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Silyane Larcher, *L'Autre Citoyen: L'idéal républicain et les Antilles après l'esclavage*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2014. 383 pp. Notes and bibliography. €18.99 (eb). ISBN 978-2-200-28940-9

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L'Autre Citoyen explores the complex tensions that arose in both “metropolitan” political circles and the Caribbean colonies over the thorny subject of French colonial citizenship after the abolition act of 1848. Set in the years that preceded and followed abolition, it examines the debates and shifts in attitudes over the possibility of bestowing full French citizenship upon the formerly enslaved populace. Across six chapters, the figure of the emancipated “slave” is juxtaposed with the lived realities of the formerly enslaved populations and their descendants in a work that meticulously debunks the myth that emancipation went hand-in-hand with the granting of full citizenship rights. In so doing, Larcher’s monograph contributes to the wealth of scholarship dedicated to investigating the glaring inconsistencies between the libertarianism of republican discourse and its violent and oppressive practices. Just as Bancel, Blanchard and Vergès noted in their seminal text *La République coloniale* (2006), paradox is shown to underpin the republican colonizing “mission” and its assimilationist goals.[1] However, *L'Autre Citoyen*’s specific focus on the Caribbean provides new and enriching perspectives on the ideological and actual difficulties that successive monarchical, imperial and republican regimes faced in maintaining the ancien régime colonies post-1789, specifically because they were rooted in the economics of enslaved labour. In this largely chronological account of the events leading up to and following the (second) abolition of slavery, Larcher tracks the ways in which the ever-shifting context of nineteenth-century French political life grappled with concepts such as civic, social and political equality and assimilation, while being steered by a barely-disguised desire to uphold the racial and hierarchical system on which enslavement was built.

Centrally, it argues for the impossibility of abstracting French republican ideology and its claims to universality from the long and laborious process of French citizenship, which was based on the exclusion of particular categories of people, not least of which were women, foreigners, beggars, vagabonds, servants and the proletariat. As has been acknowledged in other works on the French colonies and particularly Algeria, the acquirement of full and active French citizenship after 1789 was far from instantaneous and was accompanied by a whole host of limitations that demarked those with full political rights (active citizens) from those endowed with civil rights only (passive citizens).[2] Complementing this research, Larcher’s intervention explores the restrictions and irregularities imposed upon the newly-emancipated Caribbean communities, as well as the existing freemen and women of colour. Drawing from a wealth of archival data—including parliamentary debates, ministerial commissions, advisory bodies, administrative correspondence and juridical archives in both the Caribbean and France—debates on citizenship in France are brought into dialogue with the specificities of the plantation colonies and the additional limitations placed upon the (formerly) enslaved population in (dis)enabling their access full citizenship rights.

There are two central questions that this monograph seeks to unravel. First, it asks how the doctrine of French universalism went hand in hand with a process of exclusion, and what political rationality served

to justify this process. Rather than simply stating this as an irresolvable internal contradiction that might be used to undo republican myth-making, the text explores the genealogy and anthropology of citizenship as a discursive, juridical and practical process that was inflected with racialized thinking and subject to endless gains and losses. In other words, it highlights the plasticity of a concept long mythologized as immutable, and does so specifically from the margins of the colonized Caribbean. This approach simultaneously reveals the importance of the trans-Atlantic relation in the co-construction of French citizenship and the centrality of racialized thinking within republicanism itself. Second, and following in the footsteps of Dipesh Chakrabarty, it questions whether it is possible to write this history “from below”; that is, from the perspectives of those who were marginalized and whose voices are largely absent within the archives.^[3] This approach sees Larcher foregrounding the existence of informal political structures amongst the (formerly) enslaved citizens despite their actual exclusion from formal political life, and excavating their political agency against all the odds.

The text is divided into six chapters that follow a chronological structure from 1789 through to the late nineteenth century. Importantly, and in keeping with the two central aims, the chapters oscillate between debates among the political elite at key moments in history and the actions undertaken by the enslaved and then emancipated populations to capitalize on the multiple regime changes of the nineteenth century.

