
H-France Review Vol. 20 (June 2020), No. 93

Johnhenry Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti*. Yale Agrarian Studies Series. James C. Scott, Series Editor. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2019. xii + 302 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-300-23008-6.

Review by Mary Dewhurst Lewis, Harvard University.

On the eve of the Haitian Revolution, the French colony of Saint-Domingue (today's Haiti), a territory roughly the size of Massachusetts, was the most profitable colony in the world and the source of 40% of the world's sugar. It owed this wealth to the labor of its some 450,000 to 500,000 enslaved persons, who vastly outnumbered the colony's small population of whites and free persons of color. At the peak of its slave-labor regime, Saint-Domingue attracted some 550 to 600 French ships a year and supplied two-thirds of France's colonial trade with not only sugar but also coffee, cotton, and dyewoods. As the French Revolution spawned international warfare in the Caribbean, however, fighting between the French, British, and Spanish dovetailed with slave rebellion to culminate in a war for independence. At independence in 1804, the plantation economy of the former Saint-Domingue lay mostly in ruins. By the 1820s, Haitians were importing contraband refined sugar, their sugar production days largely over. The story of Haiti's transformation from intensive plantation agriculture reliant upon chattel slavery in the eighteenth century to "strategic economic autarky" (p. 202) in the wake of revolution is the subject of Johnhenry Gonzalez's important book, *Maroon Nation*. As Gonzalez tells it, this shift was not the inevitable result of the revolution. Rather, it stemmed from deliberate choices made in its aftermath by Haitians, despite every effort made by early leaders to resurrect the country's cash crop economy.

Long treated by mainstream historians as a sideshow to the main attractions of the American and French Revolutions, the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) now figures more centrally in the historiography the Atlantic Revolutions that transformed Europe and the Americas at the end of the eighteenth century. Declaring independence from France in 1804 after more than a decade of revolutionary upheaval, the Haitian leadership established the world's first free-soil state founded by former slaves. Since the bicentennial of Haiti's Declaration of Independence in 2004, work on the Haitian Revolution has flourished. But until very recently, few had studied what happened to Haiti in the wake of revolution and independence. In 2015, Julia Gaffield recast our understanding of independent Haiti's diplomatic isolation, showing the extent to which Haiti's maintenance of some commercial networks, even if often clandestine, allowed it to maintain its independence and avoid reconquest. [1] More recently, Jean Alix René has published a thorough

examination of early Haitian statecraft particularly through the lens of land distribution, use, and taxation.[2]

Gonzalez's work does not so much contradict Gaffield's or René's, as it comes from a different perspective. While both Gaffield and René focus, in different ways, on the Haitian state (or states, since the country was riven by internal political divisions for decades after the revolution), Gonzalez trains his eye on how people survived, and what they strived for in independence from France and emancipation from slavery. Although René addresses similar themes of land distribution, Gonzalez focuses more squarely on the *cultivateurs* (farm workers) as agents in their own destiny. Subsistence farming, Gonzalez convincingly argues, was not a default measure emerging, as the white planters in exile sometimes depicted it, from Haitians' reluctance to work. Rather, it was an active choice on their part, which they wrestled from state leaders who were determined to resurrect the plantation--and especially the sugar--economy, and who were willing to coerce labor to do it. Haiti went from a colony so deadly to black human life that planters imported some 40,000 captive Africans as replacements every year in the second half of the eighteenth century to a nation whose population more than quintupled in the century after independence (p. 3), as former enslaved persons and their descendants insisted on the "freedom of a full stomach" (p. 229). This transformation occurred because the people who would have worked on those sugar plantations simply refused to do so.

Gonzalez's title--*Maroon Nation*--is evocative of his argument. Organized maroon communities, Gonzalez contends, became a larger problem for the post-independence state than they ever were during the height of slave labor under the French Old Regime (p. 139). But he also deploys the term more figuratively since Haitians all adopted a kind of "maroon" mentality in their resistance to the plantocracy, shaping the nation as they joined maroon encampments, squatted, sharecropped, and acquired small parcels of land, eventually gaining legal title. They resisted an internal passport requirement dating from Toussaint Louverture's regime, which tried to fix them to their former plantations. They cultivated their own gardens, and enjoyed the bounty from them. "Decaying, crumbling sugar mills or overgrown plantation fields" have all too often been interpreted as signs of Haiti's "helpless descent into chaos and backwardness," writes Gonzalez (p. 15). But "Haiti did not become a nation of small farmers because the plantation system fell. The plantation system fell because a large percentage of the early Haitians resolved to become small farmers" (pp. 15-16). Strategic economic autarky was not the result of decline; it was, like *marronage* itself, a triumph of individual and collective will.

Gonzalez makes clear that officials fought the turn to subsistence agriculture every way they could, while showing why they ultimately were forced to give ground. The split after the assassination of Jean-Jacques Dessalines (r. 1804-1806) between the northern kingdom, controlled by Henry Christophe until 1820, and the southern republic, led by Alexandre Pétion, opened up room for maneuver for the population. Christophe's regime was extremely coercive and notorious for its forced labor practices reminiscent of slavery, which allowed it to maintain sugar output for some time. But it was also deeply unpopular, which Pétion realized and used to his advantage by allowing some plantations in the south to be split up and acquired by smallholders, and by offering land grants for military service. In so doing, Pétion sapped Christophe of potential supporters, some of whom moved south, which in turn emboldened Haitians in the republic to continue their own resistance to large plantation agriculture. Facing rebellion, Christophe ended his own life in 1820, setting the stage for Pétion's successor, Jean-Pierre Boyer, to reunite the country under the flag of the republic.

