Haiti and Its Revolution: Four Recent Books

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Haiti’s history, Laurent Dubois tells us, “can — indeed must — serve as a source of inspiration, and even hope” (10). For those who would write it, this is a problem. Among the country’s many burdens has been the exemplary role it has perforce played in international debates about slavery, colonialism, and race. Just as its earliest chroniclers often aimed to denigrate, modern historians frequently lean toward apologetics and celebration. The attraction exerted by Haiti’s revolutionary origins has tended to pull in writers more eager to make a statement than to research its
extensive archives. Book-length accounts of the fifteen-year conflict are often their
author’s first or only work on the topic, something unimaginable in scholarship on
the French, American, or Russian revolutions. This is not the case with these four
new works, whose authors each have established reputations in the field. Although
they vary a good deal in their tendency to critique or celebrate, they pursue bal-
anced assessment rather than polemic and exemplify the considerable advances
made in Haitian historiography in recent decades.

The subject matter of the four books ranges from the colonial period to
recent times, but all deal to some degree with the revolution of 1789–1804, which
transformed the wealthy French colony of Saint-Domingue into the Caribbean’s
first independent state and, for the first time, ended slavery in a major slave-owning
society. How to situate this epic struggle within the Age of Revolution and the con-
temporary movement to abolish slavery has emerged as a central issue during the
ongoing period of bicentennial reflection that began in 1976 and has aroused an
upsurge of scholarly interest in the topic. These books, however, represent some-
thing of a new departure. None is a history of the revolution, of which we already
have many. They focus instead on aspects or segments of the topic, which further
testifies to the maturation of the field.

Dubois’s history of Haiti to the present devotes an opening chapter to the
revolution but primarily deals with its aftermath. The fight for independence, he
notes, destroyed much of the plantation economy and created a state dominated
by the army and a society that was divided between a selfish elite anxious to revive
export agriculture and rural masses determined to live as self-sufficient peasants.
Although he describes the Haitian Revolution — wrongly, I think — as “profoundly
democratic” (46), postcolonial politics were from the outset authoritarian. The
main interpretative task for historians who want to explain Haiti’s problems is to
weigh such internal factors against the harmful economic and political influence of
foreign powers.

Dubois finds the latter more significant than the former but strikes a reason-
able balance. Whereas some like to explain Haiti’s development solely in terms of
Thomas Jefferson’s trade embargo, the nineteenth-century indemnity paid to the
French government, and the US occupation of 1915–34, Dubois gives us a more
complex picture. He wastes no time on the 1806 embargo, which lasted only four
years, and he observes that the French indemnity was paid off in 1883, before Hai-
ti’s foreign debt spiraled out of control. Although it took decades to win diplomatic
recognition, the country was never commercially isolated, and the lack of foreign
investment resulted from a constitutional ban maintained down to 1918. Debt pay-
ments were certainly “a major drain” (175) on national finances but, before 1900,
were lower than expenditure on the “bloated” (103) army. As military expenditure
reflected perceived foreign threats as well as institutional self-interest, it is hard to
know whom to blame for it. Dubois makes passing reference to government mis-
management and corruption, but it would have been instructive to underline how a rare president like Lysius Salomon was able to save his country millions by renegotiating a disastrous loan contracted by a predecessor.

Dubois has much more to say about bullying and predation by foreign governments and merchants. He tells an entertaining story of how the California gold rush, guano, coal-fired steamships, rampant racism, and the Panama Canal increased US interest in Haiti through the late nineteenth century. The US Marines’ nineteen years of arrogant occupation takes up a quarter of the book. The author interprets this period as one of economic stagnation, peasant evictions, and rural immiseration. By some accounts, however, exports increased and diversified despite the Depression. Apart from the failure of an ambitious agricultural school, the infrastructure projects that have impressed other writers are largely passed over. As the roads, bridges, sewers, clinics, and hospitals were not American largesse but paid for from tax revenue, one ought to ask why no previous or subsequent government ever made a similar investment.

The American failure to promote peasant agriculture is criticized, but the trade-off between small-scale and plantation production is nowhere explored. My main criticism of the book is that it tells us little about why or when Haiti became so poor. In the nineteenth century, its peasants may have been materially better off than their enslaved counterparts elsewhere in the region, but that does not mean they were “agriculturally very productive” (101). Haiti was already poor by Caribbean standards in the 1820s and extraordinarily poor by 1914. As the economy almost entirely depended on exporting coffee, it is a major omission to overlook the way Brazil’s development shrank Haiti’s national income and state revenues by driving down world coffee prices. The book similarly neglects population growth, currency devaluation, and, more surprisingly, the country’s much publicized soil erosion.

