

Sheller on Geggus, The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World

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H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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David P. Geggus, ed. *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001. 256 pp. Index. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 1-570-03416-8.

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As the 2004 bicentennial of the Republic of Haiti's independence approaches, with numerous commemorative events planned throughout the world, the question of the impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic world is a very timely one. This collection of well-researched, historical essays (based on a conference held in 1998 at the College of Charleston) is an important assessment of the revolution's multifarious impacts, and should be consulted by anyone interested in the bicentennial.

Editor David Geggus has already published a number of significant contributions to this field, and here he offers a summative preface and epilogue weighing both the "positive" and "negative" influences of the revolution. As in his previous work, he tempers some of the more "romantically sweeping" assessments of the revolution's import and seeks instead "to suggest its limits as well as strengths" (p. 247). In this sense, it will be a controversial book insofar as it undermines certain contemporary political projects based on the symbolic import of the first successful slave revolution.

One of the most valuable contributions of this collection is to map very clearly the full array of ways in which the revolution may have had an impact. What influence did the revolution have on abolitionism in different countries? What were its economic consequences for other plantation societies? How did it affect the balance of military power and diplomacy amongst the great powers? What were its influences on slave emancipation, racial equality, and decolonization? Did it foster slave plots and rebellions? And, how did the Saint Domingue refugees (both free and enslaved), scattered around the circum-Caribbean region, affect the places in which they settled?

The first section provides a punchy overview of some of the diverse, ambiguous, contradictory and, at times, surprising repercussions of the revolution from distinguished historians David B. Davis, Seymour Drescher, and Robin Blackburn. Davis points out some of the ambiguous ways in which the revolution may have both hastened and delayed the abolition of the slave trade and slavery elsewhere; yet his emphasis is on its positive symbolic role for African Americans like Frederick Douglass. Drescher focuses on "The Limits of Example," questioning the timing and direction of some of the causal sequences. He argues that some trends attributed to the impact of the revolution were already occurring prior to it (such as curtailment of the slave trade in the United States), while others were only short-lived and were quickly reversed (such as slave emancipation). Focusing on British policy, in particular, he bullishly asks, "Was the Haitian tail really wagging the British Lion?" And he memorably argues that as a catalyst for other slave mobilizations, "Haiti was both unforgettable and unrepeatable" (p. 13). Blackburn, in contrast, suggests that Haiti was a significant force of revolutionary example, especially insofar as the Haitian and French revolutions each radicalized the other. Most importantly, though, he suggests that by remobilizing slave regimes where slaveholders were strongest, and precipitating the end of slavery where slave regimes were weakest, the "impact of the Haitian Revolution hastened and accentuated a process of differentiation within the Atlantic world, dividing it more neatly into slave and non-slave zones" (p. 19).

The second section considers the revolution's impact on white political actors in Germany, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and the United States (it is oddly entitled "Politics," given that all of the sections deal with politics of some kind). In an unusual contribution, Karin Schuller traces the ways in which German interpretations of the Haitian revolution served as a mirror of Germany's own internal politics and suggest a shift from liberalism to racism. Elsewhere reactions of the slave-owning class to the unfolding events in Saint Domingue seem to have included "a mixture of paranoia, complacency, and prudent calculation" (p. xi). Olwyn Blouet shows how Jamaican planter Bryan Edwards elaborated a white West Indian counter-ideology to metropolitan abolitionism; he attacked abolitionists for instigating slave rebellions, and promoted amelioration of slavery as a gradual and more practical way forward. Juan Gonzalez Mendoza suggests some of the complex ways in which the Haitian Revolution presented Cuban and Puerto Rican "patricians" with a choice between continuing an intensive plantation economy based on slavery or diversifying the economy with a free labor force. The choice of the former path left both colonies saddled with the specter of "racial war" and slave conspiracies, which stifled moves towards independence. Simon Newman explores how the Jeffersonian Republicans in the United States bridled their own revolutionary idealism in the face of truly radical social and racial revolutions. A "sort of Thermidorian reaction" (p. 78) occurred, in which Republicans maintained their revolutionary ideology and rhetoric while "draining it of its radical essence" (p. 83).

