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A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804

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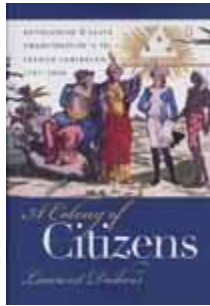
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Book Review



H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Laurent Dubois. *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 437 pp. Chronology, glossary, maps, illustrations, index. \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 0-8078-5536-7.

Reviewed for H-Caribbean by Stewart R. King, Mount Angel Seminary.

In *A Colony of Citizens*, Laurent Dubois has given us a fascinating account of the revolution in Guadeloupe. The history of the abortive abolition of slavery in Guadeloupe has attracted some attention in French scholarly circles, thanks to the recently passed 2002 bicentennial of the re-imposition of slavery there.[1] To the extent that students of Latin America in the English-speaking world have noticed the revolutions in the French West Indies at all, the tendency has been to pay attention to the striking example of Saint-Domingue and assume that conditions in other colonies paralleled those found in the "pearl of the Antilles."

Laurent Dubois's work provides needed contrast to our easy over-generalization. For Guadeloupe was not Saint-Domingue. First, of course, the outcome was different -- Saint-Domingue's slaves became Haiti's citizens, peasant farmers, and sometime laborers in the first black republic. Meanwhile, Guadeloupe's slaves, after a brief, shining moment as "new citizens" of France, went back to slavery until 1848. Saint-Domingue's white rulers were slaughtered or driven out of the colony, to spend their declining years playing up their victimization at the hands of barbarous slave rebels and pressuring the French government for reimbursement for their lost "property." Guadeloupe's white ruling class forced the slaves back into their chains, returned to plantation farming, and to prosperity, for a while. And Saint-Domingue's intermediate class of free people of color, after vacillating between pressing for equal treatment within the plantation system and support for the black revolutionaries, generally took their place at the head of the rebel armies and entered the era of independence as a new ruling class. Guadeloupean free coloreds participated in the struggles for equal rights, first for their own class, then for all people of African descent. Ultimately, though, they were defeated and ended up being oppressed even more brutally than before the revolution.

A lot of the difference between these two outcomes can be ascribed to geography. Indeed, we who study Saint-Domingue are not unaware that things did not turn out so well in the Lesser Antilles, and if we think about it we generally just note that Guadeloupe is smaller and thus harder to defend from sea-borne attack. It is, but Victor Hugues managed to not only defend the island against the greatest naval power on earth at the time but to attack neighboring islands and give the British fits throughout the whole region. An explanation for the failure of the revolution in Guadeloupe required more analysis than it had been given. Laurent Dubois has provided that analysis.

For one thing, he points out, pre-Revolutionary Guadeloupe was not part of the core of the plantation complex, while Saint-Domingue was the most highly developed sugar island of the Caribbean. Dubois begins *Colony of Citizens* with a careful portrait of Guadeloupe under the *ancien régime*, using the sources of *ancien régime* social history, the notariats, parish registers, court records, and other government documents so meticulously maintained by the French colonial government. Guadeloupean slaves seem to have been neither so industrially organized, nor so strongly alienated from their production, as were slaves in northern Saint-Domingue, or elsewhere in the plantation Caribbean. This was to become important when unified resistance was essential.

Dubois pays great attention to the role of the *ancien libres*, those persons of African ancestry who were free before the revolution. Free coloreds were marginal people in all slave societies of the Americas, but seemingly they were more so in pre-revolutionary Guadeloupe than in Saint-Domingue. Free colored Guadeloupeans tended to be small-scale economic operators: artisans, merchants, or inter-island traders, peasant farmers, laborers, or, at best, owners of small cash-crop farms. In this, they were more like the free colored populations of the English Lesser Antilles than free coloreds in Saint-Domingue. Pre-revolutionary Guadeloupean free coloreds may thus have had a greater sympathy with the plight of the slaves than Dominguans. In any case, they played an important role in the developing political situation in Guadeloupe, some going on to become revolutionary leaders. One particularly interesting case that Dubois deals with extensively is the story of Louis Delgrès, leader of the resistance to re-imposition of slavery in 1802. Dubois's work recalls the story of Delgrès for the English-speaking world. Delgrès was recently rescued from two hundred years of obscurity in France with the re-naming of the historic fort in Guadeloupe after him and the erection of a plaque to his memory (across from that dedicated to Toussaint L'Ouverture) in the Panthéon in Paris. If there is an unqualified hero of this book it is Delgrès (although he does not make his first appearance until page 119). His story alone makes this book worth reading.