Exclusively based on secondary works, Haiti: The Aftershocks of History skillfully combines the readability of a popular history with ample references to recent and classic scholarship. It eschews statistical tables and academic debate for narrative and anecdote. The text is studded with telling details and succinct formulations and makes effective use of notable figures such as Hérard Dumesle, Anténor Firmin, and Jacques Roumain to illuminate different moments in Haiti’s past. Its sympathetic but critical presentation of unpopular presidents such as Boyer, who agreed to the indemnity, and Dartiguenave, who collaborated with the Americans, is impressive. It deals better with culture (Vodou, black nationalism) and politics than with economics.

The few factual errors this reviewer noticed tended to be common ones shared with many other writers. “Most” slaves (20) in Saint-Domingue did not work on sugar plantations; only one-third did. “Most” Haitians at independence (48) were locally born, not Africans. The 150–million-franc indemnity demanded by France
was eventually reduced to 90 million, not 60 million, and it supposedly represented, not the value of the property colonists had lost, but less than 10 percent of it. The 1805 Constitution forbade landowning by “white people,” not by “foreigners” (174). The statement that Dessalines, the illiterate first head of state, “wrote eloquently” (43), and the misidentification of Pierre-Victor Malouet as governor are inconsequential slips. But the bizarre claim that, prior to the 1791 slave uprising, “free men of color [and whites] began leading their slaves into battle [in a] . . . steadily expanding conflict” (25) gives an entirely wrong idea of how the Haitian Revolution began.

Philippe Girard’s *The Slaves Who Defeated Napoleon* takes as its subject the revolution’s final phase, the war of independence of 1802–3. A period of apocalyptic violence, the war was a response to France’s attempt to reassert control of its colonies after a decade of revolutionary change. The book provides extensive background to the crisis and the best available account of the breakdown in relations between Napoleon Bonaparte and Saint-Domingue’s black governor, Toussaint Louverture, during the preceding two years. It thus functions as a history of the final third of the Haitian Revolution. This was when Louverture reached the height of his power, taking over the whole island of Hispaniola and promulgating his own constitution, while ostensibly remaining a loyal colonial subject.

Like Laurent Dubois, Girard has managed the difficult feat of making a scholarly study read like a popular history that will appeal to general readers. In other respects, the two works differ considerably. Girard draws on an exceptionally wide array of archival sources in France, England, and the United States, some of them previously unexploited. Specialists will notice much that is new in the detail of his narrative and the precision that he brings to certain debates. The book makes an important research contribution. It claims to cover its topic both with greater accuracy than its predecessors and more extensively, amplifying neglected aspects such as the naval war and the experiences of women and children. The author teaches in US academia, like the other three discussed here, but also points out, “As a white native of Guadeloupe . . . I tend to view French imperialism in a more positive light than is customary among my academic colleagues” (10).

This disarmingly frank and unusual admission does not betoken a defense of Napoleon’s brutal attempt to restore white supremacy in Saint-Domingue, but it points to arguments Girard puts forward that are likely to draw criticism. The larger thesis he advances is that the Haitian Revolution was not a “Manichaean” (433) struggle about slavery, race, or colonialism but something more complicated. As the facts of the matter are rarely in dispute, albeit frequently passed over by historians, this is mainly a matter of emphasis, though also one of tone, as when he suggests that “the only constant factor” in the revolution was “greed” (9).

One of the issues in question here is when or whether Bonaparte secretly decided to restore slavery in Saint Domingue, as opposed to just overthrowing the colony’s black rulers and maintaining the system of forced labor that black and white
landowners both supported. Girard convincingly argues that Bonaparte genuinely sought to cooperate with the black general Toussaint Louverture in the period 1799–1801 but that, after a series of missteps by each leader, he determined to reassert French control. His conclusion that “Bonaparte would probably have welcomed” (188) slavery’s restoration if it were feasible is quite uncontroversial. However, the implication that Bonaparte never decided to take that step seems contradicted by the evidence.

Girard argues that race was only a subsidiary factor in the revolution because of the many instances when it was overridden by class or political divisions. All historians of Haiti know that the Napoleonic army of conquest included a large contingent of soldiers of mixed racial descent who had been driven from Saint-Domingue by Toussaint Louverture. Much less well known is the number of prominent free blacks, like Jean-Baptiste Belley and Etienne Mentor, who also lobbied the French for Louverture’s overthrow. The Polish troops who deserted to the black insurgents and the Africans who fought against the insurgents are familiar cases, but Girard is the first to claim that, for most of the war of independence, nonwhites made up the majority of the French forces. Given this stress on interracial linkages, it is surprising he overlooks the case of Nicolas Mallet, the sole white colonist to sign Haiti’s declaration of independence.

