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Lester D. Langley. *The Americas in the Age of Revolution 1750-1850.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. xvi + 374 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-06613-5.

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Exploring the Americas in Revolution

This is a remarkable and exasperating book. It is remarkable in that it covers such a wide swath of time and space–all of the Americas, including Canada, the United States, Mexico, and Central and South America, for roughly a century. It is exasperating because it refuses to draw conclusions, find unifying threads, or even give straightforward narratives of key events. It is a difficult book to read, full of odd juxtapositions, unexplained jumps, and references to many events known mainly to specialists. But perhaps for that very reason, it is constantly stimulating and challenging, for if Langley does not impose order on his materials, the reader is certainly forced to ponder whether he or she can do so.

Langley covers three major episodes of revolution–the American Revolution of 1776, the Haitian revolution of 1791, and the Latin American Revolutions of Independence beginning in 1808. Langley doesn't hesitate to evaluate the revolutions. The American is labeled a "revolution from above," in deference to the pivotal role of the Virginia planter elites; the Haitian Revolution is called the "revolution from below," although–as I note below–Langley's account diverges from that capsule description; and the Latin American revolutions are referred to collectively as "the revolution denied," due to the failure of those revolutions to establish stable democratic regimes.

Normally, one would expect a comparative history of this sort to provide comparisons and contrasts, to delve into issues of why things went one way in some cases, differently in others, or to search for common causal elements or processes. Langley does nothing of the sort, nor is he much interested in such matters. In fact, he doesn't even seek to offer a causal account of each event. Rather, he states at the beginning that his interest is in laying out "the particularity" of each case (p. 6). Thus each case is treated in rather sharp isolation from the others, and even the final chapter, titled "the revolutionary legacy," is partitioned into separate appraisals of each region.

What Langley does provide is sort of a running commentary on each case. Assuming the reader already has a thorough knowledge of events (there is no time-line, nor narrative summary of the events), Langley comments on the motivations, successes, and failures of particular actors, and discusses issues of foreign policy, taxation, class conflict, race conflict, slavery and imperialism, as they strike him as relevant. The result is a number of clever and insightful observations, and stimulating problems. But the book is a tough slog, as almost no one except Langley–who has done this unusual comparative study–really has the combined expertise in all three cases to readily follow his arguments. This is definitely not a book for beginners seeking an introduction to these events. But for experts in either colonial U.S. or Latin American history, or comparative students of revolution, slavery, and imperialism, it is worth attempting to follow Langley through his diverse cases, to see how one's preconceptions of this period hold up when carried the length of the hemisphere.

The account of the American revolution strikes me as fairly conventional, although Langley does a nice job of pointing up the class and racial differences among the various groups that fought for independence. He comments on Washington's view of his rag-tag army; on the divisions between Virginia planters and New England farmers, on the different perspectives on the revolution in the northern and southern states, and on the critical role of the western frontier from the revolution up through the Civil War. Without the Appalachian frontier in the 18th century, and Britain's efforts to close the west to the colonies, there might have been no revolution, even granting the struggles over taxation; and certainly without the dispute over extending slavery in the west and the southwest, there would have been no war over slavery. Indeed, one of the truly fine aspects of this book is its continual confrontation of the issues of slavery and race, and the immense importance such issues

had for all three conflicts. After all, every one of these revolutions was about liberty, yet took place in societies that were committed to the continuation of legal slavery.

How these issues were wrestled with, and mostly not resolved, is an oft-neglected element of general accounts that receives its deserved attention from Langley. In the end, Langley seems to believe that the American Revolution occurred because it had to–the colonies were becoming too populous, too expansionary, too self-confident, too accomplished, to acquiesce in the role of perpetual servant to the mother country that Parliament seemed to have designed for them. But Langley doesn't dwell on the issue of causation; he is more concerned to point out that even the revolutionary victory didn't resolve the problems of class and racial conflict that would bedevil American politics for the next half-century. He does, however, suggest that open land, the dominance of small independent farmers, and a true sense of noblesse oblige on the part of the planter elite, helped the infant United States avoid–for at least the few decades needed to entrench its republic–the more severe racial unrest and militarization that developed in Haiti and Latin America.

