H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeremy D. Popkin. *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 440 pp. $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-51722-5; $24.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-73194-2.

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Published on H-LatAm (May, 2011)
Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo

Jeremy D. Popkin and Haitian Revolutionary Studies

In a lead editorial from the July 22, 1793, issue of the Saint-Domingue journal *L'Ami de l'Égalité* we read the following indictment of past efforts at suppressing the ongoing slave revolt in France's most valuable colony: "For three years now, we have been stupidly making war against them, as if they were machines that would, as a matter of course, bend themselves to the yoke, once we managed to defeat them." The result of this misguided policy, the article continues, was that "the insurgent negroes have consistently displayed a perfect solidarity, a sense of purpose, a strategy [*politique*] for attaining their goal of *liberty for all* that is more profound, more astute, and better devised than the wretched & paltry means we have used to drive them back into slavery."[1] Writing from Cap Français, the editor of this republican journal, Jean-Baptiste Picquenard (who was at the time also serving as secretary to the civil commissioners in charge of the colony, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Etienne Polverel), articulated a newly visible politics of *liberté générale* (freedom for all) that was being assimilated by the embattled agenda of republicanism in the colony. It was this politics that would soon be legitimized in Sonthonax's abolition proclamation in the Northern Province of Saint-Domingue on August 29, which would in turn lead directly to the general emancipation decree of the French National Convention, the law of 16 Pluviôse (February 4, 1794).

Picquenard's July editorial thus looked forward to Sonthonax's world-historical proclamation a month later, but it also looked back to the previous month of June, to an equally world-historical *journée* (day) in Cap Français that shook the colony to its very foundations and that provides the central focus of Jeremy D. Popkin's archivally rich and narratively gripping book, winner of the French Historical Society's prestigious David Pinkney Prize for 2010. This was the *journée* of June 20, which initiated five days of violence described by Popkin as "the most murderous instance of urban conflict in the entire history of the Americas" (p. 2). On that day, the recently appointed governor general of the colony, François-Thomas Galbaud, after being ordered back to France by the civil commissioners, chose to put himself "'at the head of a large number of sailors and about 150 soldiers"' (in the words of another Saint-Domingue journalist, H. D. de Saint-Maurice) and launch an improvised attack on the city that came within a whisker of overthrowing the French Republic's official representatives in the colony. This regime change would be stymied by Sonthonax and Polverel's proclamation of June 21, which offered freedom to any male slaves willing to fight on behalf of the republic against Galbaud and his supporters. This momentous decision, which reflected the commissioners' mounting desperation but also their deep-seated abolitionist principles, constituted the first attempt to "fuse the black insurgency with the French cause" (p. 236). By the time night fell on June 24, most of the city had burned to the ground and Galbaud's defeated forces were already en route to the United States, marking, in the words of C. L. R. James, "the end of white domination in San Domingo," and paving the way for Sonthonax's abolition decree.[2] In that same July 22 editorial of *L'Ami de l'Égalité*, Picquenard described the colony's dramatic transformation in the following terms: "the people of Saint-Domingue are no longer what they were, three months ago."[3] No longer identified with the small white elite who had never stopped dreaming, "in a ferocious delirium, of the overthrow and destruction of the republican government," the people now consisted in "the good and intrepid defenders of liberty, the citizens of 4 April [the free coloureds, Sonthonax and Polverel's firmest allies at the time]; the unfortunate victims that the republic has rescued from slavery, the citizens of 10 [*sic*] June; and those whites who, always faithful to their *patrie*, have not let circumstances affect either their be-

liefs or their conduct" (p. 4-5).

Picquenard's emphasis on the radical transformation of the people of Saint-Domingue in the summer of 1793 confirms Popkin's overarching argument that the events of June were a major "turning point" of the Haitian Revolution, which "decisively alter[ed] the range of historical possibilities that were previously present, ruling out some of them and making others plausible in a way that they had not been beforehand" (p. 386). It was a major turning point, but also a curiously neglected one, for, as Popkin points out in his introduction, the crisis in Cap Français "has never been the focus of a thorough historical study," and the fact that James devoted only a page of his *The Black Jacobins* to this event is, as Popkin also notes, emblematic of that neglect (p. 4, 7). The relative silence surrounding the *journée* of June 20 in the increasingly numerous academic studies of the Haitian Revolution can be explained readily enough, Popkin argues, since it was "a crisis that had little to do with slavery," and one in which Toussaint Louverture played no part, thus making it of little interest to "scholars who make his actions the center of their narratives" (p. 20, 8). To shift the focus away from the summer of 1791 to that of 1793, and from the slave plantations to the colonial city, is to gain a new and in many respects disorienting perspective on both the Haitian and the French revolutions, one that "upsets accepted historical wisdom about the nature and logic of events in Saint-Domingue itself" and "also disturbs standard historical narratives about the French Revolution's policy toward slavery," for without Galbaud's "disastrous miscalculation on the morning of June 20, 1793, there would have been no emancipation decree of June 21 and very likely no abolition law of 16 pluviôse" (p. 12, 385). I will have more to say about Popkin's relation to accepted wisdom and standard narratives, but first a summary of the book's contents is in order.

