

David Barry Gaspar, David Patrick Geggus, eds. *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. xiii + 272 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33247-9.



Reviewed by Lauren Derby (University of Chicago)

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This volume explores the impact of the French revolution on the Circum-Caribbean territories, an event which helped usher in the era of the modern nation-state. Yet, if this moment of crisis eventually forged nations, it first undid their societies by throwing into sharp relief a series of contradictions—such as that of slavery and egalite—which lay at the core of liberalism and the emerging definition of the rights of men. Moreover, the French Revolution’s impact in the Caribbean was refracted through the prism of the Haitian Revolution, the specter of which sharpened the gulf between slaves and planters, metropolitan and colonial whites, as well as freedmen and their slave brethren, thereby weakening the authority of the plantation complex. While both revolutions greatly raised slave expectations, the Haitian revolution provoked a draconian backlash on the part of planters terrified of the destruction of life and property which occurred in Saint Domingue. Yet, much to the horror of the planter class, this period saw the most dramatic rise in popular rebellions ever. A key debate addressed is whether the Jacobin message, combined with abolitionism, was the primary cause for this surge; or whether the split in white hegemony caused by intra-European war as successive waves of British, French and Spanish troops poured into the region, was a more salient explanatory variable. This collection of essays offers a nuanced and thoughtful consideration of the relative weight of global

and domestic forces in fomenting unrest throughout the Caribbean at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Certainly there was much at stake in the Caribbean for Europe. As Michael Duffy states, “the French West Indies were regarded as the most valuable European possessions overseas with the fastest growing economy.” Moreover, for Great Britain in particular, still smarting from the loss of the North American colonies, the “West Indies stood as easily Britain’s biggest overseas capital investment, no longer simply the jewel in the crown of the British empire, but virtually the crown itself” (pp. 78-79). Yet just as the European gaze fixed its attention on the Caribbean, rebellion surfaced in Saint Domingue and threatened to spread with the appearance of petitions for equality on the part of free coloreds in Jamaica. In the end, the British territories won out, expanding production and capitalizing on the collapse of the economy of Saint Domingue, but not without a devastating war with France first.

A key strength of the volume is its inclusion of some very interesting narratives of exemplary individuals; keen sociological approaches have not eviscerated here the texture of particular lives that lived the period. We also see up close how contradictions between official fictions and local realities were played out in particular areas. A fascinating essay by Roger Buckley treats the

incongruous effect of the formation of black militias in the British West Indies in which black officers led white troops, notwithstanding the fact that Blacks were not considered legal 'people' in the courts, thus their voices could not be used as juridical evidence. Given the absence of conscription, the Africanization of the West Indies regiments was requisite to confront the multiple, sporadic threats to British sovereignty, creating one of the most important arenas of "permanent interracial concourse" (pp. 235) and, needless to say, one which fostered frequent interracial unions. Another unusual theme explored in the essays concerns the impact of the military diaspora created by the expulsion of Black troops from Saint Domingue on the receiving nations.

In a finely-wrought piece, Jane Landers describes the tumult created by a regiment of Spanish royalist troops after their arrival in Florida in 1795. The commotion was caused not only by fears of their Jacobin ideals, but their regal manner as well, since one colorful figure in the group of fifty was Jorge Biassou, who was *aide-de-guerre* to Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture. Biassou rose from slavery to be crowned Viceroy of the Conquered Territories, but was forced to flee Haiti due to his continuing allegiance to Spain after Toussaint declared loyalty to France after abolition. Biassou installed his court in Saint Augustine, which included himself, his family and his retinue of some twenty-five dependents, where he startled locals by his vanity and his regal attire—his gold-trimmed clothes, silver saber and ivory dagger. He also raised eyebrows by organizing public vodoun festivals on the Day of Kings, replete with African music, dancing and processions. He died in a raid against the Seminoles, leading mulatto and black militias.