Chapters one and two investigate at the post-revolutionary period leading up to abolition, noting that the plantation colonies represented something of a blind spot in republican ideology. The decision to jettison the colonies from the Constitution in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution reveals a gaping hole between formal and real equality, or between the radical pronouncement of equality and its practical implementation in the colonies. This decision enabled the revolutionary Assemblée Nationale to permit the continuation of slavery for commercial gain on the prejudicial basis that the Enlightenment was yet to arrive in these far-flung regions and that the enslaved populations were not “yet” capable of enjoying full voting rights. In so doing, it set the legal and discursive precedents that provided the rationale for subjecting the colonies to exceptional laws until 1946. As is shown throughout this text, the enslaved populations and their descendants were deemed as persons inherently devoid of certain civic capabilities. These beliefs added an additional racial layer to the existing prerequisites limiting voter eligibility. By revealing the racialized thinking that underpinned revolutionary decision-making, initial questions are raised about how the Republic would negotiate the paradoxical notion of the “citoyen colonisé”; debates that marked the beginning of a long socio-political process in which all the tensions between the older system of enslavement and the modern principles of republicanism would be played out.

As chapter two shows, the structure of *L'Autre Citoyen* plays an important role in countering the myths that deemed the enslaved populace incapable of political thought and action. By writing “from below”, it works to excavate the *informal* political experiences of those who were enslaved as news of different revolutions and political upheavals travelled from Europe into the Caribbean through newspapers and letters and in overheard conversations. Importantly, Larcher argues for the need to take seriously the extent to which enslaved communities were intimately engaged in politics, albeit within the narrow opportunities afforded to them, in terms of their daily battles over social organization and improvement of conditions. The revolutions and the accompanying changes in political regime provided the formal framework in which to legitimize these long-standing struggles, while also galvanizing a whole host of insular uprisings that were often framed by republican language. As such, the enslaved communities of the Caribbean, as well as the freemen and women of colour, were always already partisans and defenders of the Republic and its principles having long appropriated and adapted these ideas in their desire for emancipation and/or their struggle for civic and political equality.

This pattern continues in chapters three and four that fluctuate between the debates in France over the drafting of the 1848 abolition decree under Victor Schœlcher’s Commission, and the political desires expressed by the enslaved populations, notably during the uprisings of 22 May 1848. Far from being a

universal decree, the decision to exclude colonial citizens from voting rights in the abolition act of 1848 created a constellation of different statuses across the empire that were dependent upon the complex pre-existing political relations between France and its various colonies. But unlike Senegal, India and Algeria, which were governed in recognition of local customs, no such obstacles existed in the Caribbean, the indigenous population having been all but erased through colonial genocide. The republican thinking that led to the curtailment of these rights is therefore located in the socio-cultural fabric of the Caribbean communities in which the “stain” of enslavement, as the antithesis of the Republic, was generally viewed as an insurmountable obstacle or even a social pathology that only time would heal.

In contrast, the revolutionary hopes of enslaved populace are revealed by their acts of insurgency that predated the arrival of the abolition decree. The figure of kneeling “slave”, the passive recipient of abolition and republican rights, is thus countered by a history of insurgency led by an enslaved population impatient for freedom who were more than capable of capitalizing on the political climate for their own emancipatory ends. In a highly engaging chapter (four), Larcher not only investigates the appropriation of republican discourse by the insurgents, but also how they expressed their own sense of freedom and the need for an entirely new social relation that upturned the existing racial hierarchy.

Central to this narrative is the desire for land and property to enable self-subsistence post-abolition. But unfortunately this theme is only partially explored and does not benefit from being linked to the long history of reparation claims to which it rightly belongs. Indeed, the demand for land is a demand for reparative justice, a link that would have further strengthened the author’s claims about political agency. Of course, and as the authors notes, the introduction of initiatives such as the system of association, the outlawing of vagabondage, and the use of extensive policing and punitive systems to enforce labour soon put pay to these dreams of self-sufficiency. The purpose of the colonial administration, working in collaboration with the ever-powerful plantocracy, was not freedom but to maintain the social, political and financial benefits of a lucrative economic system rooted in enslaved labour.