The book's eleven chapters tell a tale in three parts. The opening four chapters provide the necessary background for understanding the events of 1793, beginning with a relatively concise overview of the oft-narrated early years of the French and Haitian revolutions (including the slave revolt of 1791), followed by the somewhat less familiar story of Sonthonax and Polverel's "experiment in revolutionary government" in the months after their arrival in the colony in September 1792 (p. 98). Popkin follows these committed, but cautious, representatives of the antislavery movement as they confronted a series of crises, including dogged resistance from "colonial whites" in Cap Français; the eventual surmounting of this resistance taught Sonthonax the important lesson that although these whites "were incorrigibly hostile to the Republic, [they] could safely be treated as a negligible factor in local politics" (p. 120)–and, indeed, they would end up playing an extremely marginal role in the events of June. Popkin's concerted attention to "local politics" in these opening chapters is one sign, among many, of his desire to provide a more heterogeneous account of the Haitian Revolution by emphasizing the ways in which the urban milieu of Cap Français differed significantly from the world of the plantations that gave birth to the slave revolt. This milieu was "a good deal more complicated than the world of the plantations," allowing for the cultivation of "relationships that were not based solely on force and violence, and under conditions that offered members of the nonwhite population some real opportunities to make a better life for themselves" (p. 68, 53). The colonial city is portrayed as a place in which the entire population (notably the free people of color, but also the urban slaves) had a stake, and Popkin's nuanced portrayal of "the transatlantic urban culture of the Enlightenment era" in these early chapters represents one of the major historiographical gains of his book (p. 54).

The book's three middle chapters are its centerpiece, providing an extraordinarily detailed and compelling reconstruction of the events of June. Chapter 5, "A Model Republican General," offers an extended portrait of General Galbaud, who arrived in the colony on May 6, 1793–accompanied by his family entourage: his brother César; his wife, "the ineffable Madame Galbaud" (p. 384); and three children–to take up his post as governor general of the colony, to the great alarm of the civil commissioners, who suspected him of counterrevolutionary ambitions. Popkin succeeds in turning someone who has been conventionally treated as a straw man, someone more or less resembling Sonthonax and Polverel's idea of Galbaud, into a more complex and ambivalent figure, stressing, for instance, that, far from being the "royalist" that even recent historians of the Haitian Revolution still sometimes characterize him as, the general was a man who had "thrown in his lot with the Revolution and the Jacobins at a time when few veteran officers had been willing to do so" (p. 7, 177). Chapter 6, "The Power Keg Explodes," provides a blow-by-blow account of the *journée* of June 20, which came about through Galbaud's fateful decision not to obey Sonthonax and Polverel's deportation order and return to France–a "disastrous miscalculation" that for Popkin serves as a reminder "that weakness and bad judgment can often cause more destruction than outright malignity" (p. 385). Popkin stresses that Galbaud launched his attack on the city in the name of the same republican principles that the commissioners were

defending: the *journée* was "a fight between rival groups of French republicans," rather than "the result of a counterrevolutionary conspiracy or of British intrigue, as the commissioners and their supporters in France would assert and as many historians have continued to assume" (p. 190, 189). After this detailed, gripping account of the *journée*, the following chapter ("Freedom and Fire") effectively concludes the book's middle section with a briefer chronicle of the remaining four days of "urban warfare," which ended with Galbaud and the entire French fleet's flight on June 24 (p. 199).