Even Pétion, however, was a reluctant land reformer. As Gonzalez makes clear, the break-up of large plantations was not motivated by an egalitarian impulse. Rather, Pétion recognized that the survival of the regime required the acquiescence of the population. As Haiti was land rich and cash poor, he used the former to purchase loyalty. Even so, Pétion and Boyer still avoided breaking up the largest sugar plantations, which generally became state property or belonged to the military high command. But when faced with mass refusal by the populace to work under the conditions demanded by a plantation-based economy, Pétion conceded to a de facto system of partial redistribution in a variety of ways: granting title to land taken over during the revolution, as long as it was being cultivated; allowing the sale of small parcels; and offering small parcels of land in exchange for military service. Haitians' refusal of forced labor made plantation agriculture difficult, and thus depressed land prices. Gonzalez uses vivid examples to illustrate the point: It cost less, for instance, to buy a hectare of land than it did to acquire a head of cattle. A one-carreau (1.29 hectares) parcel could be obtained for the equivalent of "forty dozen eggs, eighty bottles of milk, or a hundred pounds of bread or fresh beef," or even "twenty iron hoes" (p. 182). Thus, "citizens of Haiti who could muster up the cash value of a single cow or a load of metal tools had a real chance to become legal proprietors" (p. 183). Scarcity of labor also led property owners to increasingly grant sharecroppers a half, rather than a quarter, share of the land's proceeds. Haiti's earliest leaders had criminalized sharecropping by halves, but Gonzalez notes the persistence of this *demwatye* system (p. 170). [3]

Haiti still produced some agricultural products for export, just fewer in quantity and virtually no sugar. Coffee, whose trees lasted fifty years and whose cultivation and processing were less onerous than either cotton bushes or sugar grasses, became Haiti's chief export, along with dyewoods. Unable to return to a sugar-based economy, Haiti's leaders instead engaged in predatory taxation, all of which was deemed necessary to shore up a large military for a state that remained vulnerable to French threats of reconquest. Even Jean-Pierre Boyer, who actively repressed maroon settlements and vagrancy, was unable to reverse the changes in land settlement that had emerged in the wake of the Haitian Revolution. Boyer, who also negotiated French diplomatic recognition in exchange for an indemnity to former planters originally priced at 150 million francs (later reduced to 90 million), had overestimated Haiti's ability to generate revenue through customs duties, which even his draconian *Code Rural* in 1826 could not reverse. This in turn forced Haiti to contract massive amounts of foreign debt. It was this debt that helped Haiti later fall prey to American invasion in 1915. While the U.S. occupation ended Haiti's history as a sovereign state, even American overlords hoping to establish plantations like those they controlled in Cuba and Central America could not reverse Haiti's decentralized land tenure system. If Haiti today is known as the "poorest country in the Western Hemisphere," it is partly because its land is undercapitalized. But for much of the nineteenth century, that undercapitalization was the active construction of former enslaved persons who "changed the terms of their relationship with both the world capitalist market and the island's natural resources and ecology. The result was a society that was more self-sufficient in terms of food production and relatively free of direct, intensive forms of labor exploitation" (p. 205).

The organization of *Maroon Nation*, while roughly chronological, moves back and forth in time just enough to sometimes prove confusing to the reader. There are times when Gonzalez repeats the same point (particularly when discussing Pétion's military land grants), and where streamlining might have been fruitful. But Gonzalez's deep familiarity with his subject more than compensates for these organizational shortcomings. The Haitian turns of phrase he shares throughout—for instance "sak nan min ou, e sa ki propiete ou" (that which is in your hands is

that which is your property)(p. 175)--show at once a scholar who took the trouble to immerse himself in popular culture and the long afterlife of the land tenure system he describes. Published by the prestigious Yale Agrarian Studies series edited by James Scott, the book is not only an important exemplar of that field but also a cautionary tale to a profession in which international and connected histories are all the rage. Here is a place, Gonzalez reminds us, whose citizens quite deliberately disconnected themselves, or at least their economy, from the rest of the Atlantic World. Gonzalez puts the political back in political economy, while focusing on a state that was largely autarkic for the nineteenth century. That Haiti is now dependent on foreign imports for the food it so abundantly produced in the wake of the revolution is the perverse result of what ensued after the state, forced to pay a price for an independence already won in 1804, became so indebted to foreign banks that it became an easy target for hostile bank takeovers and a U.S. military invasion. [4] Johnhenry Gonzalez fruitfully reminds us that it did not have to be this way, and if Haitians insisted that the property in their hands was their own, it was because it was also the “wellspring of their freedom” (p. 263).

NOTES

[1] Julia Gaffield, *Haitian Connections in the Atlantic World: Recognition after Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

[2] Jean Alix René, *Haïti après l’esclavage: Formation de l’État et culture politique populaire (1804-1846)* (Port-au-Prince, Haiti: L’imprimerie Le Natal S.A., 2019).

[3] The “de-moitié” system is also discussed in René, *Haïti après l’esclavage*, 137-46; 171.

[4] On the takeover of Haiti’s Central Bank by the National City Bank of New York (predecessor to Citibank), see Peter James Hudson, *Bankers and Empire: How Wall Street Colonized the Caribbean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

Mary Dewhurst Lewis
Harvard University
mdlewis@fas.harvard.edu

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.