The final chapters focus on the second half of the nineteenth century and the shifts between republican and imperial regimes, leading to the establishment of the Third Republic. They look at how the changes to the 1848 Constitution resulted in the imposition of enduring fracture lines that run throughout the paradoxical concept of colonial citizenship and meant that the colonies would consistently be ruled by the infamous “lois particulières”. Key to this analysis is the identification of an anthropo-historic discourse that subverted the potential for civic equality after abolition and the grammar by which the administration, jurists and parliamentarians of the Second Republic and Second Empire defined the social incompetence of their “new citizens”. This discourse placed the “new citizens” in a double-bind. On the one hand, the exercise of political rights required time and education to acquire the necessary social attributes to participate in political life. On the other hand, since the “new citizens” were still linked to the old world, there were viewed as a product of a particular political anthropology that was utterly opposed to the concept of individual freedom and modern citizenship. The result was that the figure of the former “slave” was shrouded in suspicion, meaning that he was not only disqualified from active political life, but would henceforth have to prove his quality as a true French citizen. These beliefs fuelled the idea that the anthropo-historic makeup of these colonies required particular forms of control in order to make them compatible (at some undefined point in the future) with the “metropole”, and thereby justified the creation of two distinct legislative spheres that allowed for the preservation of a two-tiered system.

Yet the dream of instating a *true* republican social order that would overturn the hierarchical status quo was never relinquished, argues Larcher. The collapse of the Second Empire gave rise to renewed cries of “Vive la République!” (as well as “Vive les prussiens!”) in Martinique. The well-known insurgency of 1870 is read as a symbolic desire to purge the colonies of the hierarchical system that had long assailed them and establish a more beneficial social order. Arguably, however, the focus on the explicitly

republican drive of the insurgents inadvertently ushers in the same kind of myth-making that the text elsewhere successfully undermines. While the analysis provides invaluable context to the 1946 departmentalization law that finally brought about political equality, the fact that it does not also read these acts of insurgency as movements for independence from French rule risks seeming somewhat one-dimensional.

In conclusion, *L'Autre Citoyen* provides a compelling account of how the post-slavery colonies functioned as a theatre in which all the tensions between the old and new worlds played out. It argues that the classic dichotomy between citizens and subjects does not sufficiently explain the complexity of the relationships between citizenship and coloniality any more than the assertion of the basic paradox at the centre of republican colonialism. Instead, it offers a deep investigation of the political situation in the colonies after abolition, revealing a basic lack of freedom and equality that was justified by underlying beliefs in their anthropo-historical difference in contrast to the socio-cultural norms of the French “nation ethnique.” Assimilation is shown to be less of a policy than a far-off ideal that might (or might not) be reached in some uncertain future, while the descendants of those who were enslaved continued to be disadvantaged by the “new” system because of their ancestral links to enslavement. This racialized thinking meant that Antilleans during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century would continue to operate within an anthropological hierarchy that worked to ensure their continued domination until 1946. As Larcher states, “l'ex-esclave ou son descendant se trouvait dès lors enfermé dans l'identité d'un citoyen toujours douteux, potentiellement incompétent, condamné à être un citoyen défaillant, bref un citoyen de second rang” (p. 328), a discourse that permitted successive regimes to legitimize the maintenance of a racial hierarchy long after abolition.

NOTES

[1] Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Françoise Vergès, *La République coloniale* (Paris: Hachette, 2006).

[2] Dominique Schnapper, *La communauté des citoyens. Sur l'idée moderne de nation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le sacre du citoyen. Histoire du suffrage universel en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). Emmanuelle Saada, *Les enfants de la colonie. Les métis de l'Empire français entre sujétion et citoyenneté* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007).

[3] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. First publ. 2000).

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