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An English creamware teapot bearing the slogan “No Stamp Act/America, Liberty Restored” is one of the iconic objects from revolutionary-era America (p. 48).[1] In *Revolutionary Things*, Ashli White moves beyond singular pieces like this to grapple with the political dimensions of everyday goods in the “age of revolutions.” The book explores the political meanings of “millions of things,” a phrase White employs repeatedly to capture the expansive circulation and consumption of routine objects around the Atlantic world. To make its case, *Revolutionary Things* draws on an impressive array of objects and data, including archaeological collections and reports, ceramics, textiles, prints, maps, and ephemera, all signifying interdisciplinary work at its finest. The result is an excellent comparative analysis of the politics of objects during the American, French, and Haitian revolutions between 1770 and 1810.

*Revolutionary Things* is a substantial contribution to both Atlantic world history and material culture studies. Early Americanists have mined these two fields extensively, but, as White ably demonstrates, even after several decades of exploration neither rich vein has been exhausted. Twenty years ago, historian David Armitage made the bold claim that “we are all Atlanticists now,” and scholars have more sharply defined what that means by sketching out, among others, British, French, and Black Atlantic worlds. White adopts a decidedly Atlanticist approach, with attention to goods and their political baggage throughout the Atlantic basin. “Revolutionary objects,” White reminds us, “were not confined to national borders and domestic politics” (p. 5). Empire is less of a frame of reference, however, and in many respects *Revolutionary Things* implodes imperial boundaries. Instead it offers a consideration of the American, French, and Haitian revolutions together to assess the interplay of goods and ideas. While distinguishing between these revolutionary events, White cuts across national and imperial boundaries to highlight diverse transatlantic populations and their interactions with the material world.
The book also sounds a clarion call for historians to pay greater attention to material culture. Although the so-called material turn is now several decades old, White argues that much work remains to incorporate objects into the study of the past. *Revolutionary Things* is a substantial contribution to this cause and will sit comfortably alongside admirable recent works on Atlantic world material culture, including Jennifer Van Horn’s *The Power of Objects*, Cary Carson’s *Face Value*, and George Boudreau and Margaretta Lovell’s edited volume, *A Material World*. White argues that material culture shaped how people all over the Atlantic understood equality and freedom and “contributed to ideological disputes that transcended borders” (p. 3). The emphasis is on the fabrication, use, and context of everyday material objects, which reinforces that consumers politicized objects in ways that manufacturers did or could not necessarily anticipate. Political expression was a “collective project between consumers and manufacturers” that signaled “in what ways both constituencies were and were not willing to embrace revolution” (p. 47).

Given the number and range of the objects discussed, there was a risk of generating a material muddle. So many goods, so many messages. But White deftly handles these millions of things in a way that clearly and precisely elucidates their meanings. The book’s seven chapters attend to several categories of material goods: ceramics, clothing, maps, prints, and wax figures come in for extensive scrutiny, while other objects like furniture or jewelry draw less attention. The analysis especially illuminates the subtleties of material culture; to take one revolutionary thing as an example, the cockade—a small rosette of ribbon that could be pinned to a hat or clothing—was both prominent and pervasive in the revolutionary era. Cockades were everywhere, but “were open to numerous interpretations as diverse populations interacted with them” (p. 161). Although the cockade signaled political affiliation, White’s examination of how and why cockades became important and universal forms of personal political expression is deep and subtle.

White offers a highly nuanced account in several respects. The book carefully unpacks the myriad, often shifting political meanings of objects as people consumed them around the Atlantic world. *Revolutionary Things*, for example, complicates the idea of emulation, noting that middling people following elite fashion “was only one component of consumption” (p. 43). In a chapter on secondhand goods, White illustrates that luxury goods from the French Revolution could embody both emulation and egalitarianism. During the revolutions, someone could acquire secondhand a luxury good formerly available only to elites, thereby making it more available to the common person. In this way, “secondhand markets simultaneously buttressed and subverted social hierarchies” (p. 79). Elsewhere, White notes that the material culture of the old regime could be both destroyed and rehabilitated, and revolutionaries and royalists alike could purchase the same goods. Queen’s ware, a line of earthenware produced by Wedgwood in Britain, represented a progressive critique of absolute monarchy in prerevolutionary France, but by the 1790s it was recast as a conservative, even pro-British response to the radicalism of the French Revolution.

Revolutions were about violence and warfighting, and during the period covered by the book, only a handful of years saw no major military conflict. Because of this, White carefully considers clothing in the form of military uniforms. A chapter on military clothing highlights how uniforms “offered hundreds of thousands of men throughout the Atlantic world a material means through which to argue for equality” (p. 138). Advertisements for deserters provide an innovative source for actual clothing worn by rank-and-file soldiers, reinforcing that in a time of warfighting, what warriors wore mattered and provided political statements as well.
The final chapter of the book reverts to the examination of unusual and noteworthy material goods in the form of waxwork figures and objects that reflected political violence in the age of revolutions. Here attention turns to waxwork shows like the famous Madame Tussaud’s depictions of executions in the French Revolution and even toy guillotines carved by French prisoners in Britain. These curious objects highlight how people may have encountered revolutionary violence, not directly but at one remove. Although the focus through most of the book is on the host of everyday items circulating in the Atlantic world, here the emphasis shifts to items that large numbers of people saw or encountered even if they did not possess them.

One of the book’s great strengths is how it successfully incorporates diverse perspectives from around the Atlantic basin, taking in a host of material possessions. Revolutionary Things drives home that free and enslaved people of African descent repeatedly demonstrated a keen awareness of the value and symbolism of things, sometimes adopting European objects while deploying them for specific ends. Attention to the material and political implications of the Haitian Revolution throughout makes for compelling analysis, where even the paucity of material evidence conveys messages about the politics of race and revolution. The presence and absence of the material record has meaning as well. The Haitian Revolution has not left the material imprint that the American or French revolutions did, but the material and documentary evidence White marshals demonstrate that the “millions of things” circulating around the Atlantic were critical to politics in Haiti as well.

In choosing these revolutionary episodes, White purposefully omits Latin America’s revolutions. This is an understandable if regrettable decision, largely because it would have been rewarding to see the book’s keen insights extended to the Spanish Atlantic. A hint of this potential occurs toward the end of Revolutionary Things in a short account from Cuba of José Antonio Aponte. Aponte, a free Black carpenter, planned a rebellion in 1812 and deployed his artistic skills to create maps that authorities believed could aid insurrection. This noteworthy example suggests that ample opportunity exists to study the political materiality of objects elsewhere.

In a conclusion that considers the “afterlives of revolutionary things” (p. 307), White makes the important observation that “most people today encounter history through material culture” (p. 313). Museum collections contain and privilege certain objects, which shape what stories have been and will be told. It is evident that modern-day politics remain highly material. In America, for example, we see how red MAGA ballcaps and rainbow T-shirts or pick-up trucks and Priuses are freighted with meaning. The continued political resonance of the material world makes this excellent book a captivating work of history and a timely reminder that everyday things have political purchase still.

Notes


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