Tilly 1993, 2015).¹⁰ This brought about the Voting Reform Act of 1832. Its reach was limited because it left property requirements for the franchise intact; but subsequent Voting Reform Acts created substantial democratic expansions. The Second Voting Reform Act of 1867 significantly lowered property restrictions as the condition for the vote, enfranchising many urban working-class men across England and Wales. This legislation was by no means universal—it excluded women and many others—but the reform doubled the electorate in England and Wales from roughly one to two million men,¹¹ making it, in the words of historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, “one of the decisive events, perhaps the decisive event, in modern English history” (Himmelfarb 1966, pp. 97–138).

The premise of the expansion of political rights to English working-class men was not universal inclusion but the capacity to embody liberal norms of industriousness, self-discipline, and responsibility. Yet, at first, liberal frames were not the only ways of understanding struggles for inclusion. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, the Chartists were a significant political force in the struggle for universal male suffrage, and their People’s Charter went as far as to tie political rights to more comprehensive socioeconomic redistribution (Working Men’s Association 1838). However, faced with state repression and increased surveillance, the movement dissipated (Thompson 1971). In its place, other political organizations, such as the Reform League—a looser coalition of middle-class reformers with the support of the working classes, artisans, and craftsmen—rose to prominence. The Reform League built on the Chartist legacy, but its demands were more narrowly centered on political reform. While the Chartists had employed a universal rights discourse, the Reform League campaigners tapped into emergent liberal discourses of the time. Aiming to oppose property ownership as the basis for voting rights, they highlighted that rights should be tied to individual capacities. They saw industriousness and responsibility as central to the characteristics of a dutiful political person. If working men came to be seen as efficient, independent,

¹⁰ This is perhaps most clearly articulated by Charles Bradlaugh, a Reform League member, who spells out this choice in a speech to parliament (Bradlaugh 1867).

¹¹ It gave the right to vote to urban male workers leading a household, to lodgers who paid more than 10 pounds per year, and to rural landowners and those with small land plots (UK Parliament 1867).

and skilled, the argument went, then they also became deserving of political participation (Hall 1989, 2002, 2013; Hall et al. 2000).

As workingmen put forth claims to political rights, they strategically adopted the language of liberal respectability, which illustrates how subaltern actors became legible political subjects. One such protagonist was Edmond Beales, the Cambridge-educated president of the Reform League. Beales asserted in 1865 that workingmen were “industrious, intelligent, laborious, skillful, co-operators in the production of the national wealth,” and that their right to political participation was deepened given the “wonderful advances made of late years by the working classes in all the habits of prudence, temperance, and social and Christian life and virtue” (Beales 1865). The historian Malcolm Chase describes how artisans mobilized these frames to make the case that they were skillful, self-reliant workers and therefore displayed the independence needed to exercise political rights. In a petition to parliament, the York’s Reform Association declared that (male) workers had “vastly increased intelligence, education, and independence of character . . . [and were] fully qualified workmen for the franchise.” A working man declared in Sheffield: “Let us show those who traduce and malign us that we are Englishmen, that we are good citizens” (quoted in Chase 2017, p. 50; see also Shilliam 2018). The liberal insistence on individual character and political responsibility was of course provoked by those who opposed franchise expansion and who denigrated workers for their “venality,” “ignorance,” and “drunkenness.”¹² But liberal members of parliament, who often also spoke at Reform League meetings, consistently countered these claims, further deepening the cultural characteristics of the ideal political person (Bright 1869, pp. 191–92).

This construction was deeply gendered, whereby political rights hinged on men’s ability to perform patriarchal roles. “Independence” and “sobriety” were distinctly male characteristics (Pateman 1988; Rose 1988; Fraser 1990; Hall et al. 2000; Hall 2002, 2013; J. W. Scott 2018). Women and children, in turn, seemingly lacked the desirable characteristics to engage in political affairs, which served as grounds for their exclusion. Religious and moral discourses in Victorian England further reinforced the patriarchal family as the foundation of civic virtue. As a result, for working-class men, demonstrating responsibility by being providers for the family became a key claim to political respectability. They at times even criticized women’s participation in the

¹² For example, Robert Lowe characterized working classes in parliamentary debates by routinely invoking the demographic fears that workingmen would overrule the powers of upper classes: “If you want venality, if you want ignorance, if you want drunkenness, and facility for being intimidated; or if, on the other hand, you want impulsive, unreflecting, violent people, where do you look for them in the constituencies? Do you go to the top or to the bottom” (Lowe 1866, col. 148)?

workforce, arguing that women's labor made it difficult for fathers to establish their authority and show responsibility toward the family and hence the polity at large (Shilliam 2018). By fashioning themselves as patriarchs, workingmen aligned their domestic roles with the ideal of the responsible political person.

Elite endorsements of franchise expansion along this logic helped to cast the franchise as an earned, not an inherent status. A member of parliament and a key voice in the movement for franchise reform, John Stuart Mill, articulated the cultural values he believed necessary for political participation. For Mill, to be "free" meant possessing rational faculties and the capacity for independent decision-making (Hall 2013). Assessing the capacities of workingmen, Mill noted that "they are becoming less and less dependent, and their minds less and less acquiescent in the degree of dependence which remains, the virtues of independence are those which they stand in need of. . . . The prospect of the future depends on the degree in which they can be made rational beings" (Mill 1848, p. 347). He at first questioned the reasoning abilities of workingmen, warning that "no lover of improvement can desire that the *predominant* power should be turned over to persons in the mental and moral condition of the English working classes" (Mill 1859, p. 39; italics in original). Yet as workingmen increasingly aligned themselves with liberal ideals, Mill revised his stance. He did so by distinguishing workingmen from the poor by highlighting the importance of independence and free labor, opposing the workingmen to those who were dependent on parish relief. The franchise, he summarized, should be given to "all grown persons, both men and women, who can read, write, and perform a sum in the rule of three, and who have not, within some small number of years, received parish relief" (Mill [1865] 1972, p. 1031). Parish relief signaled signs of dependence, idleness, and laziness, while workers were efficient, productive, and capable of attending to their own affairs as independent decision-makers (Somers and Block 2005; Shilliam 2018, 2020).

By 1864, political elites coalesced on franchise reform by again highlighting workingmen's ideals and political capacity. William Gladstone, who was then chancellor of the exchequer and would later become prime minister, made clear that workers who exhibited self-control should attain the vote.¹³ Specifically, he had his eye on the praiseworthy characteristics of Lancaster factory workers, who had shown command over their own nature during times of hardship caused by supply chain problems, given the "interruption"

¹³ William Gladstone's father, John, was the chairman of the Liverpool West India Association and one of the most important slave owners in the British West Indies (see UCL Slave Trade Database, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/8961>, accessed December 9, 2022). William not only depended on his father's wealth throughout the early years of his career but also defended planter interest throughout the abolition era (Quinault 2009).

of plantation labor during the American Civil War.¹⁴ He stated: “What are the qualities which fit a man for the exercise of a privilege such as the franchise? Self-command, self-control, respect for order, patience under suffering, confidence in the law, regard for superiors; and when, I should like to ask, were all these great qualities exhibited in a manner more signal, I would even say more illustrious, than under the profound affliction of the winter of 1862?” (Gladstone 1864, p. 325). In response to demographic fears about workingmen entering the polity, Gladstone pushed back against critics: “They seem as if they were engaged in ascertaining the numbers of an invading army; but the persons to whom their remarks apply are our fellow-subjects, our fellow-Christians, our own flesh and blood, who have been lauded to the skies for their good conduct—men who have borne destitution and privation in a manner which might be a lesson to all of us” (Gladstone 1866, p. 873).

