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Recent books on Haitian history

Haiti, like other underdeveloped countries, has only a limited market value in our “economics of attention”. It figures little, if at all, in most of the general compendia that deal with Latin American history. Mass media take no account of it unless it becomes the scene of climatic catastrophes, popular unrest, violent regime change and foreign military interventions. For those who are familiar with the Haitian past, there is no doubt that this Caribbean republic deserves not only a broader attention but also a different public perception that takes into consideration the historical burden that it had to bear for more than two centuries. Its present situation is in many respects the late result of its colonial past and the extremely difficult conditions under which this Afro-American nation was founded by former slaves 200 years ago in the neighbourhood of hostile slave-holding countries.

Research on the topic was for a long time the matter of a small group of specialists. During the first half of the 20th century, major contributions came from three groups of authors who wrote for quite different audiences. Haitian historians saw their main task in fostering the creation of a national conscience in their own country. Their French counterparts, most acquainted with the surviving archives, acted above all as chroniclers of a sunken colonial Empire. Outside Haiti, members of the Afro-American community discovered the mythographic power of the only successful slave revolution in world history that took place in that country, trying to employ it as a means to strengthen Black self-esteem in a time when an apartheid-like reality condemned people of African origin to a life at the bottom of Western society. Generally, the obstacles to a larger reception of Haitian history were hard to overcome. In the “Old Continent”, cultural hegemony lay in the hands of stubborn Eurocentrics who had the power to define what topics had to be regarded as “legitimate/noteworthy” or as “illegitimate/marginal”, dominating thus not only the existing “economics of attention” but also the distribution of institutional and financial resources that are vital for scientific research. Colonial history and their slave-based plantation economies could easily be disqualified as issues of minor public interest, despite the fact that the latter once constituted an integral part of the Western European economic systems.

The acceleration of the globalisation process, a growing presence of the Afro-American community in our mass media as well as an expanding cosmopolitanism improved the conditions for a broader reception of Caribbean colonial history and its long term consequences considerably. The Haitian Revolution is now, at least in the United States, an integral part of the historiography on slavery and the research on the “Black Atlantic”. In France, the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution celebrated in 1989 broke up the

prevailing Eurocentric perception of that event thus allowing to discuss the history of the former French colonies such as Saint Domingue/Haiti and some of the related questions concerning slavery and abolition in a broader context.¹

Recent publications on Haiti's past belong to three categories: the first one covers a single epoch of the country's history: a) the colonial period and/or the slave revolution that led to the country's independence in 1804,² b) the foundation of Haiti, the colonial legacy and the structural reasons for its underdevelopment,³ and finally c) the U.S. occupation from 1915 to 1934. General syntheses fall into the second category. Their concern is either to give an overview of a greater part of the country's history⁴ or to use it as a model within a comparative study of colonial practices, slave-based economies, abolition and post-colonialism.⁵ The third category is made up of case-studies, published in monographic form or as collection of conference papers. It comprises biographies of leading actors of the Saint Domingue revolution as well as books on special questions of Haiti's social and economic history. The themes range from the microhistory of a single plantation or the role of African religion in Haitian history to the impact of colonial trade on the economies of 18th century Europe.⁶ Some of the latest publications will be discussed here.

It is not astonishing that the United States as a country with a colonial past and an important minority of African descent are more involved than others in the current scientific debate on the Haitian revolution. One of the most prominent experts in the field is

¹ See Y. Benot (1988): "La Révolution Française et la fin des colonies, Paris: La Découverte; and the contributions to Haitian history" in M. Vovelle (dir.): *Bicentenaire de la Révolution Française 1789-1989. L'image de la Révolution Française. Communications présentées lors du Congrès Mondial pour le Bicentenaire de la Révolution* (Sorbonne), Paris etc.: Pergamon Press 1989, vol. 2.

² C. E. Fick: *The Making of Haiti: the Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Pr. 1990/Geggus (2002).

³ Menzel 2001; J.B.M. Samedy: *Mutation et persistance de la structure sociale de Saint-Domingue-Haiti (1784-1994)*, Ottawa: LEGAS 1997.

⁴ W. L. Bernecker: *Kleine Geschichte Haitis*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1996.

