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In Revolutionary Things, Ashli White builds upon her previous work on revolutions in the Atlantic world with an emphasis on the material culture that shaped French, American, and Haitian political contests between 1770 and 1810. By comparing diverse objects such as military clothing, maps, ceramics, wax figures, and politically charged accessories, White argues that material culture influenced how people understood and negotiated the ideals of equality and freedom in these three revolutionary arenas. In short, she asserts that material culture could be “a mechanism for revolutionary change” (p. 4).

White’s densely researched book is organized thematically, with each of its seven chapters taking on different objects and comparing their functions in at least two of the three revolutionary contexts noted above. White includes section introductions at key divisions between chapters, providing additional connective tissue that synthesizes and articulates the book’s overarching arguments. Many of these conversations dwell on the contingency of history and aim to dispel readers’ assumptions about the politicization of particular goods, their acquisition and availability to certain members of the public, and the meanings and functions of seemingly banal goods in the political arena. In each chapter, she takes care to highlight the black experience—either with these objects, or as represented in print.

Part 1 examines everyday items that became politically charged due to who procured them, where, how, and why. Examining eighteenth-century ceramics, White reminds readers that manufacturers such as Josiah Wedgwood studied and understood their consumers—especially in the North American colonies—and adjusted designs accordingly. But such an intense focus on consumer preferences did not, White asserts, lead to overtly political designs. While teapots bearing the slogan “No Stamp Act” certainly provide evidence of the politicization of material culture in this period, White asserts that this was not the norm. Instead, she argues that Wedgwood and others purposely avoided such overtly political designs on their wares, because consumer tastes remained
closely attached to his classic designs in Queens ware and Jasper ware. Though the Britishness of these objects might have diminished their desirability, American consumers demanded continuity over novelty.

White also notes that acquiring certain goods became a political act or an expression of political sympathies. For example, loyalists in North America and French revolutionaries purchased British wares as an expression of political support (for or against dominant regimes at home). In other cases, the acquisition of luxury consumer goods—even if through secondhand channels—subverted predominant racial and social hierarchies. This was especially true in the emergent secondhand market for confiscated and stolen goods during the revolutionary period, which allowed people of African descent, republican leaders, and the lower classes to acquire goods that had previously been inaccessible to them.

Part 2 examines clothing and accessories to show how revolutionary individuals understood, demonstrated, and interpreted their own political alignments and those of others. Perhaps the most interesting chapter in the book traces the chronic problems that many governments experienced in appropriately clothing their militaries. Supply-chain issues and inconsistencies in quality complicated governments’ abilities to provide adequate clothing in a timely fashion, and the situation was exacerbated by the fact that clothing was considered part of a soldier’s compensation. Soldiers spoke about clothing and pay in terms that revealed their own understandings of equality as citizens, complaining about late or missing garments and poor quality or fit. In this way, White asserts, military clothing became a rubric for understanding the government’s promises to its people and its abilities to live up to such promises.

Clothing was also a mode of self-expression, and White stipulates that when particular soldiers were able to wear their full regalia (in spite of the supply-chain issues she notes), it became a political assertion of one’s devotion to the cause. This was especially true for men of African descent, who “used military rank to insist on an equality that few among the master class were ready to accept” (p. 138). Likewise, wearing a cockade (a colorful ribbon pinned on the lapel or hat) indicated one’s political affinities to others in public. Because they were cheap and widely accessible, cockades expanded the arena of political participation to include women and people of color. In contrast to Wedgwood, the producers of medals and cockades were highly attuned to political shifts and shifted production measures to respond to the rapidly changing political climate and thus take advantage of shifting public sentiments. Yet as White notes, the highly politicized and public nature of cockades made them objects of conformity and coercion at times, as social pressures pushed some to wear the badges out of obligation (while others may have donned a particular cockade to disguise themselves or defraud others).

Part 3 turns to visual culture, especially maps, prints, and wax figures, to understand how contemporaries shared news about the ongoing revolutions. Maps were essential to military activity, as leaders depended upon maps to navigate the terrain, plan battles, and keep track of troops and supplies. But maps could also provide an avenue for claiming (and disputing) national and imperial boundaries—White points to contradictory maps crafted by different nation-states for this very purpose—and thus maps became an ideological tool for the exercise of power. But importantly, White asserts that contemporaries were aware of this ideological function and hesitated to bestow legitimacy on their opponents or others by representing them in print. For example, European-produced maps of the Haitian Revolution demonstrate, for White, the discomfort of European audiences with the “revolutionary spatial transformation wrought by Black men” (p. 212). Likewise, White stipulates that Britons’ reticence to produce images of both Haitian leaders and Jacobins
“tamed some of the most radical elements of the expanding call for popular sovereignty by making certain people unseeable” (p. 227). In this way, printmakers crafted editorials about which revolutionary actors deserved representation and how, implicitly acknowledging the power that such representation could give to their subjects. In this section especially, White sees a lot of evidence in the absences—a dearth of prints representing Haitian crowds or revolutionaries, for example, indicates European disdain or discomfort for those subjects. Like prints, wax figures allowed individuals throughout the Atlantic world to virtually witness the violence associated with the age of revolutions. Yet while they conveyed the news in a popular medium, wax figures offered graphic and highly reductive portrayals, which ultimately sensationalized the spectacles of these revolutions and undermined the supposedly enlightened aims of the political contests themselves.

In her focus on the objects’ production, distribution, use, and context, White departs from typical material culture histories of this period, which tend to focus on how certain objects conveyed status or represented cultural and intellectual themes for contemporaries. In this way, White provides a fresh and interesting discussion of these highly politicized objects. But the approach may be somewhat frustrating for material culture scholars accustomed to close readings of particular objects’ attributes and symbolism—there are few of these, and mostly toward the end of the book. Moreover, the broad scope and comparative nature of the book necessitates glossing over some basic details—such as the chronologies of these revolutions and their fundamental intellectual claims—which will likely impede the book’s accessibility for some audiences, especially undergraduates.

Still, this book makes several important contributions to the extant literature. White’s transnational and comparative focus allows her to isolate racial difference as a factor that shaped individual experience and, for example, affected contemporaries’ reactions to revolutionary violence. Her work thus complicates the historiography of the late eighteenth century by asserting the broad and significant influence wrought by the Haitian Revolution. Moreover, White's transnational focus allows her to trace objects that moved across the Atlantic and circulated among varied revolutionaries. Thus, the book is as much a history of material culture in the military as it is about politics and revolutions. Examining this fascinating and provocative intersection, the book expands our understandings of how cultural objects influenced war and politics in the age of revolutions.
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