Each of these chapters, then, illustrates the consolidation of slavery and conservative ideologies amongst white political actors in the wake of the Haitian revolution. But what about the alternative influence of the revolution on anti-slavery ideologies and non-white political actors? The third section explores the ways in which the revolution did or did not foment slave resistance and revolt elsewhere. On the one hand, there is evidence of a positive causal link, either through transplanted "French" slaves from Haiti, who were involved in numerous rebellions and conspiracies, or through the indirect invocation of the Haitian example (or purported direct aid from Haiti) by slave rebels and conspirators elsewhere. On the other hand, the influence of the revolution has in some cases been exaggerated; it also played a role in entrenching slavery in some places or extending it into new places.

Robert Alderson explores a rumored slave revolt in Charleston in 1793, exploring its possible origins, aims, and implications, whether as a false rumor or an actual conspiracy; in either case it reveals a current of black republicanism within the United States. Laurent Dubois uncovers significant evidence of Haiti's influence on insurgencies in Guadeloupe during the revolutionary regime of 1794-1802. Matt Childs finds even more striking evidence of Jose Antonio Aponte's Haitian inspiration in the 1812 conspiracy in Havana, Cuba. Bringing to light a less well-known example, Aline Helg suggests similar emulation of Haiti amongst francophone slaves in Cartagena, but shows how political conditions on the Caribbean coast

of New Grenada made revolution impossible. And Marixa Lasso, finally, explores some of the ongoing symbolism of the Haitian revolution amongst lower classes in the Republic of Cartagena. Each of these chapters points toward significant influences of the revolution on radicalizing black political actors around the Atlantic world, even if the full extent of such influences is not fully known.

The final section of the book examines the impact of Saint-Domingan refugees (of all colors) in Philadelphia, Louisiana, and South Carolina. While it has previously been recognized that the skills and capital of Saint-Domingan refugees (including slaves) stimulated plantation production elsewhere in the Americas, the chapters here broach more subtle questions. Susan Branson and Leslie Patrick consider the difficult position of black and "colored" migrants within Philadelphian society, including their distinction from the local black community. Paul Lachance provides ample evidence of the ways in which the numerically significant Saint-Domingan migration into Louisiana altered the population structure and entrenched a tri-partite pattern of racial distinctions, atypical in the rest of the United States. And Geggus' chapter on the Caradeux family of South Carolina explores the differing memories of this refugee family amongst its white and black descendants, and contrasts these oral histories with the historiographic evidence. This section, thus, offers an interesting reflection on some of the more indirect and long-term impacts of the revolution.

In the epilogue, Geggus sketches a "balance sheet" of the Haitian revolution's impacts, trying to distinguish between its symbolic import and the substantive difference it "really" made (p. 247), dimensions that some readers might find harder to disentangle. It is a sobering tally and it sets a challenge for those who would claim more positive impacts of the revolution to provide the historical evidence. Geggus suggests, for example, that the frequent rumors of emancipation that sparked slave rebellions were more often linked to metropolitan abolitionism than to Haiti's example, and, moreover, that slave resistance did not necessarily contribute to the progress of slave emancipation. He also finds the Haitian revolution's impact on ideas about racial difference and the reform of race relations to be "profoundly ambiguous" (p. 248). The Haitian revolution's "contribution to stimulating political activism among free people of color in the nineteenth century" (p. 249) is one of the most promising lines of inquiry, but further research is needed. Its impact on the French revolution, on the military balance between the great powers, on the expansion of plantation economies, on the cultural landscape of the Greater Caribbean, and on processes of decolonization are all downgraded or downplayed.

In sum, this book is an extremely valuable and timely contribution to the literature on the Haitian revolution, framing key questions and setting an agenda for future research. Yet it steals the thunder of writers like C.L.R. James and Eugene Genovese, and in some ways seems to diminish the power of the Haitian revolution. If these tendencies are unwelcome in some circles in this bicentennial year, they can nonetheless contribute to ongoing debates concerning the relation of Haiti to the wider Caribbean world today. Who "owns" the Haitian revolution, and in what ways? Are the meanings (and continuing "real" impacts) of the slave revolution as contradictory and ambiguous today as they were in the past?

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