No longer associated with “the rabble” or “the poor” (Bonnett 1998; Shilliam 2018, 2020) and instead positioned as efficient contributors to Britain, workingmen obtained the right to vote. Their disciplined endurance in crisis times positioned them as qualified to attain political personhood. Of course, these criteria also reproduced hierarchies and exclusions within the metropole (Virdee 2019), denying full political recognition to women, the poor, and others. But while the metropole’s exclusions were eventually addressed, albeit partially and unevenly, the colonies followed a different trajectory altogether. Within the imperial relationship, the struggle over political personhood produced a distinct hierarchy, one that redefined freedom in racial terms, narrowing its meaning and foreclosing alternative forms of Black political life. With these liberal frames in mind, I turn to their deployment in British Jamaica.

Constructing the Improvable Subject: Tutelage and the Making of the Freedperson

This section traces how the making of political personhood extended across the metropole-colony space. It reveals the conditions for and management of freedom after enslavement. In a moment when assessments of workingmen’s capacity for discipline and self-regulation shaped political personhood in the metropole, abolition posed the question of whether the formerly enslaved too could be shaped into liberal political subjects (Hall 2002). Seeking to determine what “freedom” would mean in practice, the colonial state, planters, and missionaries turned to the same frameworks operating in the

¹⁴ The assertion of moral worth of English workingmen in a time of the American Civil War points to another entanglement between metropolitan and colonial worlds, as the interruption in cotton supply was inevitably linked to the interruption of plantation labor.

metropole, centering industriousness and responsibility as a precondition for political capacity. I show how, while workingmen in the metropole were gradually incorporated through liberal ideals, formerly enslaved people were cast as *potentially* “improvable.” However, the making of the “improvable subject” crowded out freedpeople’s own alternative visions for freedom, rooted in landownership and autonomy. The same criteria that enabled inclusion in the metropole were deployed in the colonies to contain, defer, and ultimately deny Black political personhood.

The British state’s abolition—shaped simultaneously by fear of Black revolution and the desire to maintain the plantation economy—was designed not to rupture socioeconomic orders. In 1833, the British parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act, stating that “After 1st August 1834, all slaves in the British colonies shall be emancipated, and slavery shall be abolished throughout the British possessions abroad” (Act for the Abolition of Slavery 1833). The struggle leading up to abolition unfolded in the same social and political climate as the push for the Reform Act of the 1830s, often involving the same political protagonists (Blackburn 1988, p. 444). It formally ended enslavement throughout the empire, except for the “Territories in the Possession of the East India Company,” Saint Helena and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). The abolition debates came about not only through domestic mobilizations but also through fear: The British West Indies had seen continuous resistance by enslaved people (Bryan 2003; Brown 2020; Sell 2021), and the memory of the Haitian Revolution still loomed large. For British elites, the question was how to construct abolition in alignment with the existing structures of empire and capital.

The British state devised abolition through governance from above (Shilliam 2013). Abolitionists, who put pressure on the state, agreed on ending enslavement but diverged on the method and timeline (Blackburn 1988; Drescher 2009; Brown 2012; Sinha 2017; Williams 2021).¹⁵ They had to override powerful planter interests and confront the sacrosanct British principle of state noninterference with “private property.” This posed a contradiction: If abolitionists had initially insisted that enslavement was untenable precisely because the enslaved were human beings, at the very moment of abolition, abolitionists conceded that the British state pay slaveowners “reparation” payments, thus inadvertently acknowledging that enslaved people’s lives could indeed be calculated in property terms (Huzzey 2012; Shilliam 2018). Parliament awarded payouts to slaveowners, an estimated 17 million pounds, or roughly 40% of GDP at the time (McGlynn and Drescher 1992, p. 118; Draper 2010; Hall, Draper, and McClelland 2014). Rather than

¹⁵ These debates played out, among other outlets, in *The Society for Mitigating and Gradually Abolishing the State of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions*, then the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* and *The Watchman*.

disrupting the social order, abolition appeased planter interests and, additionally, reasserted British moral superiority throughout the 19th century (Huzzey 2012).

Legal equality did not automatically confer political personhood; instead, it raised new questions about how Black freedom would be practiced and managed. Formally, the Abolition Act made the formerly enslaved subjects of the British Crown ostensibly equal to others. But with legal distinctions dissolved, planters and political elites asked what this freedom might mean. Two interlinked questions emerged: Would the newly freed work industriously and would they assume the roles of responsible subjects? This mirrored the metropole's liberal criteria: The formerly enslaved were now to prove their worthiness through labor and patriarchal responsibility.

In the run-up to abolition, a parliamentary committee asked whether there could be "such a progressive Improvement in the character of the Slave Population as might prepare them for a participation of those Civil Rights and Privileges, which are enjoyed by other Classes of His Majesty's Subjects." After hearing numerous eyewitness accounts of the British West Indies, the committee offered two conclusions:

- 1st. That the Slaves, if emancipated, would maintain themselves, would be industrious and disposed to acquire property by labour.
- 2d. That the dangers of convulsion are greater from Freedom withheld than from Freedom granted to the Slaves. (Select Committee 1832, p. 17)

The committee proposed a social order that would preserve economic productivity while at the same time minimizing the risk of rebellion. The calculus was that one could *teach* the formerly enslaved to labor for wages, to be motivated by market incentives, and to inhabit the proper roles within the household and, by extension, the political sphere (Holt 1992).

Top-down abolition ensured that freedom was granted from above, not seized from below. An expert witness for the parliamentary committee, the prominent Baptist missionary William Knibb, who had witnessed the 1831 rebellion of enslaved people in British Jamaica,¹⁶ raised alarm when he testified that "it was matter of common talk that the Negroes would *take it*" (Select Committee 1832, p. 228, my emphasis). The committee repeatedly asked Knibb to clarify this phrase, and Knibb recounted one man declaring "I will never work again as a slave; give me freedom and I will work; you may shoot me" (p. 230). Knibb further affirmed his belief that enslaved people would work for wages. Given the continuous possibility of rebellion, the committee concluded that the imposition of abolition was indeed a safer choice than the continuous risk of rebellion (Holt 1992; Hall 2002; Brown 2020).

¹⁶ In 1831–32, enslaved people in British Jamaica rose in a rebellion led by Sam Sharpe in what has come to be known as the "Christmas Rebellion" (Reckord 1968; Heuman 2011).

