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Peasant Political Culture in Post-Emancipation Haiti and Jamaica

This important comparative study brings to light the essential political developments after emancipation in nineteenth-century Haiti and Jamaica. Despite their disparate avenues toward emancipation (Haiti’s as an abrupt, militarized revolutionary juncture versus Jamaica’s gradualist, policy-driven process), Sheller finds striking similarities in the political experiences of peasants in Haiti and Jamaica. Her study is focused primarily on Afro-Caribbean struggles for political agency within two Franco- and Anglo-Caribbean imperial sites. Yet Sheller regards Haiti’s and Jamaica’s post-emancipation experiences as illuminating similar processes in Cuba, the United States, and Brazil (p. 40). This challenging and powerful book should be read widely for its theoretical insights on the historical process of emancipation more generally.

The heart of this historical study is Sheller’s revelation of the parallel processes undergone in Haiti and Jamaica in the mid-nineteenth century, after general emancipation. For Haiti, the process begins in the 1840s, when, after several decades of civil war and state consolidation, a liberal reform movement emerged, expelling Haiti’s autocratic president Boyer. However, tensions between the fragile civil authority, embodied by the new legislature, and President Hérard, backed by the military, shattered the alliance between the liberal bourgeoisie and the peasants. Peasants in southern Haiti, eager to make good on radical visions of democracy, rebelled, prompting a reactionary crackdown by traditional power holders, aided by the military. The result was the crushing of the nascent radical democratic polity and the maintenance of a military autocracy.

Like Haiti, Jamaica experienced a period of radical democratic potential in the 1860s when, in response to the plantocracy’s exclusion of former slaves from the civil polity, an alliance of missionaries, non-white politicians and Native Baptist religious leaders mobilized in support of black political enfranchisement. The Jamaican governo’s refusal to respond to these demands led to the rebellion at Morant Bay and its harsh repression by the military. At this point London determined to replace the Jamaican House of Assembly with Crown Colony...
Rule, making democratic engagement even more difficult for the peasant population.

A work of historical sociology, Democracy after Slavery relies heavily on structural analysis of social relations more than detailed narration of unfolding events. The study is strongly grounded in the historiography and sociology of slavery; Sheller repeatedly returns to works by such historians and theorists of slavery as Arthur Stinchcombe, Sydney Mintz, Michel-Ralph Trouillot, Thomas Holt and David Nicholls in order to situate and differentiate her own approach. This close attention to the historiography makes for dense reading, but her mastery of the field is impressive and, if the reader works to follow her, enlightening.

After a densely packed survey of the historiography of slavery and freedom in the Caribbean (chapter 1), Sheller lays out the ways in which planter control declined in the wake of emancipation. Jamaica and Haiti were the key sugar-producing regions of the world in the late eighteenth century. In both societies, sugar production (one of the most brutal and deadly industries under slavery) fell off rapidly after slavery to be replaced by coffee (in Haiti) and smaller export crops, such as ginger and coconut in Jamaica, as well as peasant crops for internal consumption on both islands. In the political arena, Haiti’s elite was dominated by the largely mulatto planter class in the south and the predominantly black military hierarchy in the north. The Haitian state itself was relatively weak, functioning primarily to conscript soldiers and levy taxes. There were few stable public institutions like bureaucracies, courts, or schools. The Jamaican Assembly, which initially represented the interests of the planocracy, was far more effective than Haiti’s independent government in enforcing its own legislation, much of which was designed to retain the subordination of the freed population.

Sheller’s chief contribution to the analysis of post-emancipation society is her exploration of the avenues for the peasant population. She points out that Haitian elite embraced of freemasonry (a secret society that fostered debate and the ability to engage in the development of policy) restricted the ability of the greater populace to participate in civil discourse. Official limits on the Haitian press further limited democratic discussion. In Jamaica, by contrast, the emergence of black voluntary associations, an active press, and the capacity to elect representatives to the Assembly yielded many avenues for former slaves to exercise and voice their democratic ideals.

