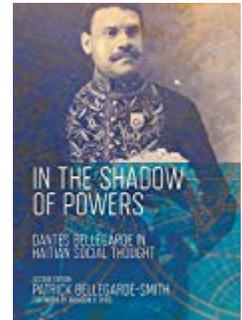


Patrick Bellegarde-Smith. *In the Shadow of Powers: Dantes Bellegarde in Haitian Social Thought.* Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press, 2019. 256 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8265-2226-9.



Reviewed by Celucien L. Joseph (Indian River State College)

Published on H-Haiti (March, 2020)

Commissioned by Grégory Pierrot (University of Connecticut at Stamford)

I was introduced to the writings of Louis-Marie Dantès Bellegarde as a graduate student while writing a doctoral dissertation on the relationship between Haiti and the African diaspora. I discovered him as I investigated Haiti's historic influence on the emergence of black internationalism and pan-Africanism. He was also relevant to my interest in the development of Haiti's intellectual history, from the colonial era to the first half of the twentieth century, and my research on the American military occupation in Haiti, 1915-34.[1] This watershed event provided the historical context for Bellegarde's rise in Haitian politics, according to the author of the present work. Finally, I was drawn to Bellegarde because I was fascinated with the ideas of Jean Price-Mars. Both Price-Mars and Bellegarde were public servants, diplomats, pan-Africanists, and good friends, prolific writers, and giant intellectuals of Haitian history; yet on Haitian culture and its origins, the Vodou religion, and Haiti's connection with Europe and Africa, the intellectual worldviews of these influential Haitian thinkers differ greatly and substantially. While the

former accentuates African DNA in the creation of the Haitian society, the latter highlights French influence in Haitian culture. Price-Mars valorized the African cultural traditions and practices in Haiti, while Bellegarde promoted Catholicism, the French language, and Western-French civilization in Haiti.[2] In this well-researched and important work, Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (grandson of Dantès Bellegarde) explores these two opposing worldviews even as the main focus is on his ancestor's thought. While Bellegarde-Smith takes a Price-Marsian approach to the origin and identity of the Haitian society, he nevertheless accentuates the merits and contributions of Bellegarde, including his firm opposition to and insightful critique of the American military occupation in Haiti; his unapologetic defense of Haiti's national sovereignty and political and economic independence during the time of the Occupation; his historic efforts to articulate a positive public image of Haiti to the international community and at the League of Nations; his role as an apologist for the Haitian nation and Haiti's Western and Christian heritage;

and his service to his native land, especially his manifold contribution in the areas of public education reform, economic development, social transformation, and political revitalization.

Bellegarde-Smith first published *In The Shadow of Powers: Dantès Bellegarde in Haitian Social Thought* in 1985 with Humanities Press International. In this second edition, Brandon Byrd, one of the editors of Vanderbilt University Press's Black Lives and Liberation series, writes an informative foreword exploring the joint political history of Haiti and the United States in relation to the various roles or functions Bellegarde played in Haiti and abroad. Byrd presents the book as "the rare work to position Haitians as self-conscious and influential actors in the world of global politics and as producers rather than objects of meaning thought" and "the first book to recover Bellegarde as an intellectual who demanded for Haitians an equal place in the geopolitical order and who claimed for all black people and black nations a seat at the table" (pp. xiv-xv). In a helpful updated introduction, Bellegarde-Smith describes his book as an effort to bolster the contributions of Dantès Bellegarde by "examin[ing] critically the consistency of these writings in relation to his public career, in his role as a foremost exponent of the rights of small states during the years that witnessed the emergence of a vibrant black cultural awareness on the world stage" (pp. xxiii-iv). The author successfully achieves this goal by situating the ideas and evolution of Bellegarde within the context of the historical period which he lived and the social milieu that shaped his beliefs and actions.

