

Response Page

The following responses were posted on the H-France discussion list in response to Peter McPhee's review of Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and William Max Nelson, eds., *The French Revolution in Global Perspective* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013).

H-France Review Vol. 13 (November 2013) No.185

The original review may be found on the H-France Review web site at:
<http://www.h-france.net/vol13reviews/vol13no185mcphee.pdf>

17 January 2014

David Andress
david.andress@port.ac.uk

I should just like to echo, if I may, Peter McPhee's praise of this volume; I have seldom read a collection of essays to compare to it for both rich original research and deeply thought-provoking breadth of reflection.

I was, perhaps, less impressed than Peter with the final association of revolution and wars of independence, because it seems to me to diminish some of the messages of the rest of the collection, if it is not handled very carefully. As I am currently working on a piece about the 'entangled' histories of the American and French Revolutions, I have been reviewing recent scholarship closely, and one thing that stands out, for me, is a willingness NOT to seek the comforting message of liberation.

In the Armitage/Subrahmanyan collection that Peter cites [another undoubted landmark book], we see David Geggus, for example, noting of Caribbean slave revolutionaries that their leaders had a notable attachment to monarchy, and displayed 'unapologetically dictatorial' ruling dynamics without 'the slightest regard for democracy' [Geggus, 'The Caribbean in the Age of Revolution', in Armitage and Subrahmanyan (ed.), *Age of Revolutions*, pp. 83-100; p. 97]. Wim Klooster, who Peter also cites, offers four broad conclusions when comparing the US, French, Haitian and Spanish-American revolutionary experiences: the first two simply deny any notion of broad endogenous social origins – international politics played a crucial role in both the conditions and course of revolt, and any of the revolutions could have been 'prevented, derailed, or postponed' by different, contingent political actions from within existing ruling elites [Wim Klooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World; a comparative history*, New York: NYU Press, 2009, p. 158.] His third point is that 'civil war' was an almost universal component of revolution, often leading to a 'dialectic of violence and counterviolence', within and across social and racial lines with devastating consequences [ibid pp. 162-3]. Finally, he observes bluntly that 'Whether they took place in slave societies, in societies with slaves or those without, none of the revolutions aimed at creating a democratic society. The chief objective of revolutionary leaders was sovereignty, and the nature of postrevolutionary rule was usually authoritarian.' [ibid p. 165]

Obviously, all of these conclusions are open to debate, but one of the great achievements of this emergent body of scholarship, it seems to me, is to give humane and broadly sympathetic attention to the quest for liberation embodied in revolutionary struggle, without losing sight of the fact that, as a historical situation, it could lead to appalling consequences, and that to pretend otherwise is simply not credible. As we have seen in very recent times, this complex, and in some ways genuinely agonising, question is not one that has gone away, and the more we can say about it, dispelling myths both of revolutionary virtue and of the inherent evil of subversion, the better.

Dave Andress
Associate Dean (Research), FHSS.
Professor of Modern History
SSHLS, Univ. of Portsmouth
Milldam, Portsmouth, PO1 3AS, UK
Tel. 02392 842204
david.andress@port.ac.uk