In contrast to many historians of nineteenth-century Haiti who write off the peasantry as “apathetic” or “backward,” Sheller argues that Haitian peasants were (and are) excluded from civic participation by the overweening role of the military in relations between public and the state. Haiti’s failure to submit the military to civil control doomed the nascent democratic ideals to atrophy and repression.

Working between twentieth-century ethnologies and fragments of nineteenth-century historical evidence, in chapter 4 Sheller improves the received notion that the Haitian peasantry was a vast, unorganized, chaotic mass. Instead she shows how patterns of land tenure, cooperative labor associations and voluntary associations (fraternal or “friendly” societies)—many of which are associated with religious practices and communities—bound the peasants to one another in proto-democratic organizations. However, the state’s land redistribution system, with estate size based upon military rank, reinforced the army’s centrality in the social order. The legal codes of Toussaint, Henri-Christophe and Boyer forced all citizens who did not work for the state or engage in licensed professions to “cultivate the land” (p. 96). Mobility was legally restricted (though enforced with difficulty) and corporate land ownership prohibited. The peasantry was excluded from civil participation largely due to its illiteracy, which in turn reflects Haiti’s lack of missionaries, priests, and schools (p. 103).

In chapter 5, Sheller recounts Haiti’s brief encounter with liberal democratic ideals, which, she argues, was undone by state repression of dissenters. Using public debates, newspapers, and the expansion of the electorate (from a minimum of 25 years to 21 years), opponents of the autocratic President Boyer forged links between bourgeois liberals and rural smallholders. When Boyer sent troops to eliminate their protests, his rank-and-file soldiers deserted en masse to the opposition coalesced around the liberal mulatto leader Hérard. Boyer eventually abdicated, fleeing to Jamaica. Haiti’s subsequent
conclusion (1843) was, for Sheller, the apex of liberal opportunity. Boyer’s ouster was followed by a “revolution within the revolution, when a locally influential black landholding family mobilized the smaller landholders and coffee growers of the Aux Cayes region to challenge the racial inequality of the liberal elite” (p. 112). This was followed by a peasant revolt known as the Picquet movement, whose participants, the self-proclaimed “army of sufferers,” demanded economic land reform and the protection of their Haitian constitutional rights. Sheller notes that the insurgent’s motto—“The rich Negro who can read and write is mulatto; the poor mulatto who cannot read nor write is Negro”—shows the centrality of literacy to the peasants’ exclusion from civil agency. The Picquet movement was somewhat mollified with the election of a black president, Guerrier, and Hérard was exiled to Jamaica. But ultimately, the army of sufferers was forcibly disbanded and the new constitution of 1846 rescinded the more liberal provisions of 1843. For Sheller, the ascendance of Emperor Faustin Soulouque in 1847 “was not the triumph of blacks over mulattoes but the triumph of statist aristocracy over the potentially democratic alliance of radical segments of the bourgeoisie with peasants and cultivators” (p. 138).

Sheller’s chapters on Jamaica during the apprenticeship and post-emancipation period (chapters 6-8) are exceptionally detailed and insightful. She amply demonstrates her principle argument—that numerous formal and informal channels were open to (or asserted by) former slaves in making their democratic aspirations known to the state. These include public meetings, petitions, voluntary associations, trade and religious networks. Sheller reviews a corpus of some sixty “public texts” generated through political contention in Jamaica in the 1830s through the 1860s. But literacy was not the only political tool of the black population. Sheller also focuses on major instances of “riot” or violent protest to identify the aims and bargaining strategies employed by the formerly enslaved population. Whether a rowdy meeting turned violent was often dependent upon the “actions and reactions of police, militias, courts and government officials” (p. 176). When more peaceful means of redressing injustice were dismissed by the colonial government, black Jamaicans’ frustration erupted in the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865.