Bellegarde-Smith's *In the Shadow of Powers* departs from, and thus corrects, previous biographies and studies on Bellegarde, such as Jules Blanchet's (1936) and Hénock Trouillot's (1957).[3] Who was Dantès Bellegarde? Why is it important to study his life and oeuvre? What contributions did he make to his native country of Haiti and the international community? The book uniquely

sheds light on Bellegarde's manifold contributions to various fields such as Haitian politics, Haitian social philosophy, Haitian education, pan-Americanism, pan-Africanism, foreign policy, *et cetera*, "within the dynamics of both international conditions and domestic realities facing the Haitian state" p. xxiii), as well as within the trajectories of Western capitalism, neoliberalism, and American imperialism in Haiti and the world. It also reveals the ambiguous character of, and intellectual conflicts in, the life of Bellegarde. Bellegarde-Smith achieves this goal in six chapters, concluding the book with a historic lecture Bellegarde delivered at the University of Puerto Rico in April 1936, entitled "Haiti and Her Problems: A Lecture."

Bellegarde-Smith traces both the lineage of Louis-Marie Dantès Bellegarde as well as the significant marks his ancestors left on Haitian society. Bellegarde was born in Port-au-Prince, on May 18, 1877, to an impoverished petit-bourgeois Haitian family. His mother, Marie Boisson, was a poor and illiterate "white" mulatto (p. 55), whose white maternal grandfather, Jacques-Ignace Fresnel, had been Haiti's first minister of justice and is regarded as the founder of Haitian Freemasonry. His father, Jean-Louis Bellegarde, was black and served as the director of the botanical gardens at the School of Medicine in Port-au-Prince, and his paternal aunt Argentine Bellegarde was a major figure in early women's education in Haiti. By Haitian and Latin American standards, Bellegarde was identified as a mulatto, a socio-racial classification associated with economic, political, and educational advantages in contrast to the country's predominant economically disadvantaged dark population that lives in abject poverty and underdevelopment. While Bellegarde benefited from these advantages, he was proud of both sides of his biracial identity and unconditionally defended Haitian people regardless of their color or socioeconomic class. In fact, as a diplomat, he championed the cause of the "Black Republic" at the predominantly white and European League of Nations.

Consequently, in the first two chapters, Bellegarde-Smith describes in great detail the historical agents and trajectories contributing to the emergence of Haiti's social policy and foreign relations, isolating four essential aspects to the founding of the new Republic of Haiti: the economic, the social, the political, and the international dimensions. They must be studied in light of the colonial system, the plantation economy, class relations, and the color question in the postcolonial Haitian society. In particular, Bellegarde-Smith notes that the dynamics and characteristics of Haitian social thought and modern Haitian society must be analyzed within the colonial class struggle in the preindependence period and the consolidation of bourgeois hegemony during the postindependence period, correspondingly. For example, "Development, economic and politico-social, was a primary concern of the men at the helm. This concept explains why social thought, rather than more esoteric branches of philosophy, took hold in Haiti and the rest of Latin America in the nineteenth century" (p. 45). According to the author, like in other societies in Latin America, social thought and politics in Haiti were influenced by two major philosophical schools: French (Comtian) positivism and Western liberalism. Dantès Bellegarde was deeply immersed in both traditions; in addition, he championed Western universalism, Spencerian social Darwinism, and the European concept of progress. In the same chapter, Bellegarde-Smith argues that the cultural process of assimilation had a major impact on Haiti's "social and political policy" (p. 91).

It is important to note that the Haitian economy was neocolonial in that it was dependent on its western European trade partners. Haiti's bourgeoisie was relatively powerless in international terms; its industrial proletariat was less than embryonic. Thus, the emulation of Western culture alone could explain Haitian intellectual developments of the nineteenth century that are seemingly divorced from Haitian social realities. But this factor was reinforced by the Haitian bour-

geoisie's desire to apply the scientific message in order to "modernize" the country (p. 51). This observation is critical to arrive at a better understanding of Bellegarde's various roles as a diplomat, financial accountant, historian, writer, public intellectual, and social philosopher. Bellegarde-Smith presents Bellegarde as an assimilationist who rigorously attempted to westernize the Haitian society. He describes his failings in this powerful statement: "Bellegarde never rose to meet the need of providing a viable sociopolitical theory or ideology for twentieth-century Haiti... Dantès Bellegarde accepted the validity for Haiti of the mainstream Western European ideology, including capitalism and liberalism. He thought it sufficient in terms of universality to bring forth what was best in the human person" (p. 172). Yet throughout the book, the author sustains the belief that Dantès Bellegarde was a man of his times, which might explain his shortcomings.

