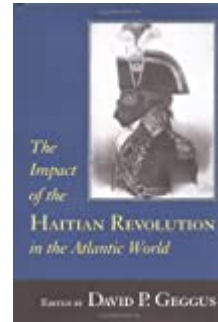




**David P. Geggus, ed.** *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001. xviii + 261 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-416-9.



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## **World-Shattering Event or Frame of Reference? The Repercussions of the Haitian Revolution**

This useful collection of essays originated as conference papers presented at the College of Charleston in October 1998. A few essays, such as Seymour Drescher's and Robin Blackburn's, are relatively short and do not seem to have been revised extensively for publication, but most are article-length and thickly footnoted with references to archival sources. The contributors, ranging from Laurent Dubois to Paul Lachance and David Brion Davis, are noted scholars in their respective fields. David P. Geggus, who helped organize the conference and edited the collection, also contributed a preface, a chapter on Saint-Domingue planter Jean-Baptiste de Caradeux, and (presumably) the unsigned epilogue. Geggus is a recognized authority on the Haitian Revolution, best known for his definitive *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint-Domingue* (1982). Geggus also co-edited *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (1997), whose essays explored themes similar to those of the book under review, albeit within a smaller geographical context.

As indicated in its title, the purpose of the collection is to assess the repercussions of the massive slave

revolt that roiled the French colony of Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) from the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789 to the 1804 declaration of independence. More generally, the book embraces the current historiographical trend toward an Atlantic history that would demonstrate links between events, economies, and human experiences around the Atlantic basin regardless of traditional national boundaries. Fulfilling such ambitious goals while conducting significant archival research would be a challenging undertaking for a single scholar, so pulling together scholars with distinct areas of expertise is an adequate way to offer both wide-ranging conclusions and detailed local research.

Authors like to affirm the centrality of the events they study, so one might expect the essays to emphasize the many ways in which the Haitian slave revolt revolutionized the Atlantic world (this was generally the conclusion reached in *A Turbulent Time*, which showed the interconnectedness of the Caribbean world). Yet, quite surprisingly, Geggus's introduction is cautiously filled with numerous qualifiers (pp. ix-xvi). News of the Haitian Revolution spread quickly throughout the Americas, but most

subsequent slave revolts were merely inspired by the Haitian example, not directly led by Haitian *agents provocateurs*. Planters in neighboring slave societies were terrified by the Haitian slave uprising, but they also benefited from high prices once Saint-Domingue's sugar plantations disappeared from international markets. Abolitionists and slavery apologists both referred to the slave revolt's bloody record to support their views. The epilogue is even more cautious and asserts that fears of a slave revolt probably convinced Cuba to remain a Spanish colony for another century (p. 250).

A section designed to offer an overview of the debate is equally inconclusive. Looking at nineteenth-century U.S. abolitionist documents that routinely referred to the Haitian republic as an inspiration, Davis concludes that the Haitian Revolution was a world-shattering event that profoundly altered the debate on abolition (p. 4). But Drescher's essay points in another direction, noting that, however often slaves and planters discussed the Haitian Revolution, the slave population continued to grow in the New World after 1804. Abolitionists scored victories in their struggle against slavery, but these either preceded, or were unrelated to, the Haitian slave revolt. "Haiti," he concludes, "was both unforgettable and unrepeatable" (p. 13). Blackburn sees a dual process at play. The Haitian slave revolt was made possible by revolutionary turmoil in France (which explains its unique nature); but it also pushed the French Revolution into a more radical phase (which demonstrates its historical importance) (p. 16). Due to their brief length and limited footnotes, along with the fact that they address slightly different topics, these essays do not lead to a definitive conclusion and serve more as think pieces designed to frame the debate. The subsequent essays, by contrast, are detailed, well-researched case studies that are by their very nature more authoritative but tend to have a more limited scope.

The collection's second part, which includes four essays on the political repercussions of the Haitian Revolution, roams from Germany to Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and the United States. Yet, a common thread can be found: the events of Saint-Domingue always featured prominently in local political debates, where Haiti was cited as a model to embrace or (more often) to reject. In her analysis of the nineteenth-century German press, Karin SchÄ¼ller shows that Haiti was the Latin American country that was most frequently mentioned in German newspapers. Haiti's prominence in the German press may come as a surprise, considering Germany's then-limited colonial ambitions and the newspapers' dearth of reliable informers. But Haiti, she explains, was studied

for its relevance to German theoretical debates on nation-building, communism, and "scientific" racism (pp. 31-32).