Britain's abolitionists similarly emphasized that freedom had to be granted. Most felt deeply uneasy with the self-determination and agency of the enslaved themselves (Shilliam 2013). This paternal ethos is most evident in the widely popular antislavery medallion depicting a kneeling person beneath the inscription, "Am I not a man and a brother?"—an image that reinforced the notion that freedom depended on white benevolence (Hartman 1997; Wood 2010; Garraway 2016). Abolitionists also never fully embraced the Haitian Revolution and instead worked to distance themselves from any suggestion that it was their abolitionist agitation that had inspired it. Thomas Clarkson, for example, wrote an official denial for the London Society for the Abolition of the Slave trade, insisting that abolitionists bore no responsibility for Haiti's revolution (Clarkson 1792). Rather than supporting Haitian independence as a triumph of Black political agency, abolitionists treated it as a cautionary tale and proof of the chaos that could result from "unregulated" abolition. Instead, in the wake of Haitian independence, a central abolitionist strategy became the insistence that, while freedom was inevitable, it had to be managed, and its terms constructed in advance (Geggus 1982). Clarkson's later correspondence with Haiti's King Henri Christophe further illustrates this logic (Griggs and Prator 2022), whereby King Henri emphasized the importance of hard work and responsibility, much to Clarkson's delight. In this framework, freedom was mediated by discipline and deference.

Planters largely resisted abolition, but once its passage became likely, they insisted that it should include mechanisms to induct the formerly enslaved into wage labor, with the aim of preserving the colonial plantation economy. This imported a market logic according to which the newly freed were expected to become productive laborers, guided by their self-discipline (Holt 1992). As a result, abolition was paired with the introduction of what was euphemistically termed the "apprenticeship period." Apprenticeship was a four-year-long, brutal, coercive system of workhouses and disciplinary institutions, through which the formerly enslaved were to be "taught" to labor (Hall 2002; Paton 2004). Torture instruments, such as the treadmill—which forced people to continuously step on a wheel while having their hands chained to a bar above—were deployed to cultivate not only the Black body but also the mind. As Thomas Holt (1992) put it, to receive full freedom, the formerly enslaved had to "practice freedom" first.

In a rare autobiographical account, James Williams, a formerly enslaved man describes the apprenticeship period as follows: "I am eighteen years old. I was a slave belonging to Mr. Senior and his sister, and was brought up at the place where they live, called Penshurst, in Saint Ann's parish, in Jamaica. I have been very ill treated by Mr. Senior and the magistrates since the new law came in. Apprentices get a great deal more punishment now than they did when they was slaves; the master take spite, and do all he can to hurt them before the free come" (Williams 1834, p. 5).

The apprenticeship system also targeted formerly enslaved women. Touring the island a few years after abolition, Quaker philanthropists Joseph Sturge and Thomas Harvey documented not only the persistence of brutality but also its effects on women. "In the workhouse there were two prisoners in the solitary cells. One was a female apprentice, sentenced to that punishment, and to the tread-mill twice a day, for *deficiency of work*" (Sturge and Harvey 1837, p. 187, italics in original).¹⁷ Women had a central public role and resisted the new disciplinary regimes imposed on them, often by withholding their labor. The colonial state's reliance on magistrates to mediate labor disputes further entrenched planter authority, often shielding abuse under the guise of law. As Diana Paton explains, the colonial state adopted the discourse of emancipation while taking on the role of labor disciplinarian (Paton 2004, p. 54).

Although apprenticeship ended in 1838, the ongoing project of managing Black freedom remained. With the termination of apprenticeship, the British state at first formally reaffirmed the legal and political equality of all subjects across the empire. Lord Glenelg, then head of the colonial office, declared, "The apprenticeship of the emancipated slaves is to be immediately succeeded by personal freedom, in that full and unlimited sense of the term in that sense of the term in which it is used in reference to the other subjects of the British crown. This is the essence of the contract between Great Britain and the colonies. It is the basis of the enactments, whether parliamentary or colonial, on the subject" (London Anti-Slavery Society Committee 1838, p. 42). In a speech to the Jamaica legislature, the Governor Sir C. T. Metcalf concurred that "all disqualifications and distinctions on account of colour have ceased . . . that civil and religious liberty is universally enjoyed in as great a degree as in the mother country; and that we have a press as free as any in the world. Such is the present condition of this Colony in all these respects; and it may be asserted without fear of denial, that the former slaves of Jamaica are now as secure in all social rights as free-born Britons" (Metcalf 1840, p. 6). But this moment of formal legal equality also intensified imperial anxieties about Black political agency and the specter of Black power (Holt 1992).

Missionaries played a central role in assessing and shaping the capacity of freedpeople. While planters and the colonial office sought to cultivate a laboring population, missionaries' intent extended beyond labor discipline. To them, the task was one of remaking the formerly enslaved into responsible, God-fearing persons, modeled on the ideals of the English middle-class family (Hall 2002; Zacek and Brown 2014; Taylor 2018; Bogues 2018). As

¹⁷ The report contains many reports of women resisting the disciplinary mechanisms of workhouses.

Catherine Hall (2002, p. 125) notes, missionaries imagined that Black men would emulate the qualities of white abolitionist men—responsibility, industry, independence, and Christian piety—rather than the decadence of white plantation owners. Black women, in turn, were expected to mirror the abolitionist fantasy of white womanhood: modest, domestic, married, and firmly located in the private sphere. Women’s moral behavior was central to political claims: They were expected to serve as moral and spiritual educators within respectable households, while any association with vice was seen as a threat to the community’s standing (Sheller 1998; Ono-George 2020).

Political control of the island was structured around an Assembly and a Legislative Council, with the Assembly comprising 47 elected members (Philippo 1843; Hall 1959). In the late 1820s, a liberal coalition known as the “Town Party” had emerged, comprising free people of color and urban professionals, who sought to challenge planter dominance concentrated in the “Country Party” (Heuman 1981; Holt 1992; Wilmot 2020). After 1838, formerly enslaved men technically gained political rights, but these rights were severely constrained by restrictive property qualifications. To stand for election, a man had to own a freehold worth £300 or property valued at £3,000 or pay at least £10 per year in direct taxation. Voting itself was similarly restricted: Only those who owned land valued at £6, paid an annual rent of £30, or paid £3 a year in direct taxes were eligible to vote (Wilmot 2020, p. 228; see also Holt 1992).¹⁸

Prominent freemen of color who had the right to vote, such as Edward Jordon and Robert Osborn, tapped into missionary ideals of responsibility. As Ono-George (2020) argues, part of the challenge for men of color was to recast the free community of color as respectable and in the image of patriarchal metropolitan men, distancing themselves from stigmatized practices like concubinage. The attempt to appeal to liberal norms for political rights meant highlighting domestic, orderly roles for Black women. Jordon and Osborn’s newspaper *The Jamaica Watchman* became a publication for the free community of color, cultivating some of these norms. In a letter to the editor, an anonymous “Man of color” notes:

But in the rapid strides which have taken place, I regret much to perceive, that a most material evil still remains—it certainly is not within the reach of legislative control; but were our ranks to set a better example to the ruled, an effectual stop would, in the course of time, be put to the system. The evil to which I allude is concubinage. . . . It is owing to this brutalizing and degrading custom that colored men are held in so little estimation; for as long as the colored woman can be the kept mistress of the white man, so long will the white man

¹⁸ Despite the existence of approximately 20,000 Black freeholders who met these formal qualifications, only 2,199 were registered in 1839—a number that remained relatively stagnant into the 1860s (Brodber 2003, p. 52).

consider the colored man as below him. There is no reason on why this should be; yet, so long as the practice is continued, so long will the colored man be degraded. (Man of Color 1831)¹⁹

Freedom was granted based on forging persons who were “improvable” within the terms of freedom that were already set out for them. Whether the newly freed were indeed “capable” of living up to these standards and, consequently, if emancipation could be enacted without disturbing the racial capitalist order, were the central questions to colonial political elites of the time. In this vein, Herman Merivale, Oxford professor of political economy, saw top-down emancipation as “perhaps the most important of all the questions which now agitate the political world, in its ultimate bearing on the destinies of the human race” (Merivale 1861, p. 332).

