

## Review Essays | Ensayos de Reseña

### “The birthday of a new world is at hand”: New scholarship on the Age of Revolutions

*Book Review Essay by Evan C. Rothera*

- *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution*, by Julius S. Scott. Verso, 2018 [1986].
- *Tides of Revolution: Information, Insurgencies, and the Crisis of Colonial Rule in Venezuela*, by Cristiana Soriano. University of New Mexico Press, 2018.
- *Patriots, Royalists, and Terrorists in the West Indies: The French Revolution in Martinique and Guadeloupe*, by William S. Cormack. University of Toronto Press, 2019.
- *Mexico City, 1808: Power, Sovereignty, and Silver in an Age of War and Revolution*, by John Tutino. University of New Mexico Press, 2018.

In one of the most famous pamphlets ever written – *Common Sense* (1776) – Tom Paine made a profound statement that continues to resonate nearly two and a half centuries later. “We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand” (Paine, 1894, p. 118-119). According to the Bible, Noah, following God’s command, built an ark, gathered up two of every kind of animal, and rode out in safety the deluge God sent to destroy the world. When the waters subsided, both animals and people found a blank canvas. It is difficult to resist the enthusiasm of Paine’s language, which, historian Janet Polasky (2015, p. 22) notes, spoke to “the literary elite with their substantial personal libraries and their comfortable reading clubs” as well as “those that can scarcely read.” For some people, the birth of a new world was a moment of great optimism, while for others it was an alarming source of dread. The four volumes under consideration in this essay all speak to Paine’s point because they consider how revolutions involved new

beginnings and new opportunities for different groups of people – planters, privateers, soldiers, fugitive slaves, and others. They explore the dizzying array of ideas that revolutionary sentiment could produce, the transfer of information from place to place by different means, cycles of revolution and reaction, and the ambiguity and complexity of revolutions, even in relatively small geographic areas.

### **Julius S. Scott's masterless Caribbean**

Julius S. Scott's 1986 dissertation, written at Duke University, has been cited far more frequently and has done more to shape the study of the revolutionary Atlantic World, than the vast majority of unpublished dissertations. As historian Marcus Rediker comments, "Scott was doing transnational and Atlantic history long before that approach and that field had become cutting-edge forces in historical writing" (Scott, 1986, p. xii). Thus, it is wonderful to now have a published version of the dissertation. Scott's ideas are timely – particularly in this important moment of globalization, when issues of citizenship, communication, suffrage, and freedom are as contested as ever – and as noteworthy as when he finished his dissertation. For Scott, the French Revolution was an important catalyst because "inhabitants of France's possessions overseas perceived the sweeping governmental and social changes in the mother country to represent an opportunity to advance their own interests" (Scott, 1986, p. xiv). News of the nearly simultaneous revolutions – one in France and a second in Saint-Domingue – proved too volatile to contain. The impact of black revolutionaries reverberated far beyond Saint-Domingue and became "a major turning point in the history of the Americas" (Scott, 1986, p. xvii).

Scott begins by analysing the masterless Caribbean. He charts tensions between planters and masters and masterless people such as pirates and fugitives. Masters utilized laws and treaties to limit mobility, but studies of slavery and unfree labour have demonstrated that people routinely defied laws designed to keep them in bondage. Maroon communities play a vital role in Scott's narrative because the revolution in Saint-Domingue energized networks of slave communication and made runaway slaves into agents who spread the news. Caribbean port cities quickly became magnets for people seeking independence, particularly fugitive slaves. Popular resistance and mobility became critical in the transmission of information.

Networks of communication encompassed entire regions, not just individual islands. In exploring inter-island mobility, Scott draws on the worlds of ships and sailors. Sailing vessels offered shelter for the disaffected and sailors "made up a highly visible segment of the Caribbean underground" (Scott, 1986, p. 39). Masters and planters fretted about the possible subversive impact of sailors and other masterless people who played a vital role in "spreading rumours, reporting news, and transmitting political currents" (Scott, 1986, p. 75). White sailors saw themselves in analogous positions to slaves: subject to

the tyranny of a master. Indeed, “the commonality of experience which brought together slaves from Africa and seamen from Europe contributed to a broader mutual identification between the two groups” (Scott, 1986, p. 92).

Scott played an important role in shaping understanding of how black people spread information. Knowledge was indeed power for mobile people. Local rulers proved incapable of controlling the spread of information and feared ideological contagion. Historians of United States slavery have discussed the presence of a grapevine among the slaves, a clandestine means of communication. Scott argues that a slave grapevine existed long before the 1830s and that slaves were consummately political actors who understood their own interests and kept their ears open for news. Furthermore, he notes, as do the other authors featured in this review, expectation and rumours fuelled revolution. Rumours were both sources of hope and potent weapons, wielded by different groups for different reasons.