⁵ See R. Blackburn: *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776-1848*, London: Verso 1996³; P. Butel: *Histoire des Antilles françaises: XVIII^e-XX^e siècles*, Paris: Perrin 2002; C. Gelszus: *Kolonisation und Kolonialpolitik auf Jamaika und St.-Domingue 1661-1783: Bedingungen, Entwicklungen, Auswirkungen*, Eichstätt: Eigenverlag 1999; P. Pluchon: *Histoire de la Colonisation Française*, Tome 1: *Le premier Empire colonial. Des origines à la Restauration*, Paris: Fayard 1991.

⁶ To mention some examples: *Commerce et plantation dans la Caraïbe aux XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles. Actes du Colloque de Bordeaux, 15-16 mars 1991*. Coordination Paul Butel, 262 p., Maison des Pays Ibériques, Bordeaux, 1992; J. Cauna: *Au Temps des Isles à Sucre. Histoire d'une plantation de Saint-Domingue au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris: Karthala-ACCT 1987; Hurbon 2000; M. Dorigny (dir.) (1995): *Les abolitions de l'esclavage de L. F. Sonthonax à V. Schoelcher, 1793/1794/1848. Actes du colloque international tenu à l'Université Paris VIII, les 3, 4 et 5 février 1994*, organisé par l'Association pour l'étude de la colonisation européenne et placé sous le patronage du programme "La Route de l'esclave" de l'UNESCO, Université de Paris VIII, Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, Paris: Éditions UNESCO; L. Hurbon (1995): *Voodoo. Search for the spirits*, New York: Discoveries/Harry N. Abrams Inc., S.R.; King: *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue*, London/Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Press 2001; P. Pluchon: *Toussaint Louverture. Un révolutionnaire noir d'Ancien Régime*, Paris: Fayard 1989; J. Ludwig: *Amerikanische Kolonialwaren in Sachsen, 1700-1850*, Leipzig: Leipziger Univ.-Verlag 1994; R.L. Stein: *French Sugar Business in the Eighteenth Century*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U.P. 1988; and of the same author: *Léger Félicité Sonthonax: The Lost Sentinel of the Republic*, London / Toronto: Associated University Press 1985; *Revue française d'histoire d'Outre-Mer* (1997), Spécial Sonthonax, Tome 84, Nr. 316.

David Patrick Geggus, professor in the History Department of the University of Florida, who showed a constant interest in the topic and published a series of important books and articles related to it <<http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/dgeggus/vitae.htm>>. One of his latest books, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, merits special attention. Conceived as a revised edition of articles published elsewhere Geggus here provides the results of more than 30 years of research on the Saint Domingue revolution. Divided into 13 closed chapters it has not only the character of a handbook which complements in some sense the all too small entry dedicated to this subject in the venerable *Cambridge History of Latin America*. Together with David Blackburn's *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* it may as well serve as textbook for courses on Caribbean slavery and the Haitian revolution.

The book begins with a short overview of the general course of events. The following section of the *Studies* is devoted to historiographical approaches and primary sources. One can distinguish two important scientific traditions of Saint Domingue studies, the Anglo-American and the French, which went into quite different directions. Necessarily, a "narrative" of modern North American Haitianology starts with an *in initio erat C.L.R. James*. This author's work *Black Jacobins*, a Marxist interpretation of the Saint Domingue revolution, first published in 1938 and canonized in the meantime dominated the American debate on this event for several decades.⁷ One may ask if it is not time for a historical revision of this book which had much more the character of a political manifesto than that of a scientific analysis. James belonged to the intellectual forerunners of Caribbean independence movements of the time after 1945. His project was to remind Afro-Americans of their political potential, taking Haiti as an example to be followed. The subtext of *Black Jacobins* contained the author's message: Starting from a desperate situation, Afro-Americans once managed to beat three imperial powers and a ruler as mighty as Napoleon, and inspired by this example, James' Afro-American fellow citizens should feel compelled to fight for their own interests. Placed in the context of the time when racist discrimination was a daily experience, James had certainly other things in mind than writing a book for the academic community. His analysis, as interesting as it might be, had only a small empirical basis. Primary sources which were mainly held by French archives were often nearly inaccessible in the 1930s. Certainly, James' way of interpreting the Haitian revolution in Leninist terms of class struggle adapted to the Caribbean world is today out of mode. In 1789, neither the Domingan slaves and only a small part of the colonists/planters showed collective behaviours, structures and mentalities typical for class-like formations.