Haitian nationalists aside, historians generally accept that Toussaint Louverture did not seek outright independence and that it was Napoleon’s aggression that precipitated Saint-Domingue’s secession. Girard generalizes Louverture’s attitude and asserts that it was the excesses of imperialism, not imperialism itself, that pushed both leaders and masses to make the break with Europe. He sees the Haitian elite’s continuing admiration of French culture and institutions as buttressing this argument. There are good debating points in Girard’s general thesis, which combines the obvious with the tendentious, but the main strength of his book lies in its details. It provides a succession of generally excellent summations of complex issues. Though the Louisiana Purchase gets somewhat unbalanced treatment, other vexed questions, like the origins of Haiti’s flag, receive definitive solutions.

Unlike many who have attempted broad histories of the revolution, the author displays an equal mastery of its French and Caribbean dimensions, and he handles political, military, administrative, and social matters with equal authority. The writing is packed with information; original insights are plentiful, and there are nice touches of wit. Factual errors seem negligible: Yayou was not African; Malouet fled to England in 1792; Toussaint Louverture’s father was not alive in 1801, and I doubt General J.-P. Leveillé became a maroon. The author, evidently no Jacobin, also mixes up the revolutionary songs La Carmagnole and Ça Ira.

Jeremy Popkin’s prize-winning You Are All Free, the longest of the works under review, has ostensibly the smallest topic. Its focus is on the few days in June 1793 when Saint-Domingue’s main city, Cap Français, was burned to the ground
and looted by insurgent slaves. Thousands of colonists sailed away into exile, and within a few months slavery was abolished throughout the colony. Saint Domingue had had the most productive export economy and third-largest slave population in the New World, and excepting some minor cases like Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, this marked the start of the century-long process that would end slavery in the Americas. The book’s central argument concerns the contingency of the slave emancipation process and the vital and underappreciated role in it played by the burning of Le Cap.

Estimating a death toll between 3,000 and 10,000, Popkin calls the city’s destruction the “most murderous instance of urban conflict” (2) in the history of the Americas (presumably overlooking the sack of Tenochtitlán in 1521). It resulted from a power struggle between two white officials, General Thomas Galbaud and Commissar Léger Sonthonax, who were backed respectively by white sailors and free men of color. The insurgent slaves, recruited by Sonthonax with an offer of emancipation and let into the city, played a belated and subsidiary role. Up to this point, the massive slave uprising that had begun two years before in the surrounding countryside had long since stalled, and was not explicitly aimed at ending slavery. Meanwhile, in revolutionary France politicians had done nothing at all about slavery. Popkin argues that the slave revolt might eventually have succeeded but that, without the burning of Cap Français, it would not have done so in alliance with the French Republic, which responded to Sonthonax’s actions by abolishing slavery in all of its colonies in February 1794.

Popkin’s comparison of Galbaud’s attack on Le Cap to the 1861 attack on Fort Sumter is startlingly original, but his contention that neither French libertarian ideology nor the 1791 uprising inevitably led to slave emancipation seems to this reviewer fairly uncontroversial. It is likely to upset only those with a romantic commitment to black agency and those who exaggerate the antislavery credentials of the Jacobins. Not so convincing is the claim that Le Cap’s “June days” were an indispensable element in French abolition. Given Sonthonax’s circumstances, it is not improbable that some other disaster, like a foreign invasion, would sooner or later have pushed him to offer a deal to the insurgent slaves. The emancipation decrees of summer 1793 had three necessary but insufficient causes: Sonthonax’s already-publicized antislavery beliefs, the undefeated slave insurrection in northern Saint-Domingue, and the outbreak of war between the colonial powers in February/March 1793. War ended the likelihood of help from France and brought invasion by the Spanish (in late June) and British (in September). It was not the burning of Le Cap that caused white colonists to seek foreign protection; that process was well under way, as were contacts between the French and the insurgent slaves. As Popkin notes, Sonthonax had already abandoned all attempts to defeat the slave rebellion as early as February.