Critically, Scott also explores the “common wind” – regional networks of communication. The events of 1789 and 1790 “activated overlapping networks of Afro-American communication” (Scott, 1986, p. 124) and the printed and the spoken word often triggered rumours. Again, despite their best efforts, planters could not suppress discussion of revolutions. Ideas and communication have always mattered, a point as relevant in the Age of Revolutions as in the modern age of instantaneous communication. Planters feared that “French Negroes” would spread rebellion and became petrified about their inability to control discussions of the French Revolution and its ideology. Furthermore, as refugees spread stories of the revolution in Saint-Domingue, black and white people throughout the Atlantic World took notice. Scott’s analysis of the relationship between the United States and Haiti would benefit from recent studies that emphasize cooperation as well as conflict. However, he clearly illustrates the many ways people imagined new worlds and how they transmitted that information to others.

That the ideas in *The Common Wind* are familiar to scholars is a testament to the profound impact of Scott’s work. It would have been nice to see him add a new conclusion surveying the development of the historiography in the thirty-three years since he finished the dissertation. Nevertheless, Verso deserves praise for bringing into print a book that has done a tremendous amount to shape the contours of the study of the revolutionary Atlantic.

### **The greater Caribbean: Venezuela, Martinique, and Guadeloupe**

Cristina Soriano and William S. Cormack turn to different areas of the Greater Caribbean and offer fine-grained analysis of Venezuela, Martinique, and Guadeloupe. Like Scott, they chart the spread of information, the role of news and rumour, and the obsession of the authorities with the threat of ideological contagion. Politics in Venezuela entailed more than elite conversations at the dinner table. Like their counterparts in the Greater Caribbean, Venezuelans debat-

ed revolutionary events and plotted against the colonial government. Venezuelans of all social backgrounds participated in information networks. Venezuela's geography made its port cities and coastal towns multicultural and multilingual hubs that allowed numerous people to access ideas authorities deemed subversive. Like Scott, Soriano argues for the importance of the Haitian Revolution as "a common language used by both rulers and plebeian groups to make demands and negotiate change" (Soriano, 2018, p. 5).

Soriano divides the volume into two parts. The first focuses on strategies for obtaining and spreading political knowledge. She begins with personal libraries and the "complex networks that connected social and economic status, literacy, and education" (Soriano, 2018, p. 16). By the end of the eighteenth century, the number of people who owned books had increased and private libraries had expanded. The same networks that facilitated the circulation of books "also served to spread antimonarchical propaganda, abolitionist and egalitarian ideas, and anticolonial sentiments" (Soriano, 2018, p. 17). Broad-sides and ephemeral texts were important forms of media. In addition, because Venezuela did not possess the technology to print newspapers until 1808, imported newspapers provided information about international politics. As elsewhere, authorities fretted over smuggled texts and ideological contagion. They were right to be concerned because, given its vast coastline, Venezuela, "represented an easy target for republican propagandists" (Soriano, 2018, p. 70). Soriano, like Scott, demonstrates how "people from the revolutionary Atlantic had an important effect on Venezuela's political culture" (Soriano, 2018, p. 79). As in Scott's telling, the authorities seemed powerless to halt the flows of people and information.

The second part of the volume analyses three important moments: the black-led rebellion of Coro (1795), a conspiracy in La Guaira (1797), and a conspiracy in Maracaibo (1799). The Coro rebels paired local demands with revolutionary calls for the abolition of slavery and the reversal of the socioracial hierarchy. Official narratives "interpreted the Coro rebellion by analogy with the rebellion in Saint-Domingue as a movement that sought to establish a republic accompanied by the abolition of slavery" (Soriano, 2018, p. 134). Scott mentions this rebellion, but Soriano offers a lengthier discussion that highlights the fusion of local demands and international awareness. The 1797 conspiracy in La Guaira confirmed fears about ideological contagion because insurgents repurposed ideas from the revolutionary Atlantic. Authorities assumed, with cause, that people inspired by Enlightenment literature and sources discussing the French and American Revolutions originated the rebellion. Although the conspiracy failed, it illustrates how revolutionary ideas and experiences rocketed around the Caribbean.

The final chapter focuses on the role of foreigners in the Maracaibo conspiracy. Colonial officials, witnessing their powerlessness to halt the spread of people and ideas, grew increasingly afraid of an invasion led by revolutionary Frenchmen. Given the efforts of Victor Hugues, the governor of Guadeloupe

and a Jacobin, to export revolution, these fears were rational. Authorities worried about French black corsairs inciting rebellion in Maracaibo. The Maracaibo conspiracy allows Soriano to illustrate two important points: how people engaged with the ideas circulating around the revolutionary Atlantic and how rebellions could not survive without considerable buy-in from local people. Like Scott, Soriano concludes that Haiti served as an enduring model for people of colour and both scholars illustrate how people thought their worlds might change, in both positive and negative ways, during the birthday of the new world.

