In the late eighteenth century, the tectonics of transatlantic revolution significantly affected the United States, much as the Americans could claim that the American Revolution affected the Atlantic world. To that effect, James Alexander Dun, a professor of early American history at Princeton University, concurs with the recent challenge of Michael Drexler and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon that “it should no longer be possible to write a history of the early republic of the United States without mentioning Haiti, or St. Domingue, the French colonial name of the colony known as ‘the pearl of the Antilles’ and the site of a world historical anticolonial, antislavery revolution that occurred between 1789 and 1804.”[1] Dun’s Dangerous Neighbors emphasizes that the United States was not set apart from the rest of the world, but entwined and susceptible to external pressure and turmoil that calibrated both its self-understanding as well as its understanding of foreign affairs.

Scholarly interest in the Haitian Revolution has long referenced the claim of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (1998) that the Haitian Revolution was silenced: it became “unthinkable” due to the years of discourse about Haiti and also scholarly interpretation that set it apart from discourse about the Age of Revolution. Complementing earlier work on the Haitian Revolution and the United States, such as Ashli White’s Encountering Revolution (2010) and Ronald Angelo Johnson’s Diplomacy in Black and White (2014), Dun engages the dynamics of that silencing as they played out on the ground in Philadelphia, peeling it back layer by layer. Dangerous Neighbors is specifically about the Haitian Revolution that Americans made, and how Haiti functioned as “a lodestar to American audiences” (p. 24): this was not to say that they fabricated it, but rather that American domestic political concerns shaped its meaning and significance. The Haitian Revolution, like the French Revolution to which it was intimately connected, invited Americans to talk about themselves with regard to both, and to position the United States and the American Revolution accordingly in foreign and domestic matters. Discourse and narratives about the Haitian Revolution began as news that circulated through the early republic’s print public sphere (p. 7). St. Domingue’s “career as a divisive standard in American politics” (p. 31) stemmed from ruminations on the nature of revolution. Implied in these discussions was the extent to which the United States provided an example of revolution for the world to emulate: whether revolution was an orderly or violent activity, whether slavery was compatible with republican self-government, and also the limits to which the United States had—in the words of Thomas Paine’s Common Sense (1776) — the “power to begin the world over again.”

Dun’s decision to center his study on Philadelphia as a site for which Americans contended with the Haitian Revolution is a judicious, creative, and illuminating one that provides an excellent example of what David Armitage has called “cis-Atlantic history”[2]: for most of the Haitian Revolution, Philadelphia was the capitol. It was important in the Atlantic world as a center of revolutionary activity, a clearing house for printed information and a hub for newspaper politics of national significance, and also an important hive of antislavery activity. The multivalent significance of Philadelphia is made
all the more apparent for its being one of the major US port metropolises where white-planter refugees from St. Domingue arrived by the boatload when the capitol of Cap François exploded in 1793 as a result of slave insurrection. All of these factors made it “the new nation’s center of gravity” (p. 4). This is a meticulously researched and lucid work, drawing on an extensive array of manuscript and print sources. The book’s geographical sensibility collapses the separation between the United States, the West Indies, and Europe. Dun’s close reading of Philadelphia newspaper sources reveals the complexities of Americans’ responses to the Haitian Revolution’s challenges to their own revolution, its ideals, and promise at the national and local levels. His skillful and intricate weaving of St. Domingue and Haiti into the interplay between foreign and domestic affairs is admirable, and all the more so for his sense of the newspaper’s significance as a political medium in the early republic: those from the capitol were the most capacious and wide-ranging, and newspapers played “an essential role in maintaining the nation’s political health” (p. 12).

While this book has much to offer historians of the early republic, I have one small criticism. Dun’s treatment of the South with regard to the Federalist and Republican national political calculus is not better fleshed out, even for its limited mention: the ascendant Jeffersonian Republicans adopted a focus for their nationalist outlook more compliant with Southern slaveholding interests. As Padraig Riley has demonstrated in Slavery and the Democratic Conscience (2016), that focus formed a basis for consensus within Republican ranks, in effect forcing the compliance of northern Republicans in Philadelphia on the slavery question.

Historians of US foreign relations will find this book valuable in various ways. Foreign relations involve not just policy, interests, and connections with the rest of the world, but how a nation makes sense of itself. In the early national period, the United States made sense of itself within an Atlantic world where it was not primarily playing the role of globalizer but being globalized. Moreover, the transatlantic emphasis of the book stresses that the United States did not provide the sole viable revolutionary paradigm. Engagement with the Haitian (and French) Revolution(s) forced a reckoning with the limits of the American Revolution and its ideals at the national level, and in ways that involved partisan rivalry and tectonic shifts within the Federalist and Republican camps and their partisan nationalist visions. These developments “decentered the birth of the United States, making it representative, not exceptional” (p. 79).

Dangerous Neighbors also enhances discussions of the politics of slavery and its contours in the early United States. The politics of slavery may generally be understood as the critical question of slavery’s place in the Union. The Haitian Revolution confronted Americans with the question via pressures from within and without, through the movement of people, material objects, and information. For one, discussions of slavery tended to arise frequently in public discourse, even when Americans thought they were talking about other things. In Peter S. Onuf’s observation: there are several overarching narratives in American history, and slavery was important to all of them.[3] In addition, the politics of slavery were always potent enough to affect everything they touched. This necessarily includes any and all discussions of the relations of the United States with the rest of the world. Dun demonstrates that the Haitian example showed Americans that slavery had to be contained in order to be made safe for America, its revolution, and republican government: for Jefferson and Adams as well as all white Americans, “the island was to be treated as an independent entity that, because of its dangerous nature, needed to be kept separate from the rest of the hemisphere” (p. 207).

Discourse about foreign relations—public and private, popular and official—pertains to the shaping of history, memory, and a usable past. It is subject to the meeting of international exchange and domestic conditions. All of those dynamics at work in the early republic culminated in a process where St. Domingue became a “black” place, separate, “other,” and primarily associated with disorder and violence. As a result, Americans struggled in their diplomatic relations with the former island colony whether or not to recognize it as a nation (p. 208). As Jessica Gienow-Hecht has shown in Trans-mission Impossible (1999)—a study of the role of newspapers in the American rehabilitation of post-World War II Germany—the extent to which outside influence like news is received, understood, and the impact that it has in shaping hearts and minds greatly depends on the local dynamics that shape perceptions and interests. Studies of similar phenomena from the time of the United States’ own early formation as a nation are at least an apt reminder that these issues and problems are not new.

Notes


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