Although a matter of hypotheticals, this suggests that the author gives a little
too much significance to his topic. Like Philippe Girard’s book, *You Are All Free* is more notable for its scholarly particulars than for the thesis that frames it. There is much to admire in the richly detailed text, which closely tracks events in Saint-Domingue and Paris in the period 1792–94. Like Girard, Popkin has mined the archives and marshaled a wealth of information, much of it new. He provides an evocative description of Cap Français, the “Paris of the West Indies,” and a valuable portrait of the hapless General Galbaud, the man who did “more damage to France’s colonial empire in one day than any other person in history” (391). Galbaud’s politics confused both his contemporaries and later historians. One of the more original features of this account is the attention it gives to the general’s circuitous journey back to France, including months as a fugitive in Canada and the United States. It throws further light on his energy and ineptitude.

This microstudy thus links up growing scholarly interest in the colonial exiles in North America with current research on the revolutions in France and Saint-Domingue in a tableau of Atlantic breadth. Popkin writes with particular authority on the intricacies of French Revolutionary politics and is a lucid guide to their incendiary impact on Caribbean society.

In *Before Haiti*, John Garrigus devotes two of nine chapters to the revolution in Saint-Domingue, and much of his dense and detailed study, which covers the entire eighteenth century, sheds light on the revolution’s origins. His subject is the free people of color who made up the middle segment of colonial society and in some ways constitute the key to understanding the Haitian Revolution. Saint-Domingue’s free coloreds were not the largest such group in the Americas, but they were the wealthiest, despite being subject to the same sort of legal and extralegal discrimination common elsewhere. In recent decades, free colored communities have gone from being the least understood to perhaps the most closely studied sector of Caribbean slave society, a development that owes a good deal to Garrigus’s pioneering 1988 dissertation.

This long-maturing project pulls together the several strands of the author’s evolving interests and contains a vast quantity of original research. The book’s foundation is a socioeconomic study based on 9,000 notarial documents such as marriage contracts, property transactions, and legal depositions. This material allows Garrigus to measure the rapid ascent of the free colored elite during the closing decades of the ancien régime, and the economic difficulties it confronted during the revolution. Yet it also demonstrates how modern historians have tended to exaggerate the wealth of this group. They were not the men of immense capital imagined by C. L. R. James. The rich data reveal trends and patterns not only in capital formation but in slave-holding and manumission, intermarriage and kinship strategies, literacy, contraband trade, migration, and so on. Interspersed with the statistics are some memorable stories of everyday life—a kidnapped child, a stolen pig, or the hunting down of a sorcerer.
Almost all this material comes from the colony’s south coast, from three of its fifty-two parishes. *Before Haiti* is in part a regional study that claims for the newly settled southern peninsula a pioneering, “American” character. It was more open to contraband trade with other parts of the Caribbean and, above all, to racial intermixture, because extremely few white women lived there. Because the slow-developing region imported few slaves, few were freed, Garrigus suggests, and this explains why southern free coloreds were overwhelmingly of mixed racial descent. Although economically marginal, the South Province was the site of important events, as in the turbulent 1760s, and several of its free men of color took leading roles in the revolution. Recent historiography has popularized the idea of a particular connection between people of color and coffee cultivation, but Garrigus finds that indigo and cotton were the main sources of wealth of the people he studied, though they did sell land to whites to grow coffee.

In several chapters oriented to culture and politics, Garrigus examines different ways in which race relations grew more tense in the French Atlantic world after the 1760s. As colonists and administrators promoted a new ideology of racial purity and demeaning stereotypes of free coloreds, class ceased to trump race even in the tolerant South Province. The burgeoning number of free coloreds counted by the censuses was partly due to a redrawing of the color line. Racial intermarriage decreased. Nonwhites were denied militia commissions, and military demands on free coloreds became abusive. Garrigus treats with skepticism the idea advanced in recent scholarship that the free colored population contained a “military leadership class.”

Garrigus frequently narrows and widens his lens as the book progresses. Besides shifting between the south and the whole free colored population, he includes useful sections on free coloreds in the Americas, on the development of Saint-Domingue’s regions, and its historiography. The final chapters on the revolution focus on two topics, the experience of the single parish of Aquin, and the mixed-race southerners who became political activists. Aquin is interesting for the way it anticipated postindependence changes in the late 1790s by selling off plantation land in peasant-sized units. The southern activists include the planter/pamphleteer Julien Raimond, the goldsmith/general André Rigaud, and the author of the declaration of independence, Louis Boisrond-Tonnerre.

These four very good books show that scholarship on Haiti has come of age and is no longer confined to the single-volume overview of the revolutionary period. Historians of the revolution and its origins can now dig deeper into regional, chronological, or thematic segments of their subject, and the former terrae incognitae of the nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries have already attracted enough talented explorers to allow for a synthetic history to map out the bigger picture of post-revolutionary development.