Cormack analyses how “the arrival of news, ideas, and language from France provided a script for revolutionary action in the Windward Islands” (Cormack, 2019, p. 3) and discovers an ambiguous and complex revolution in Guadeloupe and Martinique. Where Scott and Soriano spend more time exploring the circulation of information throughout the Caribbean, Cormack analyses the relationship between the metropole and two specific colonies, although he does consider patterns of communication in the Greater Caribbean. On the eve of revolution, the Windward Islands were “sources of tremendous wealth,” but “neither secure nor stable” (Cormack, 2019, p. 12). Tensions within these colonial societies made the islands a powder keg. These tensions were principally economic. In Martinique, for example, divisions emerged “based on an old hatred between the planters and the merchants of Saint-Pierre to whom they were in debt” (Cormack, 2019, p. 25). Revolution exacerbated tensions by undermining colonial authority and unleashing the aspirations of various groups.

The following five chapters analyse different themes – rumours of revolution; the coming of civil war; the failure of the liberal revolution; counter-revolution; and the slaveholding republic. The collapse of royal authority in France undermined the colonial governors and created conflict over the control and interpretation of information arriving from Europe. Rumours of revolution proved impossible to control. Rival factions emerged in Martinique and alliances made for strange bedfellows. Planters and free men of colour allied with each other against the urban patriots who proclaimed lofty sentiments about the rights of man, but attacked and killed free men of colour who attempted to claim these rights. The situation became so poisonous that France sent a fleet and commissioners to reassert the metropolitan state’s authority and impose the principles of the liberal revolution.

After the failure of the commissioners to impose the liberal revolution, the Legislative Assembly prepared a new expedition. Martinique and Guadeloupe then repudiated metropolitan authority and embraced royalist counter-revolution. Petrified planters sought to isolate the Windward Islands from radical soldiers and revolutionary contagion. When Captain Lacrosse, the leader of the new expedition, arrived in December 1792, he found both islands flying the monarchy’s banner. Lacrosse initiated a propaganda campaign against the royalists and his agents tapped into networks of patriot traders and shippers to distribute pamphlets and broadsides. Lacrosse’s propaganda discredited royalist

rebellion, which eventually collapsed in both colonies. Nevertheless, he represented a slave-holding republic. He and other officials tried to create republican regimes in Guadeloupe and Martinique in 1793 while defending slavery. Unsurprisingly, old wounds festered. A royalist uprising in Martinique and divisions in Guadeloupe “reflected the ambiguity of the republican regimes in the Windward Islands, which affirmed coloured equality but defended slavery” (Cormack, 2019, p. 186).

The final chapters outline the divergent fates of the two colonies. In Guadeloupe, Victor Hugues arrived to take charge. Hugues “carried the decree of revolutionary emancipation” and the guillotine (Cormack, 2019, p. 187). He reconquered Guadeloupe and understood that his success “depended upon backing emancipation in Guadeloupe and promoting it elsewhere” (Cormack, 2019, p. 198). Like Lacrosse, Hugues employed well-worn methods to achieve success such as printed propaganda and revolutionary agents to promote rebellion throughout the Greater Caribbean. The British eventually ended his export of revolutions. The British also captured Martinique in 1794. French planters welcomed the British because of their determination to control communications, their fear of revolutionary enthusiasm, and their desire to restore the colonial order. Eventually, Napoleon Bonaparte abandoned abolition and the British returned Martinique to France. Planters, patriots, petit Blancs, free men of colour, and slaves all took advantage of revolution to imagine new worlds or restore old ones, something they had in common with the people Scott and Soriano analyse.

### **Mexican counterpoint**

Scott, Soriano, and Cormack’s books ended in the early years of the nineteenth century around the Treaty of Amiens. The peace this treaty produced did not last very long. Another phase of the Age of Revolutions opened in 1808 with Napoleon’s invasion of Spain, his installation of his brother Joseph as King of Spain, and the outbreak of revolution in Spanish America. The Spanish-American revolutions proceeded in radically different ways. In Mexico’s case, most historians point to Father Miguel Hidalgo’s 1810 *Grito de Dolores* as the start of Mexican independence. However, historian John Tutino argues that 1808, not 1810, was the real linchpin. Tutino emphasizes silver capitalism, which he defines as “the economy focused on mining and the commercial, agricultural, and textile sectors that sustained it in the Andes and New Spain” (Tutino, 2018, p. xxiii). A political crisis in the summer of 1808 culminated in a coup d’état that “broke proven ways of rule that had sustained Spanish power, silver capitalism, and social stability in New Spain for centuries” (Tutino, 2018, p. 3).

