Christine Chivallon introduces her book as a contribution to the current discussions taking place in France and its dependencies about memories of slavery. The debate oscillates between the desire to commemorate and the wish to “bring repentance to an end.” Confronted with such contradictory aspirations, Chivallon chooses to focus on “memories already there, already alive, already constituted” (p. 19). This project to restore the existing memory of slavery in Martinique relies on archival research, “in an attempt to recover the ‘truth’ of the event” and on the involvement of the “bearers of memory” (p. 165).

The event at the core of the book nevertheless occurs after the period of slavery. Although the Insurrection of the South took place twenty-two years after Abolition, it is closely connected to slavery, as the book shows. In reality, over twenty years after Abolition, the structure of Martinican society—that is, the relationship between dominators and dominated—remained essentially the same as that of the preceding period. Békés (white creoles) were still the main property owners, even though Abolition had allowed a mulatto and black peasantry, however threatened, to emerge. The Second Empire had, moreover, brought an end to universal suffrage, instituted forced labor, and subjected everyone to taxation, forcing the newly-freed to work, mostly as labor on the plantations. In addition, the plantocracy had activated new migratory flows in an effort to saturate the demand for labor and impose the lowest possible salaries. It was therefore in a context of exacerbated frustration, faced with a situation in which continuities prevailed over reconfigurations, that the insurrection was triggered. Significantly, a number of insurgents, including many leaders of the revolt, came from the colored peasantry, whose development was undermining the dominance of the large estates by competing for labor and land.

Putting together the names of insurgents found in the archives with those found in cadastral records, Chivallon examines the memory traces left among their descendants. The core event in the stories she uncovered is the collective execution of Codé, a white creole. And this is where a temporal confusion occurs: Codé is described as a torturer of slaves, an oppressor with extreme methods. “This tendency to displace the 1870 event to the period of slavery might indicate not so much an anachronism resulting from a ‘false memory’ as an understanding of contemporary conditions as a holdover from the institution of slavery” (p. 386).

Furthermore, one objective of the insurgents was the redistribution of land
taken from the Békés, putting an end to the limited access to the land that was part of the system of slavery—a problem that remains unresolved to this day. Recent political movements to occupy land do so in the name of the events of 1870. And, just as the memory of the insurrection period confused it with the period of slavery, this unquenched thirst for land produces a similar temporal confusion; as one land occupation activist told Chivallon, he “feels almost as if he were still in a slavery system” (p. 489).

The persistent memories revealed and studied in the book pose the question of the persistence of colonialism in Martinique. This continuity stems from the State’s ongoing support of white creole interests, and its adherence to a racialized vision of social relations. In this respect, the tendency, strong under the Ancien Régime, the Empire, and the Second Empire, lives on in the republican era. The merciless trial of the 1870 insurgents took place under the Third Republic. And today, rather than enforcing court decisions unfavorable to the land squatters (a risky procedure now), the State chooses to offer liberal compensation to the land owners, “a solution which, examined more closely, could appear as the proof of support from the State of the old plantocracy” (p. 478). Because the need for a comprehensive agrarian reform is then bypassed.

What we learn from this study goes beyond the case of Martinique. The Insurrection of the South is compared to the Morant Bay Rebellion. The two revolts have much in common, including their historical moment and the objectives pursued (the questioning of colonial injustice, of the racial hierarchies, and of the monopolization of the land tenure). While repressive government response to these revolts differed, the most significant differences were that the Jamaican insurgents found defenders among the whites (particularly in Britain), while the Martinicans found just one, a Béké, considered an “eccentric” (p. 307).

This work is a deep reflection about memory, about its reconstruction from crumbs of data, about its effects, uses, and challenges. It is, finally, a valorization of the memory of the dominated. It is, in this respect, a remarkable extension of the quote from Paul Gilroy that Chivallon uses as an epigraph for her book: “The time has come for the primal history of modernity to be reconstructed from the slaves’ points of view. These emerge in the especially acute consciousness of both life and freedom which is nourished by the slave’s ‘mortal terror of his sovereign master’” (p. 6, quoting The Black Atlantic, p. 55).

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