One major argument over the revolution in the French Caribbean is the degree to which it can be considered an outgrowth of the French revolution and to what extent it was a "revolution from below," in the words of Carolyn Fick's work on the Saint-Domingue slave uprising.[2] Dubois shows us that the two need not be mutually exclusive. Slaves and free people of color received and understood the ideas coming from France. They did not need white people from far away to tell them that freedom was better than slavery and democracy better than tyranny. They took advantage of the ideas of liberty and equality that were coming from the metropole to help frame and advance their own pre-existing

claims. Dubois illustrates both the flow of ideas and the way Guadeloupeans of African descent made these ideas their own. In the 1793 slave uprising at Trois-Rivières, which forms the principal subject of the second part of *Colony of Citizens*, rebel leaders successfully claimed that their movement was directed against treacherous royalist whites, and escaped punishment. They took advantage of the Jacobin discourse that ascribed Royalist sympathies to the planter class, while at the same time refraining from attacking a plantation owned by a noted Jacobin. They avoided (for a time) the generally dismal fate of most slave rebels, with one individual subsequently becoming a free overseer on state plantations (before finally being shot by a Bonapartist firing squad).

The next part of Dubois's work shows how the ad-hoc conversion of slave rebels into loyal citizens of the republic in the Trois-Rivières uprising became state policy under the administration of Victor Hugues. Hugues was a figure with feet planted firmly on both sides of the divide: a former member of the slave-owning class in Saint-Domingue, he was also a committed Jacobin and leader of a revolutionary army. Citizens in a republic, according to the Jacobins, were supposed to sacrifice for the common good of the republic. The new citizens created by the emancipation edict of 1794 could make their most important contribution by producing cash crops to finance the republican state. So, Hugues was able to justify keeping the former slaves working on the plantations. Of course, the newly freed had a different idea of what *liberté* and *égalité* meant. Ultimately, the new citizens' refusal to keep working in the same way left the white colonial administrators with few arguments, or reasons, to oppose the re-imposition of slavery under Bonaparte.

It is interesting to contrast the relationship between the agricultural laborers and the Hugues administration with that which existed in Saint-Domingue between the Toussaint L'Ouverture administration and its agricultural workforce. Toussaint also required former slaves who had no other employment (e.g., typically military) to return to their plantations and work. Toussaint's laborers also resisted these orders as best they could, with actions from flight to sabotage to outright rebellion -- very similar to the reactions of slaves before the revolution. Toussaint crushed resistance with military force, executing troublemakers with little compunction -- even equating resistance to labor laws with treasonable support for the enemies of the Republic as Hugues did. Yet, when Bonaparte's troops came after 1802 to re-impose the slave system, Toussaint fought, alongside the former slaves. The resistance in Saint-Domingue was more or less universal, while, as Dubois points out, Guadeloupe's (white) administrators and substantial elements of the island's ruling class supported the re-imposition of slavery. In both cases, though, the agricultural laborers fought against a return to their old status. They, at least, could tell the difference between unpaid labor service to the state and chattel slavery, and preferred the former.

One role which new citizens and the Hugues administration both saw as crucial for the successful transformation of slaves into citizens was military service. Newly freed men rushed to join the armed forces of the Republic, both as infantrymen and as sailors on corsairs. Prior to the revolution, enslaved men could gain freedom through military service. During the period of emancipation, on the other hand, they justified their claim to the freedom they had already been accorded by being willing to fight for it. They were often the only people available to fill the ranks of the French armed forces, as white

soldiers from the metropole could not penetrate the British blockade while local whites tended to be lukewarm in their support of the revolution. Republican armies in the eastern Caribbean were two-thirds black. Hugues was able to lead his armies on a rampage throughout the eastern Caribbean, seriously damaging British hegemony. The Peace of Amiens took away this important function that black men could fulfill and made it much easier to imagine turning them back into agricultural laborers.