The first part of the volume analyses Mexico City as the heart of silver capitalism. Tutino begins with the transition from “a Mexica polity grounded in military power to a Spanish regime focused on mediation and weak in coer-

cive force” (Tutino, 2018, p. 33). He then offers fine-grained analysis of the social structure of the city. “A small, yet never closed, oligarchy” (Tutino, 2018, p. 36) formed the top of the social pyramid. The ruling regime formed an alliance with the oligarchy and both sides benefitted. The next level of the pyramid – the provincials – mixed modest landowners and learned professionals. By most standards, the provincials were wealthy and powerful, just not when compared to the silver oligarchs. They lived in the shadow of the oligarchy, but silver capitalism muted resentments and helped unite elites. Everyone who “worked to get by as producers as artisans and workers, as shopkeepers and street vendors, as builders and haulers, and in so many other roles” (Tutino, 2018, p. 75) also benefitted from silver capitalism. People did not have particularly good lives, but “as long as silver capitalism boomed, most city people found work and ways to survive and sustain families” (Tutino, 2018, p. 77). Social stability held until 1808 – despite class tensions and relatively limited police power – because silver capitalism kept production and employment strong and silver oligarchs practiced capitalist charity to maintain the peace.

The second part takes up political life in Mexico City before, during, and after the crisis of 1808. In the 1760s, Bourbon demands clashed sparked riots in working communities. However, elites remained loyal to the regime and to silver capitalism and raised militias to contain rural riots. The Bourbons learned that assertions of power backed by military force threatened to destabilize silver capitalism. Tutino does not see an empire of coercion, but a “regime of petition and mediation” (Tutino, 2018, p. 110) that exercised a stabilizing force. After the troubles of the 1760s, the city launched into a decades-long upward trajectory. A plot from 1799 that drew inspiration from revolutionary France emphasized the city’s stability. Like the 1799 rebellion in Maracaibo, this plot failed because nobody seemed interested in overthrowing the colonial government. Where the Maracaibo plot panicked Venezuelan authorities, the Mexican authorities granted plotters clemency because they saw revolutionists as misguided fools who posed no threat to the regime or the social order.

After 1800, when Spain found itself locked in costly wars, the Bourbons demanded more and more silver. Although the regime continued to mediate, these pressures added new strains. Then came the true crisis: Napoleon’s invasion of Spain. The summer of 1808 in Mexico City proved critical because political conflict erupted and news and rumours created uncertainty. Rule by mediation cracked and Mexico City finally experienced the scenes that had been occurring in the Greater Caribbean for nearly twenty years. The critical moment was a coup d’état in September 1808. The coup was neither spontaneous nor an act of the people. Indeed, the emissaries of the Seville *junta* goaded the conspirators into overthrowing the viceroy. A new crisis erupted in 1810 when “authorities set in power by armed force faced a people in arms” (Tutino, 2018, p. 230). The ramifications of the fall of silver capitalism proved costly to Mexico because it was subsequently “plagued by violence and instability unknown in New Spain before the crises and transformations of 1808-1810” (Tu-

tino, 2018, p. 248). The new world many revolutionaries imagined looked quite different in actuality.

## Conclusion

The volumes covered in this review all do an excellent job analysing the early years of the Age of Revolutions. In their discussions of communication, the power of ideas, fears of ideological contagion, and the intense optimism and pessimism of people in the midst of reimagining their worlds, they lend additional nuance and precision to scholarly understandings of this period. Scholars should apply this analysis, which focuses on the early years of the Age of Revolutions, to later revolutions. What happens, for example, when new technologies narrow distance, and make the transmission of news faster or even instantaneous? Can people quarantine ideas in eras of burgeoning literacy rates and widespread print cultures? When people imagine new worlds, are they consistent with earlier ideas or do the patterns begin to change? Do race and racism play as powerful a role in later revolutions as they do in the earlier examples? In other words, the excellent work being conducted on this period promises to do much to refine our understandings of a world in ferment in which people envisioned, sometimes with optimism and sometimes with dread, Paine's birthday of a new world.

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**Evan C. Rothera** is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Arkansas, Fort Smith. His book manuscript examines civil wars and reconstructions in the U.S., Mexico, and Argentina. He has published articles in *The Journal of Mississippi History*, the *Journal of Supreme Court History*, and *Nebraska History*, as well as numerous book reviews and encyclopedia articles.

Address: 5210 Grand Avenue, Fort Smith, AR 72904.

E-mail: [evan.rothera@uafs.edu](mailto:evan.rothera@uafs.edu)

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