

2007

Book Review of Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution [by Laurent Dubois]

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Recommended Citation

Bajaj, M. (2007). Book Review of Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution [by Laurent Dubois]. In *Factis Pax* 1(1), 28-29. <http://www.infactispax.org/volume2/Baja.pdf>

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Volume 1 Number 1 (2007): 55-56

<http://www.infactispax.org/journal/>

Dubois, Laurent. (2005). *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. ISBN: 0-674-01826-5

Reviewed by Monisha Bajaj Teachers College, Columbia University

How can the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) inform the study of human rights? Why is this historic event consistently omitted from the history of human rights? What can scholars, students, and activists learn from Haiti's history that may contribute to a greater understanding of the prospects for and challenges to the realization of all human rights for all peoples? It is precisely these questions, among many others, that are skillfully examined through the thorough and rich exploration of the conditions that led to the Haitian Revolution, and the consequent overthrow of colonial slavery and establishment of the world's first Black Republic, in *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, by historian Laurent Dubois. This book details the relevance of the Haitian Revolution for the field of human rights through detailed analyses of the economic, social, political, historical, and cultural realities of the colony of Saint Domingue (1697-1804) and later, the independent nation of Haiti. The trans-Atlantic slave trade, the extremely profitable production and export of coffee and sugar directed towards France, and, after Haiti's independence in 1804, the economic embargo placed on the country by the then slave-holding United States and Western Europe, all remind readers of the global interconnectedness of economies and politics that predates the current era of economic globalization and neoliberalism.

The author tells the story of the Haitian Revolution in great detail with his goal throughout the book being to examine how a coalition of slaves and free people of color worked together to radically apply the 1789 French Revolution's notions of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The limited franchise of the political developments at the time in the United States and Western Europe belied the ideals of true equality for all citizens regardless of gender, ethnicity, or economic status. The revolutionary promise in Haiti of equality and true democracy, although one which ultimately failed to be realized, is one that provides important insight for scholars and activists seeking to apply universal ideals (such as human rights standards) to local communities plagued by social and economic inequalities.

“Avengers of the New World” is comprised of a prologue, an epilogue, and 13 chapters in between that offer a “play-by-play” account of the 13-year slave uprising. The sections are titled: Specters of Saint-Domingue; Fermentation; Inheritance; Fire in the Cane; New World; Defiance; Liberty’s Land; The Opening; Power; Enemies of Liberty; Territory; The Tree of Liberty; and Those Who Die.

These sections offer an in-depth glimpse into the structural and physical violence that led to the bloody revolution and the desire for freedom, brutally denied for so long, that inspired it. In the colony of Saint-Domingue, the brutal torture of slaves (and their resulting death) was so common that they had to constantly be replaced such that “on the eve of the revolution, ... two-thirds of Saint Domingue’s slaves had been born in Africa” (p. 42). As such, African customs, practices, and military tactics guided many aspects of the revolutionary struggle and the ensuing socio-political order that emerged once Haiti declared its defeat of Napoleon’s troops on January 1, 1804.

In the epilogue, Dubois’ reflects on the past 203 years since Haiti’s independence, which have led the once most-prosperous colony in the world to plunge into the depths of underdevelopment. Offering a postcolonial analysis and critique, the author discusses various reasons—internal and external—that have caused this.

While violent content is often eschewed by peace educators (and this approach is certainly necessary at the primary and early secondary levels), understanding such an important historical event as the Haitian Revolution, particularly given its absence from most history textbooks, is invaluable to the study of human rights and social justice at the advanced secondary, undergraduate, and graduate levels.

An overall review of the book’s primary strengths and weaknesses reveals that its contribution to the study of human rights lies in its ability to transport the reader back to an historical moment in which everyday individuals, through collective action, achieved the impossible. From the perspective of the book’s utility for students and scholars of human rights, the weakness of this work lies in its failure, aside from in the brief epilogue, to connect Haiti’s present-day reality to the rich narrative of its history of struggle and resistance. Haiti’s eight million inhabitants, 80 percent of whom live on less than two U.S. dollars per day in the hemisphere’s poorest nation and who face regular political violence, perhaps need more from those individuals interested in human rights than mere acknowledgement of their historical accomplishments. If this well-written story in “Avengers of the New World” inspires greater solidarity across borders, it will indeed begin to honor the shared legacy that Dubois identifies so eloquently in his prologue:

The impact of the Haitian Revolution was enormous. As a unique example of successful Black revolution, it became a crucial part of the political, philosophical, and cultural currents of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By creating a society in which all people, of all colors, were granted freedom and citizenship, the Haitian Revolution forever transformed the world. It was a central part of the destruction of slavery in the Americas, and therefore a crucial moment in the history of democracy, one that laid the foundation for the continuing struggles for human rights everywhere. In this sense we are all descendants of the Haitian Revolution, and responsible to these ancestors. (p. 7)