To evaluate the “great experiment” of Black freedom, travel writers descended upon the British West Indies (Thomas 2019). Baptist missionary James Phillippo was “persuaded that our coloured and black fellow-creatures are equally as capable of being conducted through every stage of mental discipline and taught to arrive at as great a height of social and intellectual improvement as has ever been attained by the most privileged Europeans” (Phillippo 1843, p. 208; see also Woolley 1847; Bigelow 1851). Abolitionist Thomas Clarkson concurred that “their behavior ever since the day of their emancipation has been in general *most exemplary and laudable*. They have been a sober, industrious, orderly, well disposed, and moral people” (Clarkson 1842, p. 2, italics in original). For abolitionists, Black freedom was thus conceivable, but only when paired with the proper systems of tutelage. Sturge and Harvey praised the apprentices for their intense desire for education and religious instruction, describing their character as “full of promise for the future” and their conduct as evidence of their capacity to become a “well ordered, industrious, and prosperous community” (1837, p. 374). But notably, they contrasted this with what they described as the earlier “heathen and benighted” condition of the enslaved, attributing progress to missionary influence (1837, p. 380).²⁰

Philippo explicitly compared the guided freedom in British Jamaica to the self-determination of Haiti, revealing the racialized logic underpinning the British abolition project. In his account, Haiti’s independent and free Black population, remained “motionless . . . as if they floated on the surface of a stagnant pool,” trapped in “ignorance, misery, and guilt—darkness covers this part of the earth, and gross darkness the minds of its people.” By contrast, British Jamaica’s newly freed peasantry, under missionary guidance,

¹⁹ A fierce debate on concubinage ensued; by November 14, 1831, “Pamela” noted that “the sooner an end is put to it [concubinage] the better” (Pamela 1831).

²⁰ William Knibb, who had previously testified before the Select Committee, founded a weekly newspaper, the *Baptist Herald and Friends of Africa*, in 1839, dedicated to instructing the formerly enslaved with regards to their rights and duties as British subjects.

appeared “happy and prosperous” (Phillippo 1843, pp. 443–44). Haiti again served as a cautionary tale: Emancipation without tutelage and moral discipline ostensibly led to social decay. Black freedom, Phillippo implied, could not be claimed directly; it had to be mediated through structures of supervision, moral instruction, and social discipline. They denied agency to the formerly enslaved and rendered freedom contingent on their acceptance of a new moral and social order imposed from above.

Although colonial authorities sought to model freedom around the industrious worker and respectable patriarchal family (Holt 1992; Sheller 2001; Hall 2002), the newly freed actively subverted these ideals, developing strategies to live within and against the constraints imposed upon them (Austin-Broos 1997; Besson 2008). This resistance was clearest in struggles over land. After the end of apprenticeship, planters attempted to reassert control by charging high rents on provision grounds—lands historically cultivated by enslaved families (Besson 1993; Sheller 1998). People who had lived and labored on these lands for generations viewed this sudden demand for rent as illegitimate, refusing the tenancy that bound them to the plantation economy (Hall 1959; Stevenson 2001). When planters began evicting laborers to force their return to wage labor, many freedpeople left plantations altogether, seeking independent landholding. Some squatted on unused estate lands, asserting land rights informally where legal purchase was impossible (Besson 1993; Brodber 2003). Drawing on their experience with provision grounds, freedpeople carved out new spaces of autonomy, although these remained precarious and vulnerable to eviction.

Religious leaders, including Phillippo, Knibb, and others, supported the creation of “free villages,” settlements centered around churches and schools, designed to cultivate a respectable peasantry. To missionaries, these villages served as training grounds for liberal personhood (Hall 2002), but freedpeople again found ways for subversion. Black women, in particular, used these opportunities to turn away from plantation labor to practice subsistence agriculture and claim autonomy on their own terms (Austin-Broos 1997; Besson 2008; Hutton 2015). The Scottish Reverend Hope Masterton Waddell counseled the newly freed that “the best blessings of freedom must be worked out for yourselves, by patient industry and good Christian conduct” but soon revealed his anxieties that people might “abandon the sugar estates, and squat in the mountains, living in African indolence and barbarism, on the produce of their own settlements” (Waddell 1863, pp. 145–48). Conditional, liberal freedom was imposed from above, but a different political path was reimagined from below, one rooted not in wage labor or patriarchal responsibility but in land and collective autonomy.

As Du Bois alludes in *Black Reconstruction*, the limited path of liberal abolition was never the only imagination of freedom. Like the aspirations of freedpeople in the Reconstruction-era US South, Black Jamaicans envisioned

freedom tied to land distribution and autonomy. Yet political elites saw the threat such demands posed to the colonial office, planters, and missionaries alike. As a result, the dominant project of abolition became tethered to a narrow liberal framework, in line with the demands of capital and empire, demonstrating patriarchal responsibility and industriousness. Black agency was not only constrained but actively denied: The capacity to define freedom on one's own terms, or to imagine political life beyond liberal subjecthood, was rendered unintelligible. Thus, unlike in the metropole, where demonstrating liberal virtues enabled eventual inclusion, in the colonies these same ideals were mobilized to stage Black freedom as always incomplete, and, crucially, in need of supervision and tutelage.

Constructing the Incurable Subject: Unreformability and Suppression

Abolition had hinged on a vision of tutelage, based on casting the formerly enslaved as "improvable" subjects who might be shaped into liberal persons, but this framework quickly began to unravel. As freedpeople resisted plantation labor, rose in revolt, and rejected the narrow promises of abolition, British discourse shifted. The idea that freedom could be taught gave way to the belief that Black people were incurable. No longer viewed as improvable, they were increasingly recast as inherently unfit for liberal political personhood. This shift came alongside the rise in race science and fears over plantation output decline, transforming earlier tutelage into a harder claim of racial incapacity—a rearticulation that would shape the imperial order for decades to come. This transformation from tutelage to racial incurability revealed the underlying conditionality of liberal inclusion: Black resistance pushed the limits of these conditions, the discourse hardened, and racial science offered a new rationale for the outright denial of political personhood.