Haiti, of course, is often held up as an exception to history–a successful slave revolution. Langley's account is sufficiently complete, however, to show that it was nothing of the sort. The leaders of the revolt against French rule were certainly black, but they were not slaves–they were slave-owners themselves. Saint Domingue (as it was known before the revolution) was exceptional in the Caribbean in having a large number of free coloreds who included "French-educated planters, tradesmen, artisans and small landholders," and whose "rapid advancement occasionally alarmed even the grand blancs," or white plantation owners (p. 106). The free coloreds copied white manners and dress, and provoked a backlash of legal restrictions from the 1760s through the 1780s. Beginning with prohibitions against the practice of medicine, coloreds were later barred from serving as court clerks or notaries. By the late 1780s, coloreds were obliged to file for a permit to conduct any trade except farming. They were denied the rights of assembly, refused noble status, and kept out of the regular military. In their view, the free coloreds had become "a class of men born French, but degraded by cruel and vile prejudices and laws" (p. 106). With forty thousand whites and five hundred thousand African slaves, the colony of Saint Domingue had a similar white/slave structure to many other Caribbean and even southern British colonies. But it also had thirty thousand free coloreds, who in effect held the balance. For the white elite was sharply divided between highland and lowland, northern and southern, coffee and sugar, planter and merchant, groups. White divisions intensified when France was swept by its revolution in the 1790s, and the free coloreds stepped up to demand their rights as citizens.

An initial revolt of free coloreds was brutally suppressed by Saint Domingue's planters, but in Paris the Assembly declared that all free-born coloreds should enjoy full rights equal to the whites. Saint Domingue's leaders refused to publish this decree, but news spread and a second rebellion of free coloreds broke out. This time, however, the free colored revolts also triggered slave revolts in the northern plains. These slave revolts were ferocious–thousands of plantations were burned and hundreds of white families were killed and mutilated. In reprisal, the whites reacted with equal savagery, hanging and breaking blacks and coloreds in public squares, decapitating leaders and placing their heads on pikes. These extremes of violence then exacerbated divisions and set the stage for decades of bloody civil war.

In these wars, free coloreds first gained the support of troops sent from France. Sometimes joining with the whites to keep slaves from overthrowing the entire social order, sometimes recruiting slaves to join militias aimed at repulsing attacks from Spain or new, more conservative French governors, loyalties shifted from year to year and month to month. The only thing that steadily increased was the militarization of the populace and the arming and incitement of slaves to support various factions. In the end, black slave leaders arose, mainly Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Toussaint L'Overture (who was a free colored, but had once been a slave) who consolidated control of the island. But the struggle for independence destroyed the plantation economy, and left an impoverished land of marginal freeholders in its wake.

In mainland Latin America, the tale of independence from Spain and Portugal is long and often confusing. Langley does little to alleviate those endemic problems. But he does emphasize how race and slavery were almost as much of an issue in all of Latin America as in Haiti, although the problems in the former were more about the status of creoles, mestizos, and Native Americans than about African blacks. Langley is eloquent on the frustrations of Simon Bolivar, and on the divisions among elites that wracked Latin American societies. Everywhere, urban and rural elites fought against each other, and inter-elite struggles were entwined with class uprisings by peasants, Native Americans, and the urban poor.

The central problem in a comparative history of revolutions in the Americas, as Langley recognizes, is why

the United States emerged from its revolutionary turmoil able to sustain republican institutions, up through the eras of industrialization and civil war, while most Latin American republics gave way to military dictatorships. Langley's main answer would support recent findings regarding the key role of democratic "pacts" in stabilizing democracies. In the United States, the willingness of urban and rural elites–as represented by Alexander Hamilton and John Adams, on the one hand, and George Washington and Thomas Jefferson on the other–to find common ground initially, and then to agree on "rules of the game" for conducting their conflicts after they split into Federalist and Democratic parties, was crucial. But it also was enormously important that such agreements were undertaken by elites that were practiced in self-government and committed to civilian government and republican rule. It also helped that in the United States there was no mestizo "underclass" nor a large number of coloreds to create multiple fissures along racial lines. There certainly was a race line in the United States, but it was clear and dramatic; slaves on one side, virtually everyone else on the other. There was an abolitionist movement, and there were a tiny number of free blacks and coloreds in the north, but they did not threaten the overwhelmingly white composition of economic and social life.

In Latin America, the revolutions were not only seeking to change the region's status from colonial to free; they were also changing from a royal bureaucracy and corporatist society to one that was republican and liberal. Yet they had no local republican tradition or institutions, so abolishing the royal bureaucracy created great disorder, and opened the way for *caudillos* and military dictators. And they had no alternative to corporatism to deal with the schisms among whites, mestizos, coloreds, and slaves, so drawing a horizontal line anywhere (everyone on one side free citizens, on the other side those with diminished rights) roused fresh conflicts. In Spain itself, the Carlist wars took two generations to move Spain from monarchy to constitutional government; in France it took from 1789 until the onset of the Third Republic in 1871. So it should not astonish us that it took Latin America–where racial issues added to and overlaid class and regional conflicts–over a century to shed its monarchical and militarized skin.

This book certainly maps out new territory, for comparative studies of North and South America remain rare. Like many explorations it yields new perspectives and flashes of insight. But it is an exploration, not a full survey or a mapping expedition, and much follow-up work remains to be done if we are to fully grasp the differences in the causes and outcomes of these perplexing events.

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