The final four chapters of the book explore the immediate aftermath of the failed attack on Cap Français. Notwithstanding the city's almost total destruction by fire, the defeat of Galbaud "opened the door to mass emancipation" (p. 213). Popkin perforce devotes a good deal of time to narrating the relatively familiar story of the double abolition of slavery in Saint-Domingue and France, first by Sonthonax and Polverel in a series of proclamations from August to October, and then by the National Convention. However, that story proves inseparable from less familiar events associated with Galbaud's sojourn in the United States from July to February 1794, the chronicling of which allows Popkin to provide an insightful portrait of Saint-Domingue refugee culture in the United States and, especially, to highlight the crucial, if largely neglected, role played by the French plenipotentiary minister to the United States, Edmond Genet, in enabling the abolition of slavery in France through his "campaign against the French refugees who were determined to overturn Sonthonax's and Polverel's policy of slave emancipation" (p. 318-319). Genet's successful efforts at "delaying the return of Galbaud and the white refugees," while at the same time expediting the arrival in France of a delegation sent by Sonthanax and Polverel to justify their decision to abolish slavery in the colony, can be said to have made possible the Convention's abolition decree of 16 Pluviôse (p. 326). When the Convention "finally reversed itself and voted to abolish slavery" on that memorable day, it was in direct response to a stirring speech by one of the civil commissioners' delegates, Louis Dufay–a speech that, among other things, put a definitive end to the pro-slavery machinations of the indefatigable white colonial lobbyists, Pierre-François Page and Augustin-Jean Brulley, whose distressingly effective efforts between July 1792 and January 1794 at sidetracking the abolitionist movement, and in which we "encounter genuine evil," are chronicled in no small detail in the penultimate chapter (p. 384). World-historical as it indubitably was, the Convention's abolition decree would have been a dead letter upon its arrival in the colony on June 8, 1794, had it not been for Sonthonax and Polverel's extraordinary efforts during the interim at fighting off both the Spanish and the British. Thanks to those efforts, Popkin concludes, "there was still a French foothold in Saint-Domingue where the law could be proclaimed and a French government and army with which Toussaint Louverture could ally himself" (p. 285).

That the successful unfolding of the Haitian Revolution depended on contingent circumstances such as these is the primary lesson Popkin draws from the page-turning story he has told, one that bears no small resemblance to the age-old wisdom of Pascal regarding the length of Cleopatra's nose. Popkin's emphasis on such contingencies, and on the *journée* of June 20 in particular, serves for him as a cautionary reminder that there was no golden thread of inevitability linking the slave uprising of 1791 to the declaration of Haitian independence in 1804: "the connection between 1791 and 1804 was instead highly contingent," and it depended "on the outcome of a crisis that was not directly produced by the insurrection and that might have had very different results" (p. 9-10). That is Popkin's lesson about how history really works, and it is inseparable from another lesson that he draws from the events of 1793, about how human beings work. As he remarks in the concluding lines of his introduction, the story he will tell is one "full of heroism, but also of human folly, of misunderstandings, and unintended consequences; in short, it is a story of real people, of all races, with their limitations and contradictions, who found themselves in extraordinary circumstances." Precisely because of this circumstantial combination of heroism and folly, Popkin concludes, if his story's "lessons are sometimes less clear-cut than some readers would like, that is, perhaps, a reminder that history is not a simple morality play" (p. 22). Comments such as these exemplify the book's anti-moralizing lesson about "real people" (whose reality always seems to gain in depth whenever it is in contradiction with the logic of their principles). The main point about Popkin's clear-cut and simple lesson that needs to be addressed in the remainder of this review is that the drawing of it depends on the chastising, if not scapegoating, of "some readers." Who, we might ask, are those readers in need of being reminded that "history is not a simple morality play," that it "does indeed move in mysterious ways," and why should this lesson matter (p. 385)?

The vague reference to "some readers" at the end of the introduction is typical of a tendency in Popkin's book to avoid naming names when it comes to his friends and enemies in Haitian revolutionary studies, which makes

this brilliant work of archival history somewhat less compelling from a historiographical point of view as well as rather opaque from an ideological point of view. Such appeals to unnamed individuals are especially prevalent in the concluding pages of the book, where (just to cite a few examples) we are informed that the emphasis on the role of Saint-Domingue's black population in challenging slavery "has sometimes resulted in a reductionist account of these events," but with no mention of who these reductionists are. Similarly, we are warned against those who are making the Haitian Revolution "bear the weight of present-day concerns," but with no mention of who these presentist scholars are and no explanation of how their work evinces "a tendency to elevate the protagonists in these struggles to an almost superhuman status, to isolate opposition to slavery from the other issues of the time, and to attribute to some of the participants in these debates the views of twenty-first-century defenders of human rights, while condemning other historical figures for their failure to measure up to this anachronistic standard" (p. 382). Such discrete pronouncements might seem like mere instances of rhetorical *politesse*, but they actually signal, I would argue, an evident reluctance on the author's part to clarify what is at stake in his own project of "challeng[ing] deeply held beliefs about the power of libertarian ideals and of human agency" (p. 10). *That* Popkin is committed to challenging these beliefs could not be clearer; but, given the lack of a more explicit engagement with those whose beliefs he opposes, it is altogether less clear *why* he mounts this challenge, and what he hopes will result from it.