The last part of *Colony of Citizens* is the sad story of how slavery was re-imposed in Guadeloupe. Some years ago, France celebrated the one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the 1848 abolition of slavery, conveniently forgetting the abortive abolition of 1794-1802. Dubois's work recaptures this forgotten chapter, and shows how it played out in this peripheral French Caribbean colony. Peripheral or not, the story of Guadeloupe is important to our understanding of this period, if only because of the alternative viewpoint it gives those of us who study the somewhat happier story of Saint-Domingue. The savage repression of the re-enslaved in Guadeloupe, including even those who had supported the coming of Bonaparte's expedition, parallels the vicious brutality of the Leclerc regime in Saint-Domingue and shows why the Haitian rebels of 1802-03 fought so hard. And the persistent memory of freedom in Guadeloupe, despite all the efforts of Bonaparte's enforcers to obliterate it, restores one's faith in human freedom and dignity even in the midst of oppression and degradation.

Indeed, Dubois argues that this relatively peripheral rebellion deserves general attention because the modern concepts of human rights and human dignity were, in a sense, invented in the Caribbean. The anti-slavery struggle, both by the enslaved and by their liberal European champions, certainly drew inspiration from the struggle of Caribbean peoples for freedom during the eighteenth-century revolutions. There is a growing body of work on the impact of the Haitian Revolution on struggles against slavery throughout the Atlantic.[3] It is rather commonplace now to see the idea of global standards of human rights as a child of the abolition movement. Groups as diverse as the modern women's movement and anti-abortion protestors claim to be the heirs of the abolitionists. Guadeloupe's sufferings and defeat may be even more central to this tradition than Haiti's victory, since the Guadeloupean rebels never claimed to be anything but citizens of a French Republic in which equality and the liberty of all were respected. Thus Louis Delgrès set an example for Schoelcher, the architect of the 1848 abolition, and for all his heirs to this day.

On a more practical level, this book is very useful to scholars and teachers of the Caribbean and the Atlantic revolutions because of the wealth of sources that it draws upon. Saint-Domingue's public records, sadly, descend into a great silence starting about 1792. There are a few fragmentary books of notarial acts from the revolutionary period, and then very, very little for the early national period. In Guadeloupe, on the other hand, the French genius for accurate and complete (not to say excessive) record-keeping was faithfully exercised throughout the revolutionary period. Therefore, Dubois has a good deal to go on in telling the story of the Guadeloupean revolutionaries. He has plantation records maintained by the Republican administration. He has court records. He has records of births, deaths, marriages, name changes, deeds for land, manumissions of slaves, and the

like. Thus, while students of the Haitian Revolution have to rely on letters from generals, other military records, and the occasional diary to reconstruct the changes in society that went on during the revolution, Dubois has the genuine article: the stuff of a proper social history.

In conclusion, I feel that *A Colony of Citizens* merits the attention, not only of a few readers in the rather limited field of French Caribbean studies, but of a broader audience interested in Atlantic revolutions, slavery and abolition, the genesis of human rights, or even just a mighty lively story.

Notes

[1]. Frédéric Régent, *Esclavage, métissage, liberté: La Révolution française en Guadeloupe, 1789-1802* (Paris: Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2004); Anne Pérotin-Dumon, *La ville aux îles, la ville dans l'île: Basse-Terre et Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, 1650-1820* (Paris: Karthala, 2000); and Laurent Dubois, trans. Jean-Francois Chaix, *Les Esclaves de la République: L'Histoire oubliée de la première émancipation, 1789-1794* (Paris, 1998).

[2]. Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint-Domingue Revolution From Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990).

[3]. For example, David Geggus, ed., *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Charleston: University of South Carolina Press, 2002).

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