There is no doubt that the historical research on Saint Domingue/Haiti made considerable progresses in the last 30 years. In chapter 2 and 3 of his *Studies*, Geggus summarizes the main trends and points out promising, but underexploited subjects and sources.

In France, the scene was for a long time dominated by the Nestor of Domingan studies, Gabriel Debien, who died in 1990 and whose private archives, now held by the "Généalogie et Histoire de la Caraïbe"-Society in Paris, are a treasure that is still waiting to be excavated <<http://www.ghcaraibe.org/pub/debien.html>>. Contrary to many authors who only exploited the existing literature on Saint Domingue, Debien and a

⁷ C.L.R. James: *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, New York: Vintage 1963?.

small group of historians who followed his example spent a long time in archives. Their work is devoted to the plantation society, the colonial trade, lobbyism and elite circles. Founded on a broad empirical basis this source oriented school ordinarily hesitates to make use of the analytical instruments provided by social historians and therefore these scholars almost never try to generalize the results of their case-studies. Beside that, a lot of work has been done since the French *bicentenaire* to reveal the interdependence and connections between the French and the Caribbean Revolution. Geggus gives many hints on new, promising research fields. In particular, the history of the Domingan free coloureds and *petits blancs* (poor whites) requires further investigation. A list of desiderata always reflects an author's personal preferences. So one could add dozens of other important subjects that have only been insufficiently examined. For example, every book on Saint Domingue underlines its immense richness in pre-revolutionary times, but a comprehensive synthesis of the colony's social and economic history that might explain its extraordinary success has not yet been written. There are a lot of other subjects that require further research: the activities of transnational trade networks and the role that Saint Domingue colonial goods, such as coffee and sugar, played in the growing North American markets as well as in European mass consumption and popular imagination, and finally the political and economic impact of emigrated French colonist on their host countries.⁸ To give a second example, the establishment of plantation economies meant deforestation, intensive use of Caribbean soils and therefore a sophisticated resource management to prevent their rapid degradation; the shift to small peasantry after 1804 and a growing demand for fire wood due to the demographic pressure rendered a centrally controlled "soil management" illusory. Environmental factors played a decisive role in Haitian history, but a detailed study on this topic is still lacking.

Geggus' brief overview of the "underexploited sources" (Chapter 3) on Domingan revolutionary history deserves special mention. Scholars interested in primary sources have a series of special guides at their disposal that emerged from a project promoted by the Unesco since the late 1950s and which comprise the historical funds on Latin America in European archives. Walne's guide and its French counterpart published by the Archives Nationales⁹ find a useful complement in Geggus' overview that is subdivided into chapters on France, Great Britain, Spain and Spanish America, the United States and the Caribbean. One might add an important fund of underexploited sources not mentioned by Geggus: Bissainthe's comprehensive *Dictionnaire de la bibliographie haïtienne* which contains a considerable part of contemporary books and pamphlets on Saint Domingue, above all held by the French National Library. Only a small part of the publications listed there has ever been used by historians.¹⁰

⁸ Economic historians like Paul Butel deal with the matter but the existing material is far from being exploited. See K. Weber: *Deutsche Kaufleute im Atlantikhandel 1680-1830*, München: C. H. Beck 2004. Social historians know that in the 18th century, coffee was much more than a hot beverage; see H. J. Teuteberg (1980): "Kaffeetrinken sozialgeschichtlich betrachtet", in: *Scripta Mercaturae* Jg. 14, H. 1, p. 27-54 and U. Heise: *Kaffee und Kaffeehaus. Eine Bohne macht Kulturgeschichte*, Leipzig: Kiepenheuer 1996; and Ludwig's work cited above.

⁹ Archives Nationales: *Guide des Sources de l'histoire de l'Amérique latine et des Antilles dans les Archives Françaises*, Paris: Archives Nationales 1984; P. Walne: *A Guide to Manuscripts on Latin America in British Archives*, London: Oxford U.P. 1973.