Perhaps the most decisive public intervention deriding abolition as a failure was Thomas Carlyle's *Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question*, first published in 1849.²¹ With the end of the Sugar Duties Act in 1846 and the subsequent decline in plantation profits, Carlyle tied the fall in economic output directly to the supposed failure of the free Black worker, arguing that they were inherently unfit for freedom. If freedpeople could not be made to produce sugar cane, Carlyle contended, it was because they belonged to an entirely different species. Since they could not be "taught," he concluded, they required the authority of British rule (Carlyle 1853).

The rise of race science and its polygenist theories of human difference helped articulate the incurability thesis (Lorimer 1978; Stepan 1982; Hall

²¹ The essay was first published anonymously in the literary journal *Fraser's Magazine* and then claimed by Carlyle and republished as a pamphlet. J. S. Mill wrote a rebuttal, titled *The Negro Question*, originally also published in *Fraser's Magazine* (Mill 1850).

2002; Bolt 2013). If training and tutelage failed to improve freedpeople's productivity, the "social scientific" explanation increasingly turned to biology: Racial inferiority, rather than social or political conditions, might be the potential "cause" for the shortfall. This rise of scientific racism cannot be understood as separate from economic concerns, such as anxieties over the continuation of plantation output, and the project of colonial rule, manifesting in demographic anxieties of colonial parliaments (Bolt 2013; Magubane 2017; Rodríguez-Muñiz 2021). In what follows, I trace how the rearticulation of race was central to the differential making of political personhood and narrowed the possibilities of more expansive visions of Black freedom.

If, in England, working-class men mobilized to improve their living conditions by emphasizing their virtue and industriousness throughout the mid-century, in British Jamaica, freedpeople similarly organized, demanding land, justice, and political participation. Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, freedpeople repeatedly petitioned the queen, demanding access to Crown lands, an independent justice system, more equitable taxation, and greater political rights (Heuman 1994; Sheller 2001; Hutton 2015). As Sheller (2005, p. 22) shows, these petitions drew on the language of "loyal British subjecthood," yet beneath this appeal lay a growing recognition of the betrayal of abolition's promises. In turn, instead of creating more meaningful conditions for freedom, colonial authorities issued paternalistic "advice," urging freedpeople to work harder to make the plantations productive. One such response—written by Henry Taylor, head of the West India section of the Colonial Office and circulated as the "Queen's Advice"—instructed the population to work "steadily and continuously" to restore plantation prosperity (Heuman 1994, p. 54).

As the century progressed, economic conditions for freedpeople deteriorated. Crop failures, rising taxes, insecure land tenure, and dependence on imported food worsened poverty. In this context of deepening disappointment, popular political consciousness sharpened. Women remained active in public life, particularly in land struggles and community mobilizations. A report by the missionary Edward Underhill documented how unjust taxation, the denial of political rights, and a lack of secure employment produced dire socio-economic conditions (Underhill 1862). The Underhill report galvanized political meetings where slogans like "Remember that he only is free whom the truth makes free" (cited in Sheller 2011, p. 567) captured the rising disillusionment with abolition's broken promises. Formerly enslaved people increasingly articulated their virtue by asserting distinctions between themselves and indentured laborers, framing themselves as Christian, loyal British subjects, in contrast to the indentured laborer (Shepherd 1994; Sheller 2019).²²

²² Determined to replenish a vast labor force after emancipation, the colonial state turned to indentured labor schemes. Beginning in the 1840s, the government forcibly displaced thousands of indentured Indian laborers to Jamaica, thereby deliberately introducing

In 1865, Paul Bogle—a Black baker and landowner who held the right to vote (Wilmot 2016)—penned a letter, declaring: “It is now time for us to help ourselves skin for skin. The iron bar is broken in this parish. . . . War is at my black skin—war is at hand from today to tomorrow. Every black man must turn out at once, for the oppression is too great” (Bogle et al. 1865). In this call to arms, Bogle’s political imagination rejected the narrow terms of liberal personhood. His formulation of freedom did not appeal to the liberal ideals of productivity, self-discipline, or respectability but articulated a different starting point: one rooted in Black self-determination and dignity.²³ He did not seek to prove industriousness or moral fitness but instead called for collective resistance based on a direct rejection of racial domination.

On October 11, 1865, between 400 and 1,200 people marched to the courthouse at Morant Bay in protest (Simmel 1963; Hutton 2015; Winter 2016), rising against the island’s unjust justice system and broader political and economic inequality, with women playing a visible role in the insurgency (Heuman 1994; Sheller 1998). Expressing the demographic fears the rebellion provoked, the colonial press reported: “The war cry is ‘Death to the white and brown man,’ and they seem, from all I can learn, to be strictly carrying out their purpose” (*The Gleaner* 1865).

The colonial state responded with violence, carrying out mass executions, floggings, and the burning of houses. Governor Edward Eyre declared martial law and dispatched 100 troops to Morant Bay.²⁴ Although the rebellion was quelled within seven days, martial law remained in effect for another three weeks, ushering in a reign of terror. Determined to prevent what Eyre described as “a second Haiti” (Report of the Jamaica Royal Commission 1866, p. 881), Eyre and his troops killed 439 people—British subjects—flogged 600 more, and burned over 1,000 dwellings (1866, p. 25).²⁵ Justifying this repression in racialized terms, the journalist William Finlason described the uprising as a potential “war of extermination” against white people, arguing that the “Negro character” of the uprising demanded the strongest possible state suppression (Finlason 1869, p. vi).

labor competition (Shepherd 1994; Sheller 2001; Lowe 2015). Indenture reproduced many of the coercive dynamics of enslavement—disciplining freedpeople, rupturing indentured workers from their homelands, and ensuring the continuity of the plantation system. This was not merely an economic fix but a colonial strategy of labor governance: one designed to fragment solidarity and reassert control over Black labor after emancipation.

²³ For a discussion of traces of African culture, see Brathwaite (1974).

²⁴ The use of excessive military force must be understood in the context of ongoing demographic anxieties. Given the overwhelming majority of formerly enslaved Black Jamaicans and a small minority of white planters, the threat of Black rule vexed the planter class. The nonwhite population vastly outnumbered that of the white settlers.

²⁵ These are the officially reported numbers, although some accounts place the number of victims much higher.

In the aftermath of Morant Bay, debates on what kind of people freedpeople could be returned to the center of the imperial press. For nearly four years, political leaders and intellectuals in the metropole deliberated Eyre's use of martial law and the state-sanctioned execution of political revolutionaries. At the forefront of this debate was the Jamaica Committee—composed of many of the same liberal reformers who had championed franchise expansion in metropolitan England. This included members of parliament, such as John Stuart Mill, John Bright, Charles Buxton, and Thomas Hughes, prominent abolitionists, the positivist Frederick Harrison, and leading scientists, like Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer.