Chapter 3 explores the career and life of Bellegarde and the milieus in which he evolved as a public servant and thinker, following him through his formative years in his roles as the secretary of the cultural and literary newspaper *La Ronde*, as a public servant in the area of public education, and as Haiti's most ablest diplomat, as well as in his demonstration of a pan-African spirit. Bellegarde is regarded by many as "Haiti's outstanding ideologue at the beginning of this century and the country's ablest synthesizer of Nineteenth Century social thought." [4] The celebrated Haitian writer and poet Leon Laleau wrote these memorable words at the death of Bellegarde in 1966: "The first amongst us, he placed audaciously at international gatherings, Race before Nationality, Man before Citizen." [5] Among African American intellectuals in the United States, he was known as the champion of black freedom and rights in the world. W. E. B. Du Bois, in an article published in *The Crisis* magazine in 1926, felicitously named Bellegarde "the international spokesman of the Negroes of the World." [6] In the world of diplomats, Bellegarde was admired for his cosmopolitan vision and

ideal of international cooperation among the nations and peoples of the world.

As a cross-disciplinary thinker, Bellegarde contributed vastly to the international advancement of Haitian life and thought. In 1944, Bellegarde collaborated with Mercer Cook to produce the first Haitian-American anthology, featuring the writings of prominent writers and thinkers such as Du Bois, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, *et cetera*.^[7] Bellegarde served as a visiting professor at Howard University and Atlanta University, where Du Bois taught for many years. He acquainted black students in these historically black universities with Haitian literature and history, most importantly teaching them how African slaves at Saint-Domingue broke down the shackles of slavery to acquire their freedom and independence from France in 1804 and eventually establish the Republic of Haiti.

In chapters 4 and 5, the author provides a critical assessment of Bellegarde's understanding of the national characteristics and cultural ethos of the country of Haiti. Bellegarde-Smith illuminates the ties that bind Bellegarde's thought and praxis and the values and ideologies that guided his life and decisions. Yet we also learn that at times, his ideas were far from the existential realities and unfortunate living conditions of the Haitian masses. Bellegarde identified as mulatto, not black; yet he rejected the biological concept of race because he believed it unscientific and contended that modern racial types have been from time immemorial modified by the twin influences of environment and intermixture. Hence, he argued that one should not confuse individual heredity with racial heredity; while the former is scientific, the latter is nonsensical. As for culture, he associated it with a high level of education and the potentiality for individuals to be successful in society; interestingly, he dissociated the concept of culture from its anthropological elements. For Bellegarde, French culture and values were intrinsic to Haitian national identity and mentality. By con-

trast, Price-Mars brilliantly argued and demonstrated with scientific rigor that the cultural traditions, values, and practices of the majority of Haiti's peasant population are African in origin, and constitute the core elements of the Haitian soul, culture, and identity, a thesis Bellegarde rejected.

Bellegarde's ambivalent attitude toward African cultural traditions and the Vodou religion in his own country of Haiti was particularly troubling, an important element of his thought that is not effectively discussed in the book. He could not conceive of any value in preserving black diasporic Africanisms or in maintaining African-derived diasporic cultural traditions and customs. For Bellegarde, Afro-Haitian Vodou religion and spirituality were a hindrance to Haiti's development and Haitian people's advancement toward Western-style modernity.^[8]

As Bellegarde-Smith argues in the final chapter of the book, his ancestor "never rose to meet the need of providing a viable sociopolitical theory or ideology for twentieth-century Haiti.... Bellegarde accepted the validity for Haiti of the mainstream Western European ideology, including capitalism and liberalism" (p. 172). He propagated ideological positions of nationalism and liberalism embraced by the Haitian bourgeoisie and believed that for Haiti to attain economic independence and cultural relevance, she must be subservient to Western culture and the economic interests of Western countries. While his good friend Price-Mars befriended the rising younger generation of Haitian intellectuals, including Marxist radical Jacques Roumain, Bellegarde shunned them. Bellegarde-Smith presents Dantès Bellegarde as a man stuck in nineteenth-century Haitian history while Haitian society was moving forward. Paradoxically, Bellegarde became a victim of the era that produced his character and nurtured his ideas: "During his last years, almost thirty years of his life, [he] became an anachronistic figure; yet he was a figure intensely Haitian. His alienation, his

despair, and his frustrations were those of his country” (pp. 172-4). Although he lived well into the twentieth century, it appears he never understood that the new, progressive young Haitian generation and intelligentsia had categorically rejected his cherished ideologies and social and cultural ideas.

