Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall (ed.)


A graduate seminar on European history that I took in the 1980s discussed C.L.R. James’s _The Black Jacobins_, admiring his analysis of the class and anti-colonial struggle of the original Haitians. Toward the end, I asked my professor, “What happened?” She looked puzzled. “What do you mean?” “If the slaves won their freedom and established an independent antiracist republic in the early nineteenth century, why is Haiti so poor today?” She responded with a vague reference to the nineteenth-century conditions, but clearly my question troubled her too. Now, more than two decades later, Alyssa Sepinwall’s excellent collection makes available some of the best recent scholarship on the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath, offering advanced undergraduate and graduate students a deeper understanding of the problems encountered by independent Haiti in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and foregrounding the historiographical interpretations of them.

As part of Routledge’s “Rewriting History” series, the book presents tightly edited versions of fifteen essays recently published elsewhere. Sepinwall has provided a sharp, informative introduction, narrating the key events and important historiographical themes in both Anglophone and Francophone (especially Haitian) scholarship. There are also substantive bibliographies, guides to digital and archival repositories, and ideas for further research.

The first of the book’s three sections focuses on the Haitian Revolution, a subject that has generated many new interpretations in the past two decades. Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s 1995 meditation on the tendency of Western historians to erase or banalize the cataclysmic event of the Revolution remains fresh and pertinent for historians considering the silencing of Haiti, the Holocaust, and other “unthinkable” events in world history. Carolyn Fick’s careful recovery of the many forms of slave resistance forces a reconsideration of the myth of a complacent slave population on the eve of the revolt. David Geggus’s 2009 essay, “Saint-Domingue on the Eve of the Haitian Revolution,” represents the culminating perspective of a senior scholar who has critically probed the archival record and sought to shrug off ideological interpretations that have no patience for empiricism. John Thornton’s innovative perspective on the slave rebels’ ideology as viewed from the lens of an expert in Central African history breaks through the blindness of even C.L.R. James’s incapacity to imagine the subjectivity and capacity of African slaves.

It is in the second section, seven essays on independent Haiti ca. 1798–1860, that my youthful question, “What happened to Haiti?” finds a satis-
fying response. Sepinwall’s introduction, drawing on work by two of Haiti’s leading historians, Michael Hector and Laënnec Hurbon, notes that independent Haiti faced a triple challenge: internal struggle of state-building, international isolation and indebtedness, and the establishment of a postslavery economy without capital. The essays, all written by Anglophone authors, probe the challenges of establishing a black nation state while the entire Atlantic world struggled over emancipation and industrialization, not least of all in the sugar industry. Ashli White examines the impact of the Saint-Domingue diaspora and Haitian independence both on the cities where the émigrés arrived and on American foreign policy in the early republic. Ada Ferrer thoughtfully probes Cuban archives to discern the reactions to Haitian independence of slaves, free people of color, and the plantation society in Cuba. Mimi Sheller shows how the conditions of Haiti’s foundation—in slave revolt, wars of independence, and civil war—produced a particularly martial and masculine idea of citizenship, which in turn laid the groundwork for an authoritarian political culture. David Nicholls searches for the ways that Duvalier’s authoritarian regime in the late twentieth century drew upon and manipulated a nineteenth-century tradition of peasant revolts. Leslie Alexander’s study of African Americans’ migration to independent Haiti explores both what Haiti meant to Blacks in the United States on the eve of the Civil War and the challenges of establishing a middle-class society in nineteenth-century Haiti.

The final section focuses on twentieth-century Haiti: the U.S. occupation and Haiti’s “second independence”; the Duvalier regimes of Papa Doc and Baby Doc; Aristide’s three terms; the damaging effects of foreign-aid “development” projects; and the 2010 earthquake. While most Americans are familiar with the United States’ growing imperialism since the Spanish American War, the occupation of Haiti is not generally addressed in U.S. textbooks. Brenda Plummer’s essay fills this lacuna and explores Haitian resistance to that incursion. Matthew J. Smith offers one of the few studies of the aftermath of American occupation, when brutal repression of Haitian workers in Santo Domingo catalyzed resistance against corrupt leadership, culminating in the revolution of 1946. Out of these tensions emerged François Duvalier, champion of the noiriste movement, who consolidated his power with terror and passed his dictatorship to his son Jean-Claude; the origins and manifestations of this difficult period, as well as the downfall of the Duvalier dynasty, are discussed by Patrick Bellegarde-Smith. Paul Farmer uses his anthropological training to analyze the failures of one U.S. development project, the Péligre Dam, which displaced thousands of peasants without compensation, enriching the wealthy sponsors at the expense of the poor. Robert Fatton Jr. offers a nuanced analysis of Aris-
tide’s controversial rise and fall. The book concludes with Évelyne Trouillot’s heart-wrenching account of the 2010 earthquake.

Sepinwall’s introductions to the three sections efficiently highlight the core questions and historiographical debates of Haitian history. (One small complaint: the collection does not include any translations of Haitian-authored works in French or Kreyòl that Anglophone students may not otherwise be able to access.) By foregrounding the tensions between nation-building and the world beyond, Sepinwall demonstrates that Haiti’s history is not parochial, but an ideal case study through which to consider the deeper problems in modern world history.

Built on a diverse array of sophisticated analyses, the collection reads well at the level of narrative (what happened?) and analysis (why was it so?). Whether assigning it in a course on modern history or cribbing it for lecture notes, I will return to it frequently, for Sepinwall has put together writing by authors who engage the deeper philosophical questions of history: For whom does history tell its stories? How do we know what we know? What can the archives tell us and what must instead be imagined or otherwise drawn from historical memory? An engaging collection for historians and students alike, this book will stimulate profound discussions that give meaning to our world.

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