To be sure, there a few moments in this long book where some such engagement is undertaken, notably in its introduction, where an occasional footnote breaks out into a historiographical skirmish with flesh-and-blood opponents. Revealingly enough, those taken to task often turn out to be radical (one could even say neo-Jacobin) historians of the French and Haitian revolutions: Florence Gauthier's contention that "the essence of the French Revolution was a universalist conception of natural rights" is refuted, for instance, as is Nick Nesbitt's claim that "the black insurgents were directly inspired by the French Declaration of Rights of 1789" (p. 13n18, 18n26). As far as the specifics go, these refutations are plausible enough. After reading Popkin's book, it is difficult not to conclude along with him, against Gauthier, that there was "nothing inevitable or ideologically predetermined about the Convention's abolition decree: it took the shock wave emanating from Cap Français to bring it about" (p. 15). Gauthier's obliviousness to the transatlantic complexities of the double abolition of slavery in France and its colonies is indeed symptomatic of the sort of francocentric logic that created the need for Haitian revolutionary studies in the first place. Likewise, one can readily concede to Popkin's authority when he remarks that Nesbitt's claim is based on precious little historical evidence, all of it assailable in one way or another. If Popkin is the clear winner in both instances, however, these skirmishes do render evident what is for the most part kept under wraps in his politely phrased critiques of unnamed reductionists and presentists: namely, that to insist on the power of contingency and circumstances as opposed to that of libertarian ideals and human agency is not only to take one's distance from readings of the Haitian Revolution that stress, in Nesbitt's phrase, the project of "universal emancipation" (*Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* [2008]), but also to place oneself in a questionable relation to that very project itself. One can see why, in the particular context of this world-historical revolution, a strategic discretion might prove preferable to a more open historiographical exchange, since the more explicit the critique of those committed to the logic of revolutionary principles becomes, the more likely it is that one's own argument runs the risk of appearing a deeply conservative gesture.

This impressively researched book is surely *not* making a conservative statement about the Haitian Revolution. But exactly what kind of statement *is* it making? Without presuming to know the answer to that question, I would, in closing, like to highlight two autobiographical passages from the book that are certainly vital pieces of evidence for anyone interested in answering it. These two passages, which come from the very beginning and the very end of the book, are ones in which the author explicitly situates himself in relation to the very same "present-day concerns" that are said to have unduly influenced some of his fellow historians in their "anachronistic" accounts of the fall of Saint-Domingue.

In the opening paragraphs of his preface, Popkin provides a personalized account of why his book follows the approach of "'traditional' political history, with its emphasis on individuals, short time frames, and contingent events," instead of adhering to the institutionally dominant approach that he had imbibed "during his graduate training in history in the early 1970s," which emphasized that "the great events of history were to be explained in terms of large impersonal forces–social structures, cultural paradigms, intellectual discourses" (p. x). The neat characterization of these two antagonistic approaches to history telling raises expectations of a historiographical debate, bearing on the specific field of Haitian revolu-

tionary studies, that is at best only implicitly present in *You Are All Free*, as has been shown. More to the point, though, are the reflections on "present-day concerns" that Popkin cites as being in part responsible for his "decision to revert to working as a 'pure' historian," after a decade of writing about autobiography from the perspective of a "literary analyst": his preoccupation with "individuals, short time frames, and contingent events" was prompted, we are told, by "the way in which President Bush had launched the United States into the bloody adventure in Iraq," because it was a war "that seemed less the product of long-term and inevitable processes than of decisions taken by a handful of political leaders" (p. x, ix, x). It is highly ironic, to say the least, that a book which so insistently challenges the power of human agency should place this much weight on the decisions of a few men, divorcing the neo-orientalist adventure of George W. Bush, Jr. and his cronies from whatever "social structures, cultural paradigms, intellectual discourses" may have determined their sense, as it were, of exactly how long Saddam Hussein's nose was. In fact, this opening anecdote anticipates a central contradiction of Popkin's book as a whole: his desire to shift the focus away from structural factors leads to an emphasis on the power of individuals that aligns very uneasily with his general critique of any and all interpretations of the Haitian Revolution that stress the power, rather than the limits, of human agency when it comes to the principled enactment of "libertarian ideals." The specific point, though, that can be drawn from this opening engagement with "present-day concerns," and its (presumably disapproving) invocation of Bush's "bloody adventure" in Iraq, is that whatever blame might be attached to "a handful of political leaders" does not here extend to any *system* of which they were a part and which might account for some of their actions. Whatever statement this book is making, then, would appear grounded in a politics that is committed to the idea of individual rather than systemic responsibility for social injustice.