The strength of this excellent and well-researched work lies in Patrick Bellegarde-Smith’s ability to synthesize a substantial amount of scholarship on Haiti’s social thought in conjunction with that of Latin American society and French society. It is an insightful study of the history of ideas in Haitian social thought by way of the life, thought, and career of Dantès Bellegarde; regrettably, this new 2019 edition does not engage more recent scholarship or studies on the subject matter (Wien Weibert Arthus’s *Les grandes dates de l’histoire diplomatique d’Haïti: De la période fondatrice à nos jours* [2017] and *Machine diplomatique française en Haïti: (1945-1958)* [2012]; *Haiti and the Americas*, edited by Carla Calargé, Raphael Dalleo, Luis Duno-Gottberg, and Clevis Headley [2013]). Despite this minor flaw, this audacious book is indispensable not only to better grasp Haiti’s existential realities and political shortcomings; it is a profound meditation on one of Haiti’s dearest sons who served his native land sacrificially, loved his country deeply, committed to its development and success, and whose patriotic zeal and exemplary character remain worthy models for a brighter Haiti.

Notes

[1]. Bellegarde wrote two important texts on the Occupation: *L’Occupation américaine d’Haïti, ses conséquences morales et économiques* (Port-au-Prince: Chéraquit, 1929; Éditions Lumière, 1996), and *La résistance haïtienne : L’Occupation américaine d’Haïti* (Montréal: Éditions Beauchemin, 1937). He also penned *La République d’Haïti et les États-Unis devant la justice internationale* (Paris:

Librarie de Paris-Livres, 1924) on the diplomatic relations between Haiti and the United States. Also see his important book with the African American literary scholar Mercer Cook, *The Haitian-American Anthology: Haitian Readings from American Authors* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie de l’état, 1944).

[2]. I addressed Bellegarde’s ideas in two major publications, “The Problem of and Impossibility of Vodou in the Writings of Dantes Bellegarde,” *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 6, no. 8 (March 2014):1-24, and *Vodou in Haitian Memory: The Idea and Representation of Vodou in Haitian Imagination*, ed. Celucien L. Joseph and Nixon Cleophat (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016).

[3]. For example, see Jules Blanchet, *Peint par lui-même ou la résistance de M. Bellegarde* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Valcin, 1936), and *Hénock Trouillot, M. Dantès Bellegarde, un écrivain d’autrefois* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Théodore, 1957).

[4]. Patrick Bellegarde, “Dantès Bellegarde and Pan-Africanism,” *Phylon* 42, no. 3 (1960): 233.

[5]. Quoted in Patrick Bellegarde Smith, “Dante Bellegarde and Pan-Africanism,” 233; Léon Laleau, “Dantès Bellegarde, une célébrité, amie de la pénombre,” *Conjonction* (July 1972): 89, 119; for a different perspective on Bellegarde, Hénock Trouillot, *Dantès Bellegarde, un écrivain d’autrefois* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Théodore, 1957).

[6]. Quoted in Mercer Cook, “Dantes Bellegarde,” 125.

[7]. Bellegarde and Cook, *The Haitian-American Anthology*.

[8]. I elaborate on Bellegarde's religious sensibility and attitude toward Haiti's African culture in "The Problem of and Impossibility of Vodou."

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-haiti>

Citation: Celucien L. Joseph. Review of Bellegarde-Smith, Patrick. *In the Shadow of Powers: Dantes Bellegarde in Haitian Social Thought*. H-Haiti, H-Net Reviews. March, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54960>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.