Olwyn Blouet's study of Jamaican planter Bryan Edwards also shows the Haitian slave revolt's importance in shaping the yearly British parliamentary votes on the slave trade. Edwards visited Saint-Domingue weeks after the August 1791 uprising and wrote a history of the island that blamed French revolutionaries and abolitionists for inciting the slaves to revolt. But he also concluded that similar revolts would break out in Jamaica unless efforts were made to improve the lot of British slaves and encourage natural reproduction. This position, derived from his experience in Saint-Domingue and a belief that Creole slaves were more submissive, made him a surprisingly moderate figure whose positions on slavery were not always at odds with those of abolitionists (pp. 48-49).

In his study of 1810 Puerto Rico, Juan GonzÄ¡lez Mendoza also notes that Saint-Domingue was frequently cited in local debates about the island's future. Based on the Saint-Domingue example, poor whites (*agregados*) and ranching elites feared that developing the sugar industry would marginalize them, darken the population, and lead to a catastrophic slave revolt (p. 61). The *partido negro*, on the other hand, was convinced that Saint-Domingue's demise had opened valuable business opportunities in the sugar market and felt confident that they could contain the slaves by courting the support of free people of color and the Spanish metropolis.

As explained by Simon Newman, the events of Saint-Domingue also featured prominently in the political imagery of the early U.S. Republic. The Jeffersonian Republicans made public their fondness for revolutions, but they grew aghast when the French and Haitian revolutions reached their radical phase. Party members such as Nathaniel Cutting (who had the rare opportunity of witnessing the U.S., French, and Haitian revolutions firsthand) thus cleverly drew a distinction between moderate, admirable revolutions, like their own, and radical, objectionable ones, like the Saint-Domingue slave revolt (p. 73).

Part 3 of the collection examines contemporary planters' worst nightmare: whether the Haitian slave revolt could be exported to neighboring slave societies. Allegations by planters that French and Haitian agents were at work spreading the revolution (or hopes by slaves that they would come to their help) abounded, but the case studies assembled here paint a bafflingly complex picture. Time and again, Saint-Domingue was cited as a point of comparison, yet local factors were eventually

instrumental in deciding whether a slave revolt would break out or whether it would succeed.

Robert Alderson studies the August 1793 rumor in Charleston, South Carolina that a massive slave revolt was in the offing. Though plantations in the U.S. Southeast were the supposed targets, the plot was linked to the massive influx of French planters and slaves following the burning of Cap Fran ais. Alas, faced with the wealth of accusations and counter-accusations (the Girondin French consul and the royalist planters were prone to denounce each other to score political points) and the consequent dearth of reliable information, Alderson expresses his inability to definitely prove the involvement of French revolutionary agents, or even the existence of a conspiracy (p. 103).

The 1797 uprising in Lamentin (Guadeloupe), that is the focus of Laurent Dubois's contribution, was more localized and straightforward. The *cultivateurs* (former slaves) revolted because they feared that the French Directory would renege on the 1794 decree of emancipation. But Dubois sees a Saint-Domingue connection because the rebels in Guadeloupe complained that emancipation would remain imperiled until officers of color were promoted to lead the revolutionary army as was the case in Saint-Domingue (p. 116).

In his analysis of an 1812 series of slave uprisings in Cuba, Matt Childs relates that Cuban officials blamed a free Black from Havana named Jos  Antonio Aponte, who was allegedly an agent of Haitian subversion. The evidence is superficially conclusive. Aponte owned drawings of various revolutionary figures; Cuban slaves thought that Haitian king Henri Christophe would help them; a rebel even claimed to be the famous Jean-Fran ois Papillon who had led the 1791 slave revolt in Saint-Domingue. Childs, however, remains doubtful whether the Haitian connection was as clear-cut as it seemed. Cuban officials were so convinced that they were benevolent slave owners that they could not conceive that their slaves could revolt on their own; outside influence was thus a convenient explanation for any internal turmoil (p. 142).

According to Aline Helg, two conspiracies uncovered in 1799 Venezuela were most likely connected to free sailors of color coming from the French Caribbean. These and later planned revolts, however, were rapidly foiled with the help of free blacks, mulattoes, and Indians. Saint-Domingue might have been a beacon of freedom for the hemisphere's slaves, but slave revolts could not succeed because of local factors such as the fragmented

nature of Venezuelan society that made any united attack on the white elite illusory (p. 161).