In the final paragraphs of the book, Popkin recounts a visit he made in November 2008 to Cap Haïtien, armed with a 1795 map of the city whose revolutionary fortunes he has chronicled in such detail. Unlike the opening invocation of Iraq, the description of "present-day Haiti" unfolds without any reference to the actions of world-historical figures such as Bush (who helped initiate another of his "bloody adventures" there in 2004, when he helped spearhead the Franco-American-Canadian coup that deposed Aristide). Although Haiti's "social and economic problems are all too evident in the city's streets," it is not structural factors such as these to which the author draws our attention but, rather, the hope he sees on these streets, "the hope for a better future represented by the groups of schoolchildren, in their neatly pressed uniforms, who crowd the sidewalks in the mornings," a hope that "first blossomed amid the ruins of the city in 1793," and to which the Saint-Domingue journalist Saint-Maurice gave voice when, shortly after the burning of Cap Français and the white exodus from the colony, he expressed the wish that "the former residents of the city would return, and that they would 'practice the love of equality'" (p. 395, 396). History may have "dashed Saint-Maurice's dreams for a racially integrated society in Le Cap," we are told in the final sentence of the book, "but we can still hope for a world in which the people of Haiti and those of the rest of the world will be able to live together peacefully and share the benefits of that freedom to which the conflicts in Saint-Domingue more than 200 years ago made a crucial contribution" (p. 396).

What is there to remark on, much less quarrel with, in this benign vision of the "free people" of Cap Haïtien? Subjecting these seemingly anodyne pronouncements to any sort of critical scrutiny might well seem a needlessly excessive gesture. And yet, I would venture, there is an important, if by no means clear-cut and simple, lesson to be drawn from paying (excessive) attention to a passage such as this, for a close tracking of the ways in which Popkin's concluding vision both draws to the fore and yet shies away from "present-day concerns" in Haiti makes it possible to pose the following set of questions, which would, if answered, surely be of no small help in identifying exactly what sort of statement his superbly researched and beautifully written work of "pure" history is making, and what sort of politics undergirds it. What is at stake in representing Haiti and its hope through the figure of the (school) child, a metonymic identification that can be traced back, with disturbing ease, to the image-repertoire of colonial discourse? What is at stake in putting the spotlight on "real people" like these (unraced) children rather than placing the emphasis on the social and economic problems that surround them? What is at stake in appealing to a hope that is completely divorced from any and all consideration of how those problems might best be resolved (more neoliberal discipline imposed from on high by the inheritors of George W. Bush, Jr. or principled attacks, by whatever means necessary, on the foundations of neo-colonial power in Haiti)? And, finally, what is at stake in taking the seductively inclusive rhetoric of a journalist like Saint-Maurice as one's touchstone for understanding what "the love of equality" means, rather than pursuing his fellow journalist Picquenard's decidedly less consen-

sual insight that for every friend of equality there will always be enemies whose delirious beliefs and conduct have not changed with the circumstances, and who will oppose, in a systematic manner and with all their might, any and every politics intent on promoting, and attaining, the still elusive goal of *liberté générale*?

Notes

[1]. *L'Ami de l'Égalité* (Cap Français), no. 13 (July 22, 1793): 2. An incomplete run of this journal can be consulted on microfilm at the Centre d'Archives d'Outre-Mer in Aix-la-Provence (CAOM, 87 MIOM 15), as well as at the Archives nationales in Paris. For more on Picquenard, see my introduction to his two novels about the Saint-Domingue revolution, *Adonis suivi de Zoflora et de documents inédits* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), vii-xl.

[2]. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, rev. ed. (1938; New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 127.

[3]. *L'Ami de l'Égalité* (Cap Français), no. 13 (July 22, 1793): 4.

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Citation: Chris Bongie. Review of Popkin, Jeremy D., *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. May, 2011.
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