

Review: Slavery and the American Revolution - "The slave system is not dismantled by the Revolution, but is deepened and expanded more than ever"

Wednesday 7 October 2015, by [PRESCOD Paul](#) (Date first published: 1 September 2015).

***The Counter-Revolution of 1776. Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America.* By Gerald Horne. NYU Press, 2014, 363 pages, \$39 cloth.**

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THE BASIC CONTRADICTIONS of the American Revolution of 1776 are by now fairly openly acknowledged and discussed. A rapidly growing set of colonies fights for its independence from Great Britain under the slogans of "liberty" and "all men are created equal." Meanwhile, the same people who lead this movement enforce a massive system of African slave labor, with all the brutalities that it entails. This slave system is not dismantled or at all weakened by the Revolution, but is instead deepened and expanded more than ever.

However much these contradictions are accepted by scholars and historians today, the root causes of the American Revolution are still usually put forward along the lines of what we traditionally hear. The increasing economic independence of the colonies came into conflict with the direct control the British sought to maintain. Slavery could be considered a factor in this account, but not a driving cause for the colonists' revolt.

Additionally, it is often implied (if not openly stated) that African slaves played little part in determining the outcome of this conflict that was primarily between white Europeans.

Scholar Gerald Horne, Moores Professor of History and African American Studies at the University of Houston, has written extensively about African-American history as it relates to the Cold War, as well as the interactions and alliances African Americans have made with foreign countries. In *The Counter-Revolution of 1776* Horne provides a direct challenge to previous assumptions about the role Africans played.

For the author, this book "rests in the long line of works by African people who challenge the traditional view of 1776." A much more complicated picture is painted by placing the American Revolution in the context of violent slave revolts throughout the British colonies in North America

and the Caribbean, inter-imperial rivalry, and an expanding category of “whiteness.”

Horne draws heavily on sources from the Daniel Parish, Jr. Slavery Transcripts, located in the New York Historical Society. These sources provide extensive information about colonial slavery in North America. The result is a book that will forever change the way you view the founding of the United States.

Slave Trade and Rebellions

Horne wisely does not arbitrarily choose a distinct “beginning” to this process. But he marks the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England as an important moment because it facilitated the ascendancy of the merchant class and encouraged private merchant entrepreneurs to enter the slave trade. They did so with vigor and the slave trade escalated in intensity.

In response to this, the intensity and frequency of slave revolts increased as well throughout the 18th century. The book details many of these uprisings along with the hysteria they aroused among Europeans.

The island of Barbados, then a British colony, was a consistent place of rebellion. Ambitious plots were discovered there in 1676, 1683 and 1689. Jamaica also had a long history of revolts, with the Maroons forcing some concessions from London in the 1730s. The North American mainland was not free from rebellion, either. In 1712 a few dozen armed Africans killed nine settlers in a Manhattan outhouse. In 1739 the Stono Rebellion erupted in South Carolina, killing 21 whites.

These persistent rebellions demonstrated how dangerous and unstable the maintenance of the slave system would be. The profits from it were too handsome to resist, however, and the trade continued to accelerate despite the problems it created. This led to another predicament for London to worry about: the ratio of African slaves to white settlers.

As the slave trade expanded not only did revolts increase but also the sheer number of African slaves that had to be monitored and repressed. This volatile situation was the source of constant fear for white settlers. In Barbados, for example, the ratio of slaves to whites reached 20 to 1 at one point. Instability across the Caribbean led to slaves being sent to the mainland to be resold.

But the apparent resolution of this contradiction led directly to another one, for now the problem became the dramatic increase of slaves in North America. This is highlighted by the fact that in 1756 slaves made up 25% of New York City’s population.

How London dealt with this “problem” would greatly determine its future relationship with the settlers on the mainland. However, other forces would also influence their course of action.

A great strength of this book is the layered contextualization brought to critically analyze what happened in 1776. One major focus is the inter-imperial rivalry among Great Britain, Spain and France that had been raging for centuries.

Of course there are many aspects of this rivalry that one can examine, but the main issue Horne explores is the use of African troops by Spain and France for their exploits in the Caribbean as well as to antagonize the settlements of Great Britain on the North American mainland.

Spain played a role in the Stono Rebellion of 1739, and it was thought that slaves felt they could participate because they could flee to Spanish Florida. By this time, Africans were among the most

important components of the Florida militia. Another major provocation from Spain came with an Edict in 1733 that promised to free all slaves who fled to Spanish Florida from the Carolinas.

In 1741 plots were discovered in New York that involved both Spain and France conspiring against Great Britain with the use of armed Africans. These actions from London's imperial rivals naturally set dangerous examples for Africans still enslaved under British rule.

London itself seriously considered using armed Africans as well for their imperial adventures in the Caribbean and India. This would be hard for North American colonists to stomach, of course, for their whole model of development depended on the brutal repression of Africans.

Here we begin to see how the fundamental interests of Great Britain and the American colonies diverged, and how slavery was at the heart of it. We also see how Africans cleverly used the imperial rivalries to further their own interests.

Constructing Whiteness

The British responded to the Spanish and French attacks without using armed Africans by developing the construct of "whiteness." The state of Georgia was created to be a "white" buffer between South Carolina, with its Black majority, and Spanish Florida. The category of whiteness was expanded to include Eastern Europeans, Italians, French, Germans, etc.

Horne argues that this policy effectively created the first apartheid state, as white settlers received land stolen from the indigenous people and worked by enslaved Africans, while enjoying civil and political rights that were denied to all those outside the category of white. The legacy of this policy is still felt heavily throughout U.S. society.

Another important moment highlighted in the book is the Somerset Case of 1772, which stated that slavery was unsupported by British law. Many settlers saw this as an indicator of what was to come in North America.

Great Britain had already greatly upset colonists like George Washington, Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson when they tried to prevent settlers from moving west and seized their land.

Tension was heightened in 1775 when Lord Dunmore of Virginia offered to free and arm Africans to put down any settler revolts. This infuriated colonists, and illustrates how much the slavery issue was part of the American Revolution.

As the war unfolded Dunmore was indeed able to recruit regiments of Africans very easily, to the great shock of George Washington. We see that already in this early stage of the United States, race was at the forefront of political and military events.

In an interview with the Real News Network, Gerald Horne said that the phrase "I can't breathe" Eric Garner gasped as he was murdered by police perfectly captures the experience of African Americans throughout the country's history.

The Counter-Revolution of 1776 provides some deep insight into the origins of this bitter history and how its legacy can be seen today.

Throughout it is clear that African slaves were never viewed as a people who would take an equal part in building the country. Instead, they were to be constantly surveilled and repressed by any means necessary.

The devastating results of these racist origins reveal themselves in numerous ways, from a white voting bloc that consistently acts against the interests of people of color, to the failure to create any significant political party for working-class people across racial lines. This book should be read by all who wish to better understand these realities, and seek to overcome them.

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P.S.

* From Against the Current n°178, September-October 2015. <https://solidarity-us.org>