The Jamaica Committee sought to prosecute Eyre for murder and reacted against the violent overreach of the state. But they formulated their primary concerns through the abuse of state power—justice for freedpeople emerged as secondary. This framing became clearest in their defense of George William Gordon, a mixed-race member of the Jamaican Assembly and longtime critic of Governor Eyre (Gopal 2019). After the uprising, Eyre had Gordon arrested, trialed under martial law, and executed. The Jamaica Committee condemned the act, insisting that “a British subject has been illegally put to death” (Jamaica Committee 1866). But in mounting their case, the Jamaica Committee focused not on the injustice of colonial repression but on Gordon's character. He was portrayed as an ideal political person: devout, responsible, and industrious. Gordon's final letter to his wife was widely circulated in the British press, casting him as a martyr in the moral register that resonated with liberal sensibilities. “All I ever did was to recommend the people who complained to seek redress in a legitimate way; and if in this I erred, or have been misrepresented, I do not think I deserve the extreme sentence. It is, however, the will of my Heavenly Father that I should thus suffer in obeying his command to relieve the poor and needy, and to protect, as far as I was able, the oppressed. And glory be to his name; and I thank him that I suffer in such a cause” (Gordon 1865). Liberal reformers were less offended by colonial violence and more at the killing of someone who had, in their eyes, sufficiently proven his virtue. The Jamaica Committee's strategy was not to affirm the demands of the Morant Bay uprising or to issue a principled condemnation of colonial rule. It was to insist that Gordon did not deserve to die, given that he had met the standards of liberal personhood.

The Morant Bay uprising deeply unsettled the foundational premise of abolitionist discourse; that, with tutelage, freedpeople could be guided to liberal personhood. While abolition had been premised on the expectation of gratitude and moral uplift, the rebellion shattered this expectation. It revealed that Black political demands did not fall within the register of deference but rather that of resistance and political visions grounded in autonomy. *The Times* perhaps best captured the end of the “improvability” discourse:

It comes very home to the national soul. Though a fleabite compared with the Indian mutiny, it touches our pride more and is more in the nature of a disappointment. . . . Jamaica is our pet institution, and its inhabitants are our spoilt children. We had it always in our eye when we talked to America and all the slaveholding Powers. It seemed to be proved in Jamaica that the negro could become fit for self-government. . . . Alas for grand triumphs of humanity, and the improvement of races, and the removal of primeval curses, and the expenditure of twenty millions sterling, Jamaica herself gainsays the fact and belies herself, as we see to-day. It is that which vexes us more than even the Sepoy revolt. (*The Times* 1865)

The liberal compromise had been to admit the formerly enslaved to a community of the free but only on the condition that they conform to ideals of labor and responsibility. As a result, the uprising at Morant Bay was read as a betrayal of those terms. The project of crafting the formerly enslaved into responsible political subjects gave way to a new consensus: that Black freedom was not only an unfulfilled promise but in fact a dangerous miscalculation.

Some of Victorian Britain's most celebrated voices came together in the Eyre Defense Committee and expressed the counterposition to the Jamaica Committee. Rallying to protect the governor who had ordered the massacre, this camp included Charles Dickens, John Ruskin, Charles Kingsley, the physicist John Tyndall, and later J. A. Froude—along with wide support from the landed gentry, the army, and the church. For them, the Morant Bay uprising confirmed what they had long believed, that Black emancipation was a misguided project and that liberal tutelage had failed to suppress inherent "negro characteristics." The discourse of individual moral formation collapsed into a discourse of collective racial pathology. The nonwhite subject overall was framed as "inflammable and unreasoning" and Black political agency as inherently incendiary (*Pall Mall Gazette* 1866).

The Eyre Committee argued that nonwhite populations belonged to a different species, to whom liberal political forms did not apply, invoking polygenist claims of innate difference. "I decline accepting the negro as the equal of the Englishman," declared the physicist John Tyndall, "nor will I commit myself to the position that a negro insurrection and an English insurrection ought to be treated in the same way. . . . If the falling into the hands of a Jamaica negro be a different thing from falling into the hands of an Englishman, then the conclusion is mathematically evident that we are justified in going further to prevent the one calamity than to prevent another" (Tyndall 1867, p. 283). Recalling the memory of the Haitian Revolution, which had as "its object the total extirpation of the whites" (Tyndall 1866, p. 269), he argued that Eyre's violent suppression of the revolt had been justified. Unlike the "Englishmen," Black populations were understood as inherently unreformable and required state suppression.

Some argued that the very extension of freedom to nonwhite populations had been a mistake. In 1866, naval commander Bedford Pim addressed the

Anthropological Society, asserting that although a return to enslavement was “no longer expedient,” the Black person nonetheless labors for the white man, for “civilized man has no right to allow him, to pass his existence without in any way contributing to the advancement of mankind” (Pim 1866, pp. 34, 35). In this framework, freedom did not apply to nonwhite subjects. “Perfect political and civil freedom—freedom, that is, from surveillance, freedom to bear arms and form organisations, freedom, as Englishmen understand the word—can scarcely be safely granted to races at present (to say no more) as ignorant, and therefore as easily misled, deluded, and maddened, as the negroes of the West Indies or the Sepoys of the East” (*Pall Mall Gazette* 1865).

Carlyle echoed these views, insisting that strong government was necessary to preserve civilization. The “civilized” should govern the “uncivilized,” the rich must rule the poor, and the educated must discipline the ignorant. The Morant Bay uprising, in Carlyle’s view, was not an aberration but a grim echo of a wider racial crisis, one that resonated across the Atlantic. He expressed similar outrage at the US Civil War’s outcome, lamenting that “half a million . . . of excellent white Men, full of gifts and faculty, have torn and slashed on another into horrid death . . . and three million absurd Blacks, men and brothers (of a sort), are completely ‘emancipated’” (Carlyle 1888, p. 594).

This sharp divergence of who could be a political person—who could be trusted with freedom—marked a pivotal ideological shift, which extended well beyond British Jamaica. By the late 19th century, Britain had violently suppressed a series of anticolonial resistance movements across the empire: the Khoi Khoi and Xhosa in the Cape Colony, the Māori in New Zealand in 1860, and the Ashanti in the Gold Coast in 1863 (Shilliam 2018, p. 39). The 1857 Sepoy Mutiny in India provoked an especially frenzied reaction. British newspapers published sensationalized horror stories of Indian soldiers massacring British children and women, stoking metropolitan anxieties with patriarchal tropes of white women endangered by “savage” men. The British military portrayed its retaliation as a defense of white women’s honor and civilization. Together, these episodes fed the growing conviction that nonwhite subjects were not simply temporally “lagging behind” but that they were inherently incapable of self-rule (Kostal 2005). Tutelage had failed and only coercion remained.

The shift to categorical racial differentiation underwrote new forms of colonial governance. State repression replaced the tutelage of abolition. Even though British Jamaica’s Assembly had traditionally been planter dominated, the Morant Bay uprising confirmed racialized fears of the island’s nonwhite demographic majority. In response, the assembly abolished itself, opting to be ruled directly from London. The colonial governor now held executive authority, was supported by a legislative council, which was

appointed rather than elected, and reported directly to the British monarch (Bryan 2000; Lee 2017). Seeking a governor capable of managing “native revolts,” London appointed Sir John Peter Grant, a colonial official who had served in the Indian Civil Service in Allahabad during the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion (Smith 1994). That revolt had shaped Grant’s worldview, whereby uprisings were not expressions of political claims to be addressed but evidence that Britain’s nonwhite subjects required firm rule (Shilliam 2018). This claim followed a temporal logic, a framework in which different societies were imagined to be at different stages of civilizational development and therefore required different forms of governance (McCarthy 2009).

