
Linda Rupert has made a valuable contribution to both Atlantic and Caribbean historiography with a new study of Curacao and nearby regions, chiefly during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She has drawn on archival sources, mostly in Spain and the Netherlands, and has also synthesized a very large body of printed primary and secondary literature in English, Spanish, and Dutch.

Curacao, as Rupert demonstrates, was unusual in that in the eighteenth century it grew to be one of the largest port cities in the Caribbean archipelago without possessing a plantation economy. Rather, the island's productive hinterland was the neighboring Tierra Firme of Spanish America, the region corresponding to today's nation of Venezuela. Given the ease of communication between the two areas, this made sense. However, the island and the mainland belonged to different empires, and the vigorous trade between the two areas was—at least until 1778—proscribed by Spanish authorities. Consequently, the political history of Curacao mainly involved the attempt of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) to develop Curacao's port, Willemstad, as a trans-shipment facility that capitalized on Spain's relative neglect of what it perceived as a peripheral part of its empire. Taking advantage of growing markets, Dutch merchants became major movers of African slaves and European manufactures to the Tierra Firme. In return they illegally shipped cacao, hides, and tobacco to Curacao and from there back to Ports in the Dutch Republic. Under Dutch supervision, Curacao became a major center of intercolonial trade linking diverse parts of the Atlantic world, and consequently a major threat to European rivals attempting to enforce mercantilist systems.

The originality of this work lies chiefly in Rupert's examination of the role played by non-state actors as driving forces shaping the economy and society of this Caribbean region. These actors included free and enslaved people of African descent and ethno-religious groups such as the Sephardim, descendants of Iberian Jews. Rupert does not usually situate her arguments explicitly within frameworks of economic history or theory, but one can read her work as a study of self-organizing networks of free agents competing for markets with agents of the Spanish crown and state-sponsored monopolies such as the WIC. Rupert sees the involvement of the former as foundational in Curacao. Her detailed descriptions of various
agents and their far-flung, polyglot networks strongly support this point. Conversely the state actors she describes appeared to have been mostly reactive, and they usually tried either to shut down or tax an economy essentially built and maintained by self-organizing groups. The Spanish crown appears particularly weak in this story, although the WIC was more effective both in fostering its own contraband trade and channeling that prosecuted by others to its own profit-making purposes.

The second major theme of the book is “creolization,” which Rupert describes broadly as “processes of sociocultural exchange and adaptation” that included “cultural interactions across social class and ethnicity” (6). She notes that in colonial history creolization has mostly been traced in plantation societies but claims that contraband networks were also important conduits for this phenomenon. The author is at her best in looking at the complex activities of enslaved Africans and their free and slave descendants. These groups both fostered trade between Curaçao and the Tierra Firme and engaged in cacao-farming and livestock-raising in the latter. In a zone of trade characterized by a porous imperial boundary and limited state power, many slaves enjoyed considerable economic agency. In fascinating subsections in chapters three and four, she traces the complex and evolving legal frameworks that many slaves deftly exploited to win freedom in both Curaçao and Tierra Firme. The complex, “creole” societies that resulted shaped independence movements and notions of national identity in later periods.

Rupert has also devoted considerable space to a discussion of Curaçao’s Sephardic community, which emerged in the seventeenth century both in the Dutch Republic and some of its colonies as an openly Jewish group. She follows Jonathan Israel and other historians in seeing the Sephardim as a diaspora that was especially suited to develop commercial networks across imperial boundaries. This is a common, but problematic, interpretation that is also superfluous to support the main arguments of this work. Other self-organizing networks were just as successful elsewhere, and Rupert’s own brief discussion of the vigorous contraband trade in eighteenth-century Dutch-owned St. Eustatius shows economic activity very similar to that of Curaçao, without the involvement of Sephardic merchants. However, whether “special” or not in a larger context, the Sephardim clearly played an important economic role in this region, and they were also a major force for creolization on both the island and the mainland. The author demonstrates this persuasively in a—somewhat technical—final chapter where she examines the role of the Sephardim as primary