The lower classes and non-white groups of Colombia, Marixa Lasso explains, also looked up to the Haitian slave revolt. The short-lived Republic of Cartagena (1811-15), for example, decreed racial equality and called on Haitian citizens to help defend the city, while the 1823 lower-class disturbance in Mompox explicitly cited Haiti as a radical model. But Lasso is unsure how specific Haiti's influence was. Basic knowledge about the Haitian system was often hazy, so Colombians might have invoked Haiti's name merely as a "utopian image" to be employed in the local class struggle (p. 187).

Each violent turn in the Haitian Revolution sent waves of refugees to nearby shores. Their destinies and influence form the basis for the collection's fourth and final part. The refugees' tumultuous arrival was always noticeable; but only the essay on Louisiana makes the argument that they significantly altered the communities that welcomed them.

In their analysis of the large French community that settled in Philadelphia, Susan Branson and Leslie Patrick leave aside the well-studied white refugees to focus on the slaves and free coloreds who accompanied them. Despite Philadelphia's emancipation laws, the slave refugees only acquired their freedom gradually. As French-speaking Catholics, they even found it hard to be accepted by Philadelphia's existing free black community (pp. 196, 204).

Paul Lachance, covering ground that had already formed the basis for an earlier essay published in Carl Brasseaux's *Road to Louisiana* (1992), explains that few refugees initially came to Louisiana because Spanish regulations banned the importation of Saint-Domingue slaves for fear they would spark revolts. But in 1809, ten thousand Saint-Domingue refugees arrived in Louisiana when they were expelled from Cuba. They radically altered the population's demographic profile, particularly in New Orleans. Their visceral Anglophobia also made them a key military asset in the War of 1812. Lachance sees no evidence, however, for the oft-cited canard that the planters jump-started Louisiana's sugar industry (p. 221).

Geggus's own contribution to the collection tells the interesting story of Jean-Baptiste de Caradeux, a wealthy Saint-Domingue planter whose prominent role in the turbulent politics of 1789-92 Port-au-Prince forced him to exile himself to Charleston. Caradeux stayed out of pol-

itics once he reached the United States, however, which limits his historical relevance as a refugee (he did establish a successful plantation). His life is more interesting within the realm of historical memory. His white and mulatto descendants in South Carolina celebrated his memory as a gallant defender of French and Old South values, but Haitians (with good reason, Geggus argues) point to the brutal way Caradeux treated his slaves when in Saint-Domingue.

Most of these essays are invaluable pieces of historical scholarship that are notable for their use of multinational archives and will greatly add to their respective fields. One can only lament the fact that the editor left aside some relevant topics, thus leaving the reader longing for more of a good thing. Of particular interest would have been case studies documenting the Haitians' success, or more often failure, in exporting their revolution. Alexandre Pétion's famous assistance to Simón Bolívar is frequently alluded to, but never studied at length. The agreements between the British and U.S. governments and Toussaint Louverture, under which Louverture promised not to foment slave revolts in Jamaica and the U.S. South, should also have warranted a full chapter. That the Haitian slave leaders never put together an ambitious program to spark slave revolts throughout the hemisphere becomes apparent as the book unfolds; but nothing is said that explains why Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines made the crucial decision to have a revolution (to paraphrase Stalin) in one country alone.

It always seems unfair to criticize a book for what it did not cover, but one would also have expected other relevant geographical areas to receive more attention. Saint-Domingue refugees left for Philadelphia, Louisiana, and Charleston, all of which are covered in the final part; but many also settled in Jamaica and Cuba, which are not studied. Despite the book's title, the main focus of the book is the circum-Caribbean region more than the Atlantic basin. There is no essay dealing with any part of Africa, when a scholar could have analyzed whether the Haitian Revolution affected the slave trade. No essay covers metropolitan France either, even though earlier works by Laurent Dubois and Yves Benot have shown that events in Saint-Domingue profoundly impacted revolutionary debates on the rights of man in the 1790s.

The collection does reach the interesting, and surprising, conclusion that the Haitian Revolution often mattered more as a disputed symbol than as an actual vehicle of historical change. Abolitionists, planters, slaves, and even German reformers endlessly discussed its meaning and potential ramifications even when they were not directly impacted. Politicians in Colombia and the United States analyzed the revolution not because of its actual significance to their everyday life but as a yardstick by which to measure local political sensibilities. The revolution, in a way, was a postmodernist event that mattered not for its substance but because the way it was portrayed in individual discourses revealed the fears and aspirations of each author.

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