Jean Casimir, *The Haitians: A Decolonial History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. xxix + 419 pp. (Paper US\$34.95)

Prominent Haitian diplomat and writer Jean Casimir offers students and scholars of the Caribbean a corrective to some prevalent depictions of Haiti, beginning this book not with the early degradations of enslavement nor later narratives of incomplete modernity—ideas derived from Western normativity that have tended to occupy other texts. Also, rather than state or biographical focuses, he investigates the resilience and perspectives of those enslaved people who defeated imperialism and the way their descendants defied diplomatic and financial impositions.

Casimir emphasizes the inventiveness of a Haitian people “born from our ancestors’ response to a triple crime: the abusive appropriation of the lands of America by the European states, the ignominy of the massacre of the original nations, and the criminal slave trade” (p. 98). He also questions how the Haitian populace received this West while crafting a resilient, unique society. The book focuses on the chronology of 1697–1915, yet pursues analysis through chapters organized around themes such as production, thought, citizenship, segregation, property, public and communal life, sovereignty, and the state. Translated by Laurent Dubois, it also features a useful foreword by Walter Mignolo. Rather than relying upon archival revelations or bounds of historiography, it employs historical sociology to examine tensions between the state and a sovereign people.

Casimir argues that governing classes were born, unfortunately, from free people of color or emancipated slaves who had worked as intermediaries for the abusive French. When France chose annihilation, they became independence leaders with their own survival in the balance, though many remained “prisoners of metropolitan thought,” and they “could not rid themselves of these tools” (p. 100). Nevertheless, early national complexities revolved around unresolved class and ethnic tensions. Over generations, Eurocentric affect and influence persisted among elites and behind certain constructs. Casimir notes that “the concept of the black person” obscures both “the intersection between the interests of property owners, whether free blacks or free people of color” and workers (p. 17).

He contends that another conundrum revolved around presentations of Haiti as the first “Black Republic,” which oligarchs wielded as a stand against racism and to show their equality to the white “race.” However, in some ways “the great Haitian intellectuals of the nineteenth century ... were both pro-Black and Africanophobic” and “dreamed of regenerating the black race by using the very principles and tools the West used to degrade them” (p. 19).

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Casimir says this was “to protect the social order offered by the Christian, racist West ... rendering local culture invisible” (p. 20). Some early national leaders viewed the general populace that had won freedom with contempt as their new state adopted many colonialist and juridical principles, creating codes and institutions beyond access for the overwhelming majority of Haitians, partly due to longstanding use of French language rather than Kreyòl. Elites “never operated *within* the nation, and even less *with* the nation” (p. 67). Casimir asserts that the “civilizing mission” they claimed was more to “justify the maintenance of a colonial-style administration” (p. 260). The more Haitian administrations tried to reconcile economically, diplomatically, or culturally with the West, the more they subjugated the state.

Casimir suggests that the Haitian people understood that imperialist powers preferred property rights and extractive relationships with local oligarchs. They knew that direct overthrow could yield possibly worse infringements of external forces. “For the public authorities, the countryside wasn’t a place where the population was born and lived and might need social services” (p. 20). Rather, many elites saw the Haitian majority as laborers. The people rejected overreaches, financial extractions, and snobbery partly through resolute use of rural spaces and community agriculture. In this book and elsewhere, Casimir has referred to the origins of this sovereignty as a “counter-plantation system” (p. 304). These repositories promoted better quality of life than stereotyped notions of indigent poverty.

Later, nineteenth-century Haitian oligarchs appeared more comfortable with an outside world that demeaned their country, though they remained unable to control the peasantry with rural codes or educational policies. Absent international partners, this Haitian public order had to placate communal life, as Casimir presents it, because the populace could overturn their internal stability. Although by the late nineteenth century both the cities and the interior were more tied by a balance of exchange and infrastructure, Casimir contends that the U.S. 1915 occupation “brought the country back to where it started” (p. 391). He leaves the reader with the valuable insight that the Haitian populace “understood their powerlessness” against external forces and irresponsible Haitian administrations they deemed illegitimate, and thus “exercised their sovereignty through an endemic escape from government regulations” (p. 393).

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