In contrast to majority-white settler colonies like Canada or Australia, which were seen as capable of self-government and framed as extensions of “Greater Britain” (Bell 2009), colonies with majority nonwhite populations were denied that same possibility (Shilliam 2018). This denial was not for lack of political mobilization. On the contrary, it was precisely *because* of mobilizations like at Morant Bay, and rebellions across British India and Africa, that the British state came to see such populations as unfit for political personhood (Bolt 2013). The historian and writer James A. Froude made this logic explicit: “The liberties that we grant freely to those whom we trust and who do not require to be restrained, we bring into disrepute if we concede them as readily to perversity or disaffection or to those who, like most Asiatics, do not desire liberty, and prosper best when they are led and guided” (Froude 1888, p. 4). Across British Africa, where white settlers feared the demographic majority, the response was the same: Self-government was withheld and Crown rule was imposed (Younis 2022, p. 48). The Irish too were denied these freedoms. The rise of Fenianism reinforced imperial narratives that the Irish were incapable of self-rule (Martin 2012).²⁶ And yet, as the Conservative MP Arthur Mills noted, Black people were the most stationary: societies progressed on a civilizational ladder, and it was “hopeless to transplant institutions slowly grown in Europe to uncongenial places of people” (cited in Smith 1994, p. 140).

DISCUSSION AND HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS: ATLANTIC RECONSTRUCTION

Nineteenth-century liberal democratization was not only a process of rights expansion. Rather, it was underpinned by a racialized project of differential

²⁶ As a population marked by both phenotypical whiteness and cultural otherness, the Irish stood at the intersection of overlapping racial schemas—a cultural inferiority constructed through the logics of the British empire and the phenotypical logic of North America. These tensions were not lost on contemporary observers, such as Charles Kingsley, who wrote: “I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country. . . . To see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black one would not see it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours” (quoted in Martin 2014, p. 52).

political person making. In rewriting the story of liberal democratization through the cartography of the wider colonial world, we can make visible how the very frameworks that enabled inclusion in the metropole served to constrain and foreclose more expansive Black freedom and agency in the colonies. Across the Atlantic world, scripts of free labor and patriarchal responsibility defined political personhood, but these criteria enabled inclusion in the metropole while denying Black freedom in the colonies. If workingmen in the metropole came to be seen as capable of political participation, these scripts also produced a racialized grammar, first of “improvability” and then of “incurrigibility.”

British abolition was a conjuncture: It marked a shift from the legal nonpersonhood of enslavement (Goveia 1960; Patterson 1992; Bogues 2005) to new struggles over who counted as a political person. Britain had framed abolition as a test for the formerly enslaved, designed to ensure that emancipation would not disrupt colonial and capitalist orders (Shilliam 2013). Initially framed as “improvable subjects” through tutelage, freedpeople were recast as “incurrigible” once they showed signs of resistance. As anticolonial resistance grew, plantation profits declined, and race science gained traction, elites increasingly abandoned the language of tutelage. The very agency of freedpeople, and their refusal to conform to liberal scripts, turned into evidence of their incapacity. Through resistance and mobilization, freedpeople challenged liberal frameworks that sought to discipline them into wage labor and patriarchal orders of responsibility. Although denied, these moments point toward alternative visions of political life, ones not tethered to wage labor or responsible personhood but grounded in autonomy and land redistribution. By tracing these transformations across the imperial terrain, we see how liberal frames shaped what forms freedom could take and what forms were foreclosed (see table 1).

This process of racialized political person making is not only a story of the British Empire. Haiti stood as a beacon of Black political agency and an alternative to these scripts of political personhood. As Anna Julia Cooper (2006) and C. L. R. James (1989) made clear, Saint Domingue’s enslaved rose in revolution, compelling the French National Assembly to abolish enslavement in 1794, and nearly one million formerly enslaved people became French citizens (Fick 1990; Dubois 2012; Boatcă and Roth 2016; Getachew 2016). But this status proved tenuous and short-lived. Napoleon sent a large military force to reinvade Saint Domingue to effectively reenslave French citizens. In response, the army of the enslaved went to war a second time, this time to win independence, creating the first free Black nation in a world resting on plantation economies. Elsewhere in the French Empire, France only abolished enslavement in 1848, and here too tethered it to political tutelage. Legislators questioned whether formerly enslaved people were “capable” of exercising French citizenship and imposed a regime of cultural and moral

TABLE 1
SHIFTING FRAMES OF POLITICAL PERSONHOOD

	Postabolition (1830s) Tutelage	Postrevolt (1860s) Suppression
Labor	Creating the free worker	Impossible to become industrious free worker
Responsibility	Creating the responsible political subject	Impossible to become responsible political subject

NOTE.—As with all conjunctural explanations, this table portrays a pattern in a much more complex historical moment.

instruction to reshape them according to the standards set out for them. Often, the very experience of enslavement was weaponized as proof of political incapacity (Larcher 2014, 2015; Wilder 2014). Racial hierarchies then naturalized this narrative of political incapacity, further entrenching the racialized project of political personhood.

Du Bois recognized that the logics forged in the postabolition Atlantic world persisted into the 20th century. Speaking at the 1900 Pan-African Congress in London, he attempted to revive the initial promise of British abolition: “Let the British nation, the first modern champion of negro freedom, hasten to crown the work of Wilberforce, and Clarkson, and Buxton, and Sharpe, Bishop Colenso, and Livingstone, and give, as soon as practicable, the rights of responsible government to the black colonies of Africa and the West Indies” (Walters et al. 1900). Du Bois envisioned a world in which the formerly enslaved could steer their own political futures. Yet his appeal came at a moment when the global color line was already being reenshrined through imperial restructuring and the exclusion of Black sovereign countries from the international community.

By the early 20th century, with the rise of anticolonial nationalism, debates over self-government increasingly focused on collective sovereignty, rather than individual capacity. But the same racialized logics that had shaped the postemancipation world resurfaced in the language of collective self-government. As Adom Getachew (2019) has shown, figures like Woodrow Wilson and Jan Smuts invoked the supposed failures of postabolition societies as “proof” that nonwhite populations were unfit for self-rule. They saw the demise of Reconstruction in the United States as evidence of political incapacity, while Haiti and Liberia became cautionary examples. The “propaganda of history,” as Du Bois termed it, played a decisive role in debates over whether nations like Liberia and Ethiopia should be fully included in the League of Nations. At the second Pan-African Congress, Du Bois (1921) noted this false narrative. “The insidious and dishonorable propaganda, which, for selfish ends, so distorts and denies facts as to represent the advancement and development of certain races of men as impossible and undesirable, should be met

with widespread dissemination of the truth. The experiment of making the Negro slave a free citizen in the United States is not a failure; the attempts at autonomous government in Haiti and Liberia are not proofs of the impossibility of self-government among black men.”²⁷ He insisted that neither Reconstruction nor the independence of Haiti and Liberia “proved” political incapacity. Rather, they revealed the extent to which imperial powers undermined Black self-rule.