The real power of Sheller’s analysis comes forward in the final chapters on the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion, provocatively entitled, “‘Little Agitators, Small Speechifiers, and Embryo Cut-Throats’.” Here she offers an incisive analysis of the political rhetoric of participants in the Morant Bay Rebellion. Her reading of testimony gathered after the rebellion not only examines the nuanced cadence of political speechifying, but also reveals the wider connections between Jamaican activists and Afro-Caribbean political agents throughout the region, especially the exiles from Haiti.

I was heartened to see Sheller’s attention to the gendered nature of Haitian and Jamaican peasant populations in the nineteenth century. [1] The estimated population of Haiti in the 1830s was 500,000, “three-fifths of which were thought to be women (a gender ratio probably due to high male mortality during the years of revolutionary and civil war, higher male infant mortality, and longer female life expectancy)” (p. 110). For Jamaica’s population of about 400,000, “non-white females outnumbered males throughout the post-emancipation period, and formed the majority of the population of the larger ports and towns” (p. 179). In both Haiti and Jamaica, “women were responsible for local marketing... Their mobility, access to credit and centrality in networks of communication gave them a greater degree of autonomy than other peasant groups. Yet, women were excluded by definition from equal citizenship” (p. 159). Still—or perhaps, because of these dynamics—both Haitian and Jamaican women played key roles in overt forms of resistance within the public sphere, including the liberal opposition to Haitian Boyer in the 1840s (p. 125) and violent resistance to the repressive agents of the Jamaican state (p. 161).

One aspect that Sheller describes but does not explicitly define as a causal agent in the distinct political climates of Haiti and Jamaica is the intermediary role of white missionaries (the term “missionaries” is regrettably absent in the index). Sheller accurately notes that there was no formal arrangement with the Vatican for the arrival of French missionaries in Haiti until 1860 and points out that the scarcity of missionary activity and lack of a public education system in Haiti created a vacuum for literacy and thus curtailed many avenues of civic participation on the part of the peasantry. (Note, however, that missionaries from non-Francophone Protestant denominations also traveled to independent Haiti, including some African Americans.) By contrast, many missionaries in Jamaica, especially Baptists who had worked for abolition, became vocal allies of emancipated slaves and were instrumental in organizing many public meetings, petitions and associations. Most importantly, the democratic processes entailed in these organizations—public speaking, church elections, moving and seconding resolutions—all gave former slaves immediate experience...
in empowering political processes.

This brings to mind some of the comparisons that have been made between Francéò’s and England’s abolition movements. Seymour Drescher and others have emphasized the importance of Non-Conformist religious revival movements in 19th-century England in mobilizing the mass petition drives that brought pressure on Parliament to abolish the slave trade and then slavery itself. Francéò’s reliance on the judiciary (without a counterpart to the British Parliament) to defy the executive powers of the monarchy partially helps to explain why causes célèbres were an important venue for civic discourse in France. It also explains why abolitionism was limited to elites and never achieved the mass mobilization apparent in England. Sheller’s argument—that Haiti’s inability to subordinate the military to civic powers of the state gave the peasantry the narrowest means to voice their political concerns—is well taken. But I am curious to know whether the culture of civic participation is primarily a result of economic or political structures or of broader cultural patterns. That is, did the more decentralized Protestant religious practices help participants to feel a sense of agency and learn mechanisms for expressing and acting upon collective will?

Sheller also draws attention to African, black-identified religious movements in Haiti (Vodou) and Jamaica (Obeah, Myalism, and Native Baptists) as means of expressing political will. One wonders whether the importance of African political frames of reference were not important as well, for a sizeable portion—perhaps two-thirds—of the generation that claimed independence for Haiti was born in Africa.[2] It is interesting that the mostly creole-born Jamaican protestors, when dissatisfied with the response of the colonial government, addressed their petitions in part to the British queen.

In sum, this is a provocative, dense, intelligent, ambitious, politically and intellectually committed historical work of sociology “from the bottom up.” While of special interest to those who study slavery and emancipation in Francophone and British Caribbean contexts, readers from U.S. and Latin American contexts will find much of comparative and theoretical value here as well.