¹⁰ Max Bissainthe (ed.): *Dictionnaire de la bibliographie haïtienne*, Washington 1951.

Section II of Geggus' *Studies* is devoted to the outbreak of the Saint Domingue slave insurrection of 1791. Starting with an analytical chapter, the author presents a checklist of factors preventing or promoting slave rebellions. The elements that reinforced the social order within the plantation societies were multiple: the lack of cohesion characterizing most slave communities as well as weak family ties, self-debasement of the slaves which led many of them to accept the social hierarchy of the plantation, voluntary submission preached by the Christian churches, the technological advance of the Europeans that attributed to the white masters superior power resources, well established strategies of *divide et impera* that implied punishments and rewards such as the prospect of a future manumission, and last but not least the degree of Creolization within a slave community (the higher the percentage of individuals born in slavery, the lesser the inclination to revolt). These stabilizing forces could be partly neutralized by the following factors favouring rebellions: the concentration of large groups of slaves with a similar ethnic background, a high percentage of slaves within a given population, cleavages and power struggles within the ruling classes, the absence of legal or illegal alternatives to slavery, negative effects of business cycles upon the living conditions in the plantations, and finally the activities of abolitionists that weakened the legitimacy of slavery as an institution are the main elements that have to be taken into consideration.

Geggus shows a special talent to explain complicated matters on few pages, always using a precise terminology. His *Haitian Studies* resume current debates, presenting pro and contra arguments of the different opponents and confronting these with the empirical evidence. The chapters of his book devoted to key events of the Saint Domingue revolution are masterpieces of source analysis. These case-studies, touching some corner stones of the Haitian national conscience, are not just a matter of academic interest. Geggus examines the historicity of the Bois Caïman Ceremony of August 1791 which is renowned for being the starting shoot of the slave insurrection, discusses the question if maroons formed an integral part of the slave insurgents or not, if voodoo was to be looked upon as a ferment of revolutionary decomposition or as a politically neutral spiritual complex that played only a marginal role during the Domingan revolution, and analyses in detail the motives that led Toussaint Louverture, who later became the leader of the revolutionary movement and founding father of the Haitian nation, to go over from the Spanish to the French in 1794, an event that marked the turning point of the slave revolution.

Readers interested in the topic should compare Geggus' studies with those of other historians published by the Haitian historian Laënnec Hurbon (2000) after a conference devoted to the Domingan slave insurrection of 1791 which showed the complexity of the matter. It is discussed there as a media event (F. Gauthier, M. Dorigny), a claim for human rights (Y. Benot), a challenge for French universal ideas of *citoyenneté* (V. Saint-Louis) and as a mythographic machine transforming historic events into half-imaginary collective *lieux de mémoire* (D. Geggus, R. Law).

The impact of Haiti and its history on parts of the U.S. public opinion can be measured by reading *Haiti: A Slave Revolution*, published by the International Action Center in New York (Chin *et al.* 2004). This textbook does not pretend to be a profound academic analysis of the event but targets a broader audience of Third World activists. Its sometimes polemic articles try to constitute a counterweight to the superficial – and often also polemical – representation (or should one say misrepresentation?) of Haiti in

U.S. mass media and political discourses. The use of voodoo-related terms to disqualify opponents in public debates (“voodoo economics”), analysed by G. Dunkel is a striking example for the perseverance of anti-Haitian prejudices that emerged in the 19th century and which were reinforced under the U.S. occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934. Some of the contributions to this book underline the high symbolic value which is still attributed to the Haitian revolution within the Afro-American communities of our days. The book reedits some Afro-American lectures on Haiti of the 1890s.

In the first decades of the 19th century, the Haitian revolution was a “media event” not only in the United States, France and Great Britain, but also in Germany whose readers and publicists showed a surprisingly high interest in the topic. Articles and books on the revolting slaves and the Afro-Caribbean nation seem to have equalled if not outnumbered those who were devoted to the Spanish-American independence movement.¹¹ The French *bicentenaire* that internationalised historic approaches to the revolutionary Era and the debate on forced labour in the “Third Reich” which proved that Germany was for a certain time one of the major slave-holding countries in the world has brought slavery and its long term consequences back on the general agenda. One of the latest results of German research on Haiti is Menzel’s comprehensive history of this nation since 1804. Based on a broad bibliography, but not on unpublished sources it is conceived as a chronological overview of the country’s past until the presidency of Aristide’s successor Préval.

