
RESEÑAS DE LIBROS / BOOK REVIEWS

CRISTINA SORIANO, *Tides of Revolution: Information, Insurgencies, and the Crisis of Colonial Rule in Venezuela*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018.

When did the Spanish American wars of independence begin? Recent historiography has argued that neither the American nor the French revolutions had much of an impact in shaking colonial Spanish America. The collapse happened suddenly and serendipitously several decades later, only after Napoleon's armies invaded the Iberian Peninsula in 1808. The power vacuum caused by Napoleon was filled by local urban juntas. It took the rest of the nineteenth century to reassemble tiny, sovereign municipal islands into functioning nation-states. In her challenging *Tides of Revolution*, Soriano stands this historiographical paradigm on its head. Soriano demonstrates that coastal Venezuela suffered profound transformations in the wake of the French Revolution in the Caribbean. She thus recovers older narratives that had long connected the Latin American wars of independence to the wider late eighteenth-century Atlantic radical politics and texts.

Soriano argues that coastal Venezuela received an average of 1,500 slaves per year prior to the Caribbean upheavals of Saint-Domingue. Most of these slaves worked in ports and in relatively small farms growing cacao, tobacco, indigo, sugar, and cattle. About 50% of the population of this smuggling, mercantile society were free blacks, 20% slaves, 15% white, and 15% Native Americans. Although a small white "mantuano" elite kept firm political and economic control, most of the free population (including poor-white, Canarian farm workers) gathered and mingled around ports and cities like Maracaibo, Coro, Puerto Cabello, La Güaira, Cumana, Valencia, and Caracas.

This Caribbean coastal society, however, was suddenly radically transformed. Around the second half of the 1790s, a string of rebellions broke out in Coro, La Güaira, and Maracaibo led by republican white planters, artisan and militia free blacks, as well as slaves. In *Freedom's Mirror*, Ada Ferrer explored how the revolutionary turmoil in Saint-Domingue deepened the commitment of Cuban elites to plantation slavery. Cuban planters brought slaves, capital, and machinery directly from Saint-Domingue as they led "Spanish" troops against black rebels in the island. Unlike Cuba, Soriano argues, Venezuela shut down the traffic of slaves to avoid potential contagion. Venezuela witnessed a permanent reduction

of the traffic by more than 90 % for the rest of this decade and the next (120 per year instead of 1,500).

Soriano shows how these cities witnessed intense, new political mobilization, particularly by free blacks who found in barbershops, houses, and *pulperías* (grocery stores) institutional alternatives to colleges and universities to acquire literacy and educate their children.

In the second important historiographical move, Soriano depicts thriving alternative urban and rural public spheres of free blacks and slaves who gained access to newspapers, songs, hymns, pamphlets, and even manuscripts by local *letrados*, tailored to the needs of these audiences. Books in several languages also circulated briskly. One of Soriano's most important contributions is to bring this oral, semiliterate public sphere back to life while detaching the concept from print culture. There was no printing press in Venezuela. So much for Benedict Anderson.

Soriano studies three coastal black rebellions separately. The revolt of 1795 in Coro was led exclusively by free blacks and slaves who found inspiration in French radicalism to demand release from excessive taxation, not an exclusive republic of blacks as the white elites insisted. The rebellion was ruthlessly put down, meting out summary justice without a procedure. Those in charge made sure not to document the voice of the rebels. Soriano particularly excels in her analysis of the La Güaira Conspiracy of 1797. She reconstructs in great detail the written constitution (*órdenes* and *instrucciones*) of the new republic penned by a handful of radical white planters and free black artisans and military; she reconstructs the libraries and manuscripts created by the leaders, including political fictional dialogues. Finally, Soriano explores the arrival of Black corsairs in Maracaibo in 1799, seeking both to trade plunder and to inspire local Blacks to revolt against the monarchy. Locals, however, did not welcome the "Haitian" republican privateers. Free Blacks and slaves rejected the corsairs as foreigners while embracing royalism over republicanism. As Marcela Echeverri has shown there were plenty of Indian and Black Loyalists in *Tierra Firme* in the Age of Revolutions.

According to Soriano, this decade of political mobilization and lively, semiliterate, oral public sphere changed Venezuela for good. Rebellions and conspiracies created a political culture of pardo and slave rights that proved fundamental in shaping armed mobilization in the wars of independence in the 1810s and 20s.

Tides of Revolution is an enlightening study of the agency of Venezuelan Blacks to choose either republican revolt or royalism as well as to build an alternative literate and oral public sphere.