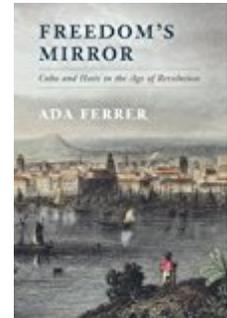


Ada Ferrer. *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. xiv + 377 pp. \$29.98, paper, ISBN 978-1-107-69778-2.



Reviewed by Dante Barksdale

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Commissioned by Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

The “global Haitian revolution” is a term that has become associated with the liberation struggles of Latin America. Whether directly or indirectly, the social upheaval that occurred in the French colony of Saint-Domingue had reverberations throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. Across the region, these reactions resulted in radical policies, gradual emancipation, and abolition of slavery during and after the early nineteenth-century wars of independence. Cuba differed by embracing a slave-based plantation society that burgeoned after the Haitian Revolution, proving that the spirit of liberty did not affect all the Spanish American colonies. Ada Ferrer’s work, *Freedom’s Mirror, Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution*, juxtaposes the slave-led Haitian Revolution and the sugar revolution that was instigated by Cuban planters in the surrounding decades. While using the Haitian Revolution and the following kingdom of King Henri Christophe I in the north of Haiti as a backdrop, Ferrer’s work positions Havana and western Cuba in a global context and shows how the emerging

conservatism of that society differed from the more radical black republic that emerged just fifty miles across the Windward Channel.

There has been an explosion of literature on the Haitian Revolution in the past few decades and especially since the earthquake in 2010. Many of these works focus on its origins, the revolution itself, or its immediate aftermath. Ferrer joins Phillipe Girard, Laurent Dubois, David Geggus, and others in chronicling the history of the first black republic, but she goes further in her contextualization of its outcomes. In her transnational approach to Cuba and Haiti, she succinctly connects the Spanish and French colonies of the region to the revolutionary spirit of the early 1800s. Ferrer contextualizes the role that both places played in Santo Domingo, making clear the importance of both ideological and physical exchange. She explains how fear of an exported Haitian Revolution landed on the shores of Cuba, showing how French soldiers who used Cuba as a launching point for their attempt to reimpose the prerevolutionary order in Haiti instilled a deep fear of

the change they had found in the planter elites when they later retreated back to Havana. At the same time, Ferrer explains how the commercial benefits that could be reaped by recreating the Haitian sugar plantation outweighed, but did not mitigate, these same elites' fears. She uses the economic vacuum created by the revolution to explain the emergence of the new plantation system in Cuba.

Ferrer uses several individuals to contextualize and explain the Havana elites' many fears of the possible exportation of the rebellious slave spirit that gripped Haiti. These characters are drawn from her rich use of newspapers and archival sources from numerous archives in Haiti, France, Spain, Cuba and the United States. Toussaint L'Ouverture, military leader of the Haitian Revolution and Haiti, Henri Christophe, leader of the Haitian kingdom in the north, Jean-Francois/Juan Barbier, the imposter liberator who appeared in Cuba in 1812, Governor Marie-Louis Ferrand, who helped reclaim eastern Hispaniola for the Spanish, and Jose Antonio Aponte, a man in Cuba who attempted to lead a slave rebellion in March 1812, all feature prominently in the work and carry the narrative by adding a human element to these large and complex colonial and national stories. Ferrer also uses several important dates to center her work: the British occupation in 1762, the origins of the Haitian Revolution and the Haitian Declaration of Independence in 1792 and 1804, and the Napoleonic invasion of Spain in 1808. The use of key dates and individuals to anchor the narrative gives *Freedom's Mirror* a coherent and comprehensive as well as precise explanation of this tumultuous time.

Ferrer begins the primary analysis of her study with the British occupation of Havana in 1762 and the changes that it brought to the city's racial and economic development. In addition to taking the right for British ships to trade at Havana, the British imported four thousand slaves during the few months they occupied the city, a

significant number compared to twenty thousand whom the Spanish had imported the twenty years prior and the sixty thousand who had been imported since the colony's inception in 1511 (pp. 19-20). This, along with technological advances in sugar and tobacco production, began the shift from a society with slaves to a slave society in the western Cuban plains. Despite these shifts, Cuban planters and their elite allies in Havana could not compete with the output of the French colony of Saint-Domingue. Only after the eruption of the Haitian Revolution in 1791 did the Cuban planters' crops and profits balloon, along with their determination to maintain slavery despite the emancipation and revolution that was occurring in neighboring countries.

The rest of the book follows how Cuba was affected by and how it reacted to the Haitian Revolution. In her analysis, Ferrer seeks to answer two questions. First, she asks how Haiti exported the fear of slave revolt, free soil, independence, liberty, and emancipation without ever supporting or instigating one single foreign slave insurrection. Second, she asks how and why Cuba responded to the most violent slave revolt in the New World by increasing its own commitment to slavery. In answering the first question, Ferrer argues that Haiti helped reimagine the space Atlantic slavery and Afro-descended peoples had in the greater world in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. This space was created by black Haitian citizens but reimaged and corrupted by the primarily white elites of the era. The northern plain of Saint-Domingue, the part of Haiti closest to Cuba, was the birthplace of the Haitian Revolution. The principal city of the region, known as Guarico to the Spanish (Cap-Français), would become synonymous in Cuba with the massive slave revolt that erupted in 1791. This connection ties Ferrer's first question to her second. Her exploration of this fear of revolution shows how it motivated two competing trains of thought about the emergence of Cuba as a slave society. To recreate the wealth of Saint-Domingue, Cuban elites knew they would

have to import massive numbers of slaves, but in doing so they also recognized that they would be recreating the conditions of the Haitian Revolution. To counter this fear, Ferrer demonstrates, elites immediately began explaining the Haitian Revolution as an expression of the violent tendencies of Africans who were enslaved, not a reaction to the violence of slavery. Ferrer argues that this justification helped secure Cuba's continued hold and expansion of slavery. Yet, as she also shows, this fear was unfounded. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the first leader of independent Haiti, proclaimed, "Let our neighbors live in peace ... let us not, as revolutionary firebrands, declare ourselves legislators of the Antilles, nor let our glory consist in troubling the peace of our neighbors" and upheld that proclamation (p. 189). Whether agents were carrying out plans to lead slave rebellions across the Caribbean or whether the spectral imaginings by the planter elites of another slave-led rebellion haunted them, Ferrer acknowledges and explores how both narratives circulated and influenced Haitian and Cuban relations.

The specter of another Haiti drove the Cuban consciousness during the late colonial era and, because of it, Cuba served as the antithesis to the free soil, peasant-led, black republic of Haiti. Haiti at this time actively worked to suppress the slave trade by commandeering slave vessels that sailed through its sovereign waters and freeing the captives on board. Black sailors spread fact and fiction of the new country and those became legend around the Caribbean, increasing the perceived fears of Haiti exporting its slave rebellion. Yet when Cuba began its own independence struggles in the 1860s Antonio Maceo looked to "form a new republic assimilated to our sister of Santo Domingo and Haiti" (p. 340). Ferrer's work brings the slavery and antislavery debates of Haiti and Cuba into the nineteenth century and shows how the trajectories of both countries were woven together despite heading for diametrically opposed end goals.

Erratum: The original version of this review mistakenly named Jose Marti instead of Antonio Maceo.—ed. (5/10/17)

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