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Reseña de “Degrees of Freedom. Louisiana and Cuba After Emancipation” de Rebecca J. Scott.
Instituto de Estudios del Caribe
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Price’s ground-breaking work is essential reading for any ethnographic, anthropological, sociological, literary, historical or cultural study that aims to represent another culture. Price has entered uncharted terrain that will bear fruit for the years to come.

Reference


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The best thing one can say about Louisiana politics during Reconstruction is that it is Byzantine. Years ago, while I was trying to piece together the activities of a couple of African Americans who had gone to Louisiana in the early years of Reconstruction, I was forced on a number of occasions to throw up my hands in despair of ever understanding the twist and turns of state politics with its competing governors, unpredictable relations between sympathetic whites and freedmen and, for that matter, the ways gradations of color informed relations among African Americans. After all, I am from the Caribbean and know a thing or two about the effects of color on political and social relations. But even that did not prepare me for Louisiana.

Rebecca Scott has come to the rescue; or at least I think I now know more about the strange ways of Louisiana politics at the end of the 19th century. Part of the reason for this new appreciation lies in her commanding comparative analysis of developments of Louisiana and Cuba, two major former sugar-producing slave economies, in the years after the American Civil War and the Cuban Ten Years’ War and the shorter War of Independence. This is comparative history at its best, but one that in the end shows how the struggles in both locations became intertwined at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries with the intervention of the United States in Cuba. In order to make the study...
more manageable Scott opts for an extensive examination of a sugar-producing center in each location—the Lafourche basin in Louisiana east and southeast of New Orleans and Central Cuba in the jurisdiction of Cienfuegos—economies based on the brutal coercion of labor. The approach allows her to examine the economic, social and political structures of each location in great detail. But it also provides her an opportunity to ask large questions of small places.

Scott’s command of structures is complemented effectively by an appreciation for the stories of the people who lived and struggled to make a better world of freedom for themselves. Scott’s analysis of economic, political, and social developments—the structures—never fails to pay close attention to the stories of the men and women who struggled to make a better world for themselves and those who opposed these efforts at every step of the way. As others such as Eric Foner have shown, African Americans and their Republican allies in Louisiana saw the need for a declaration of rights that far exceeded anything guaranteed by the 14th or 15th Amendments. The 1868 Constitution, for instance, declared that all citizens were entitled to the same “civil, political and public rights.” The attainment and protection of these rights depended on a number of factors: the willingness of the national and state Republican Party to defend them by force if necessary against any attempts by the opposition to reverse these gains; accessibility to land for the freedmen; and the willingness of former slaveholders to accede to the demands for such a revolutionary redistribution of land. In less than 30 years after the adoption of the 1868 Constitution all of these gains had been reversed in the face of violence, murder, and mayhem. This “white supremacist project,” Scott argues, aimed to subordinate black labor, force segregation in public places and to suppress the black vote. Yet in spite of this sustained and overwhelming opposition she points to the many examples of racial cooperation, of efforts of black self determination, of cross-class alliances between the descendants of slaves in the country and artisans and professionals in the city.

While the search for freedom in Cuba faced less formidable obstacles in the immediate post emancipation period, by the end of the first decade of the 20th century American intervention both encouraged and facilitated the articulation and adoption of policies that, in many ways, mirrored those of Louisiana. In the crushing of the Independent Party of Color and the rumored lynching of its supporters at the eastern end of the island, for instance, Cuba seemed to have adopted the American approach to the resolution of post-emancipation issues. But there were significant differences. Scott points to the fact that those who fought on the side of the Confederacy were committed to the preservation of slavery. In comparison, the War of Independence aimed to destroy slavery.
The latter, she argues, was framed by an “ideology of independence, justice, and transracial patriotism” (p. 151). It is the commitment to “transracial patriotism,” she insists, that provided greater political space for the freedmen in Cuba and although this space would be constricted after 1912 following the destruction of the Party of Color, it was never totally closed.

In their effort to create worlds of freedom and to protect those worlds, blacks in both Cuba and Louisiana saw the need for greater contact and cooperation. Scott tells a captivating story of what she calls these “crossings and recrossings” across the Gulf of Mexico, of the contacts forged between these newly freed people as they sought to “gain rights at home by going farther afield in pursuit of alliances and respect” (p. 4). In doing so, she adds to the growing body of scholarship which explores the nature and extent of these “international” contacts across the Americas all predicated on the assumption that they were vital to the attainment of freedom at home.

Scott has set the bar of comparative history pretty high and more impressively has cleared it.


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Hay obras escritas de tal forma que generan la impresión de que son de una gran simplicidad, aunque en realidad sus planteamientos centrales sean extremadamente complejos y sofisticados. Es ése el caso, para poner un ejemplo, de Jorge Luis Borges, cuyos cuentos, por la manera en que están escritos, a veces transmiten la sensación de ser obras livianas, de que constituyen meros juegos verbales. Pero nada más alejado de la verdad. Tras esa escritura diáfana, carente de preciosismos verbales o de metáforas rebuscadas, se encuentran solapados algunos de los cuestionamientos más perspicaces que se hayan efectuado a no pocas de las ideas predominantes en la cultura occidental.