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Paul Cheney, *Cul de Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism and Slavery in French Saint-Domingue*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017, 264 pp. Images, bibliography, and index. ISBN 13: 978-0-226-07935-6.

Review by Gerald Horne, University of Houston.

It was in the early twenty-first century that the author chose to visit Haiti in order to gain a more graphic picture of that which he had been researching, mostly in France. Those he encountered there, as he reports, were not necessarily friendly. One “exchange remained surprisingly tense”; he attributes this to the supposition that “trust among Haitians is...very low: what in other places might seem like perfectly innocuous information is closely guarded in a country where secretiveness remains the rule” (p. 224).

Maybe.

Still, another way to explain this encounter is that it is a reflection of the continuing impact of the world historic impact of the Haitian Revolution, 1791 to 1804, which upended the events the author described that took place on the Cul de Sac plain in what is now Haiti, i.e. the casual brutalization of a sugar plantation staffed ignominiously by enslaved African labor.

In other words, the conflation of class and race, with the French and other Europeans in the role of exploiters and the Africans as the mudsill of society, was to be shaken violently during the revolutionary upsurge but has left a lingering lack of “trust” directed toward those who—at first glance—appear to be part of a once exploiting class.

Earlier, the author writes of the “pervasive mistrust between metropolitan and Creole elites,” though “their collaboration was essential in maintaining the Saint-Dominguan plantation complex for a century before its demise” (p. 40). In other words, a dearth of trust, by the author’s own admission, has many roots and is not simply an exclusive product of post-1804 Haiti. Later the author acknowledges “an atmosphere of lawlessness and vigilantism developed” during the unlamented era of slavery, “with planters sending out gangs of slaves to smash other planters’ water basins and dikes so as to prevent the hoarding of water” (p. 58). It is difficult to envision trust emerging heartily from such a parched environment.

The primary exploiters of this story, however, are the Ferronnayses who had roots extending to 1160 in Brittany. They were part of the French nobility, a group that “was about 300,000 strong, or 1 percent of France’s total population of 25 million” by the eighteenth century (p. 20). These

exploiters were also a relatively small part of the population of the Caribbean islands they claimed. "From 1701 to 1790," he says, "613,000 captives were sold in the markets of Saint-Domingue, which represented three-quarters of the 822,000 Africans who arrived in the French Caribbean—an area that also included Martinique, Guadeloupe, some smaller islands and the South American colony of Guiana" (p. 75). In the vicinity, "English, Dutch and Spanish masters" during the "same period" dragged "2,533,000 captives" across the Atlantic to labor as slaves (p. 75). Those exploited by the Ferronnayses and their comrades, the Corbiers, were heavily of Congolese origin, striking in light of Paris's role in what came to be called Brazzaville (p. 77).

The casual brutality inflicted upon this forced labor serves to explicate why the slaves rose in revolutionary fervor. Some were "buried up to their necks" and "had their exposed necks eaten by flies" (p. 81). "Placing an iron collar with a heavy chain attached to it around the neck" or "applying...an iron weight fastened to the ankle" were some of the milder punishments (p. 82).

According to the author, "abolitionist arguments enjoyed no wide currency at this time," speaking of the era before the 1788 founding of the Amis des Noirs, though the lack of specificity in terms of region or people tends to occlude the obvious point that the enslaved, as they were to demonstrate shortly, not only harbored "abolitionist arguments" but "abolitionist intentions" (p. 100). Possibly because of his tight focus on this planation on the Cul de Sac plain, the author does not turn his gaze to other events nearby, e.g. the rise of the heralded Makandal, a celebrated figure in the Pan-African world, a fierce rebel against slavery before his 1758 execution.

To his credit, the evidence he gathers points to "unrest among slaves," i.e. "marronnage was on the increase, as was arson" and "poisoning" (p.124). Also to his credit, the author connects upheaval in the Caribbean to the fateful decision in France to support the anti-London rebels in North America post-1776, which not only induced financial strains in Paris that eventuated in tumult by 1789, but led to the dispatching of troops from Hispaniola to Savannah, a force that included *gens de couleur*, who gained military experience that proved to be handy by the 1790s. "The leader of the Savannah expedition," writes Cheney, "the Marquis Lenoir de Rouvray, would later trace the origins of the Reign of Terror of 1793-94 in France to the American colonies: 'The Jacobin sect was born there and they will always be the home of popular revolt and the doctrine of regicide'" (p. 126).

The proclamation of the slaveholding republic in North America also meant, writes Cheney, that "slavery voyages increased by 100 percent in the decade after the war," increasing tremendously the number of Africans on the island, creating kindling for a blazing fire of revolt (p. 127). The author also, quite creditably, punctures the progressivism of a "certain egalitarianism among the white population" of the island, which was a kind of compensation deployed to attract French migrants to a war zone—a factor often neglected when considering a comparable phenomenon that eventuated in North America (p. 148). Thus, by 1791 "the slave population in Saint-Domingue numbered around 480,000 while the combined free population, white or black, was about 54,000"; this was a recipe for a slave master's debacle, which soon ensued (p. 170).

The resultant revolution led to a general crisis of the entire slave system in the Americas that could only be resolved with that system's collapse, including in North America and the wider Caribbean. London sensed early on that the jig was up in the cash cows that were Jamaica and Barbados and moved toward abolition of Britain's role in the African Slave Trade, then banning slavery itself by 1833. The slaveholding republic dug in its heels, then reaped the whirlwind by

the 1860s with a bloody civil war that meant the slaughter of hundreds of thousands. Arguably, these world historic events were set in motion by events the author ably describes on a plantation on the Cul de Sac plain, which means that he has contributed to one of the more important historiographies now extant.

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