David Sartorius

Ever Faithful: Race, Loyalty, and the Ends of Empire in Spanish Cuba. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2014. xiii + 312 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

David Sartorius sets out in this book to trace “the relations between political allegiance and racial identity” in nineteenth-century Cuba. He finds that parallel to the officially sponsored idea that African-descended islanders placed being Cubans above their racial allegiances there is a narrative to be told of those who expressed support for the Spanish colonial government. How can one reconcile both stories? Sartorius finds that in the nineteenth century there evolved “a conception of race and loyalty that allowed Cubans of African descent—slave and free—to be included in colonial politics as faithful if unequal subjects” (p. xi).

The Spanish Constitution of 1812 recognized that all free men born and residing in the Spanish dominions, and their children, were Spaniards (Article 5), but made a distinction between being a Spaniard and being a citizen (Article 18). “Citizens are those Spaniards who by both bloodlines have their origins in the Spanish dominions of both hemispheres and reside in any town of them.” The Constitution allowed that descendants of Africans who displayed exceptional merits could be recognized as citizens (Article 22), but as Sartorius shows, the process of being recognized as such was long and difficult, and very few attempted it.

Moreover, the authorities were constantly suspicious of the associations, the gatherings, and the celebrations of freedmen and their descendants. The Spanish American wars of independence aroused the suspicions of the authorities in Cuba so much that civic and cultural manifestations were closely watched. Although historians habitually trace the reluctance of Cubans to embrace the cause of independence in the 1820s to their fear of slave rebellions, this explanation only takes into account the perceptions of the wealthier and more literate sectors of the white population. Simón Bolívar’s questions in his “Letter from Jamaica” remain unanswered: “But aren’t the people of those islands Americans? Are they not oppressed? Do they not desire their own happiness?”

In an expanding economy, such as those of Cuba and Puerto Rico in the 1820s, the experience of oppression was especially the lot of the slaves and the displaced landless creoles, who had scant access to written manifestations of discontent, but whose acts of resistance or rebellion can be traced in the judicial and administrative records. But to center in those traces the main narrative of the 1830s and 1840s is to ignore other political and social processes. That is why Sartorius is so refreshing when he documents the achievements

and aspirations, as well as the frustrations, of African-descended Cubans in the middle decades of the century.

The 1868–78 War of Independence afforded an opportunity for slaves to gain their freedom through service in the Spanish or insurgent forces. The revision of the documents submitted for those who fought on the Spanish side provides an interesting glimpse of slave society. The reforms sponsored by the Spanish government in the 1880s, including the abolition of slavery, were unable to stave off the Second War of Independence (1895–98), in which African-descended Cubans fought on both sides.

This book, rich in detail and in the variety of sources used, should open up the discussion of issues on racial identity, nationality, and political allegiances which may have been inhibited by patriotic considerations or priorities. But complexity, not simplicity, suits historians best.

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