Even after World War II, the imperial world met decolonization struggles with echoes of this racialized approach to self-government. Across both political and social scientific fields, the denial of self-government was legitimized through cultural “explanations” around political capacity (Griffith, Plamenatz, and Pennock 1956; Lipset 1959). By 1945, in *Color and Democracy*, Du Bois again insisted that “henceforth the majority of the inhabitants of earth, who happen for the most part to be colored, must be regarded as having the right and the capacity to share in human progress and to become copartners in that democracy which alone can ensure peace among men” (Du Bois 2007, p. 241). Yet, responding to the postwar international order and the failures of the Dumbarton Oaks conference to meaningfully address colonial sovereignty, his tone had grown ever more disillusioned.

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING DEMOCRATIZATION BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

While democratization is often studied as the gradual inclusion of new actors within national frameworks (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992; Tilly 2007), a Du Boisian approach makes clear that first-wave democratization did not solely unfold through rights expansions and racially unmarked class struggles. Underlying institutional expressions of political rights rests a cultural construction of political personhood that operated within the imperial world. Rather than excluding the colonies as exceptions to democracy, we need interrogations of the historical processes that constructed political personhood in racial and imperial terms, especially during the so-called first wave, when “nation-states” were in fact empires.

With this goal in mind, I analyzed the contested struggle over who could be recognized as a political actor and on what grounds. Throughout the 19th century, the very frameworks that enabled the inclusion of metropolitan workers—anchored in free labor discipline and patriarchal respectability—were re-deployed to cast colonized populations as unfit for freedom. Attending to the larger conjuncture of franchise expansion and abolition across imperial space reveals the political work necessary to craft people outside the bounds of the polity. In reconnecting this political work to the demands of capital and

²⁷ Translation adopted from Getachew and Pitts (2022, p. 56).

empire, we can move beyond narrow institutional effects and instead get a better understanding of liberal democracy's possibilities and shortcomings. At the same time, this analysis highlights suppressed histories of resistance that can serve as resources for reimagining democracy beyond the color line.

Throughout I have highlighted how we can think of liberal democratization as a racialized and imperial process of political person making. The article foregrounds how elites constructed racialized distinctions between the "improvable" and the "incorrigible" subject and how these distinctions helped stabilize a global order of racial capitalism. Colonized and racialized populations here are not outside political modernity but rather central actors who had to be actively excluded. British Jamaica's postemancipation history reveals how the question of who counts as a political subject is inseparable from the deeper question of what forms of freedom are permissible—and for whom. If Jamaica marked a failed experiment in liberal tutelage, Haiti loomed as its radical counterpoint: a revolution that enacted freedom beyond liberal terms and was therefore disavowed. Taken together, these cases illuminate a conjuncture, not of a process of inclusion but a redrawing of the boundaries of political life and a foreclosing of alternative political futures.

Centering Du Bois's work in our analysis of political modernity brings a series of analytical advances. First and foremost, it allows us to bring together the sociology of democracy and rights formation and the sociology of race. Studies of rights formation have often treated the exclusion of racialized and colonial populations as if "race" were a self-evident explanatory factor for exclusions rather than a product of historically constructed power relations (Du Bois 2007, 2008; Glenn 2009; Fields and Fields 2014; Hesse 2016; Mamdani 2020; Wacquant 2024). At the same time, the sociology of race has frequently analyzed the effects and reproduction of racial discourses while leaving aside the political processes determining access to the polity (Magubane 2005; Go 2007, 2018; Hesse 2007; de Leon and Rodríguez-Muñiz 2022). In turn, a Du Boisian approach leads scholars of democratization to analytically center the global color line and sociologists of race to interrogate how ideals of political personhood, citizenship, sovereignty, and inclusion were forged through racialized struggle across an imperial space. Rights and race must be understood not as separate domains but as coconstructed in specific historical conjunctures.

Second, differential political person making did not merely discursively reproduce racial hierarchies but helped to enshrine the structures of capitalism and imperial rule. As the data from postabolition Jamaica make clear, political personhood was fashioned to ensure that Black freedom would remain profitable, governable, and compatible with the demands of postplantation capitalism. These scripts of political personhood thus function as a world-making force that coconstitute material structures. Racial capitalism operates

not simply as an economic system that exploits racialized labor but also as a political order that crafts classifications to define who is exploitable, who is governable, and who is to be excluded. Freedom was granted only to the extent that freedpeople conformed to wage labor and scripts of responsibility, disallowing and delegitimizing subsistence practices or alternative forms of autonomy. This enshrined colonial power relationships and offered a way out of demographic anxieties and the specter of Black political agency. In this sense, liberal democratization not only failed to address the inequalities of racial capitalism but also scripted political capacity in accordance with its demands.

Third, scholars of racial capitalism have long shown how capital reproduces itself through racially stratified labor regimes (Dawson 2016; Muller 2018; Khan 2021). But it is also important to note that racial capitalism is not a static system and its reproduction is not automatic. Rather, active and contingent political work is required to differentially construct specific political subjects (Matlon 2022). As Nancy Fraser (2016) notes, analyses of racial capitalism require an attention to distinct economic bases as well as to political processes, thereby bringing into focus the differential positioning of the “exploitable citizen-worker” and the “expropriable subject.” The making of political personhood, as demonstrated here, differentially created liberal citizen-workers and responsible patriarchs in the metropole and improvable/incorrigible subjects in the colonies. In this vein, this “racecraft” becomes the ideological work through which domination is naturalized—transforming political power relations into biological or cultural “facts” (Fields and Fields 2014). Such naturalizations leave us with a world where political inclusion becomes thinkable solely through liberal scripts and standards, while crowding out alternative and more expansive political openings.

Finally, a Du Boisian approach highlights that these cultural constructions are never complete. Throughout the historical conjuncture examined here, we can see openings and opportunities for resistance. The political demands of freedpeople reveal not only their agency but also their ability to envision freedom on their terms (Bogues 2012). This insight compels us to ask new questions: What alternative political futures have been foreclosed—and how might they be reimagined today? What could more liberatory genealogies of abolition and decolonization teach us about democracy today? What kinds of subjectivities does the imperial world produce and how do they challenge metropolitan histories? What solidarities emerged between struggles across metropolises and colonies? By tracing these conjunctures, we can recover emancipatory alternatives foreclosed by Atlantic Reconstruction and other significant moments.

A Du Boisian political sociology attentive to cartographies of the global color line reveals how imperial contexts forged political personhood. Political modernity contains struggles over race, imperial domination, and freedom as

well as possibilities for more emancipatory futures. Du Bois and others in the anticolonial tradition offer theoretical tools for centering the demands of the subaltern and a better understanding of their suppression at the heart of political modernity. Engaging their work allows us to reclaim these demands not merely as lost possibilities but as enduring claims on the present—inspirations for reimagining democracy beyond the color line today.

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