Menzel’s *Schwarzer Traum vom Glück* (freely translated: *The Black Pursuit of Happiness*) is basically an event-oriented narrative of Haitian political history. Together with Bernecker’s brief overview on the country’s past, published in 1996,¹² it is the only actual handbook-like introduction devoted to the topic available in German. The author’s primary intention is not to present an entirely new perspective, but to summarize the achieved state of knowledge. In Germany, the matter was until recently the exclusive hunting ground of Romanistic studies, which were more interested in the literary reception of the event than in history itself, and so Menzel’s vividly written work doubtlessly fills a gap.

The book’s chronological order is interrupted by three *excursus* devoted to *Church and Voodoo, Elites in the late 19th century* and *Haiti and the Great Powers between 1804 and 1915*. Menzel’s emphasis is on political history. The motives of social actors and basic structural deficiencies of the Haitian economy are taken into consideration, but at this point, the chosen narrative method is quickly reaching its limits. Analysing the profound causes of Haitian underdevelopment and the long term effects of colonialism and slavery is quite a difficult task that cannot be tackled without the help of the instruments provided by social and economic historians. One may also regret that Menzel does not discuss in detail the problematic state and nature of the surviving sources. Books, articles and pamphlets on independent Haiti, its leaders and elites written during the 19th century had often a polemical character, so they have to be used with care. Data given by contemporary publicists were often misleading. The archival funds held by Haitian institutions were permanently threatened by the tropical climate, political instability and civil wars. A handbook-like overview on Haitian history should contain a chapter dealing

¹¹ See K. Schüller: *Die deutsche Rezeption haitianischer Geschichte in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts. Ein Beitrag zum deutschen Bild des Schwarzen*, Köln: Böhlau 1992.

¹² See note 4.

with these questions. However, these critical remarks notwithstanding, Menzel's book is informative and of great use to historians interested in the topic.

M.A. Renda's work *Taking Haiti. Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* is remarkable in many respects. The author, actually assistant professor of history and women's studies at Mount Holyoke College, presents an entirely new access to the understanding of the U.S. occupation of Haiti. Using diaries, letters and oral histories of involved marines, she analyses the military intervention in cross-cultural terms. Her main concern is to understand "the occupation as an event in the cultural history of the United States" (p. 20) following the paradigms and some of the leading questions of gender studies and Benedict Anderson's concept of nations as "imagined communities". The marines' intervention in Haiti fell into a period of transformation. Since 1898, the United States' shift from a continental to an imperial power led to the readjustment of the country's self-image. The new Empire in the making was not only based on violence: it required "stories as well as guns" (p. 9). Renda uncovers the "paternalist master narrative" (p. 28) derived from the current Anglo-Saxon sentiment of racial superiority that served as a pretext for interventions in poorer countries inhabited by supposedly "racially inferior" populations. In official discourses, the occupation of countries such as Haiti were not to be interpreted as part of a strategy of imperialist expansion, but as acts of altruism, the marines serving as "father-figures for a child nation" (p. 67). The direct confrontation of "American values" with the "otherness" of the occupied countries helped to adapt these values to a changing national and international context. The experiences that soldiers and journalists were making in the occupied countries thus represented an important contribution to the reconstruction of American "national identity".

Focussing the young marine rank-and-file engaged in Haiti, the author analyses their socialization patterns and the modes of indoctrination to which they were exposed, confronting them with the world view of leading officers such as Smedley D. Butler. In other chapters, she discusses the literary production of the time relating to Haiti. Starting with a well established set of preconceived ideas, the paternalist imperial project quickly had to stand the test of guerrilla warfare. It finally ended up in a "moral breakdown" (chapter 4). Renda's book is well documented and convincingly structured. The use of new source categories and the choice of a gender related perspective makes this study especially interesting. *Taking Haiti* is certainly one of the most innovative contributions to Haitian studies of the last years.

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