If Biassou amazed by virtue of his flamboyant attire and larger-than-life sense of self—a rare if not unique persona for a Black man in eighteenth-century Florida—Louisianians were similarly unsettled by the new free population which arrived as a result of the tumult of the Haitian revolution. Kimberly Hanger explores the ambivalence of this intermediary group in New Orleans, who jealously guarded their privileged capacity to "pass" as whites, interpreting the Jacobin message as a call for their own equal rights *vis-a-vis* whites. She describes the case of a particularly ambitious free black militia man named Pedro Bailly who campaigned for pardo rights, drawing upon every patron-client connection he could muster within this hierarchical society for his advancement, as well as those of his group. Deeply disliked by whites who perceived him as presumptuous and insolent, Bailly was known for his rabble-rousing among pardos as

he spread the word that their brethren in the French and Spanish Caribbean territories had the right idea and that the revolutionary clarion-call should be brought home. Yet Bailly never saw the revolutionary message as pertaining to slaves. Indeed, he himself owned slaves and his company was frequently sent into the hills to chase runaways. The inclusion of these rich and surprising individual vignettes makes these essays ripe for classroom use.

This volume closes several gaps often found in the literature. Not only does it combine in one set of essays debates in diplomatic and social history; but all of the essays join meticulous research with historiographic rigor, developing finely-tuned descriptive narratives alongside clear analytical arguments. The coastal regions of Louisiana and Florida, which certainly shared many of the experiences of the Caribbean but are typically omitted due to their geographical location, are also included, as are several highly under researched slave revolts. David Geggus' contribution, for example, includes rich data from a little-known uprising in Cuba, as well as a 1796 rebellion in the largest sugar mill of Santo Domingo which is not covered in English sources. He demonstrates the structures of fictive kinship among the Dominican slave community, as well as aspects of their ritual life. Geggus thus counters a local historiography which tends to downplay the African aspects of everyday life on the Spanish side of the island, seeking to portray them all as thoroughly assimilated into metropolitan values, even if actual links to the metropole were arguably the weakest of all the colonies. He describes how, after razing the plantation, the slaves crowned a king and queen during the evening celebration of their victory—an important detail which could indicate either African traditions or the replication of European monarchic rites as a form of legitimation.

My one complaint is that at times the differences between 'African' and 'Creole' practices are taken for granted. Not only have some scholars argued that processes of syncretism commenced very soon after contact, but British, French, and Spanish colonial practices varied considerably in how much they fostered assimilation; eighteenth century "Creole" culture looked very different in Saint Domingue than Havana, for example. Geggus asserts that Africans tended to attack slavery less than Creoles due to their familiarity with and acceptance of the institution in West Africa—thus assuming a parity between the meaning and function of West African and Atlantic slavery forms. Yet African scholars have argued that there was nothing whatsoever in common between

the two; that slaves in Africa were considered part of the extended family, thus were accorded a radically different status than the transatlantic institution in which slaves were treated as inhuman property subject to the nightmare of the middle passage.[1] Geggus' analysis deploys Michael Craton's distinction between African and Creole slave cultures, one which begs the question of how these two were different and how and when they may have merged in particular contexts and periods. In light of the plethora of recent studies on cultural syncretism and hybridity in the "Black Atlantic," the volume could have included a more explicit treatment of how processes of creolization may have taken place in the various colonial contexts of the Caribbean. Several authors invoke the term "creolization" without specifying how it took effect, or what it meant—and certainly it meant something rather different in those areas tightly linked to both the metropole and Africa, such as Cuba through migration flows, as opposed to the colonial backwaters such as Santo Domingo where creolization got a jump start due to highly limited global contact.[2]

Notwithstanding this one quibble which is certainly

not central to the goals of the book, this is a welcome volume that makes a solid contribution to the literature on Atlantic slavery, slave revolts and plantation societies in the wake of the Era of Revolution. All of the essays are beautifully crafted and researched and analytically rigorous. It is destined to become an instant classic, inspiring historians of slavery to even greater heights of research and analysis.

Notes:

[1]. Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440-1870*. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1997.

[2]. Roger Buckley in his essay, "Slave testimony at British Military Courts," uses the notion of creolization deployed by Kamau Brathwaite in his *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770 to 1820*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), but does not discuss or engage it.

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