

---

## RESEÑAS DE LIBROS / BOOK REVIEWS

---

SYBYLLE FISCHER: *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004.

Over the last decades the term ‘Age of Revolution’ has become more and more frequent among western scholars. Most of the classic works on this time period have looked at the historical developments occurred in the Atlantic from a European or North American perspective. R. R. Palmer and Eric Hobsbawm, to mention but a couple of examples, focused mostly on events such as the French and the American revolutions, paying little attention – if any – to other crucial episodes such as the independence of Hispanic America and, most conspicuously, the Haitian Revolution.

Sibylle Fischer’s *Modernity Disavowed* comes to enrich the still minuscule group of scholarly works that discuss the Age of Revolution from a non-European and non-North American perspective. In doing so, she has brought up fresh problems relying on an original methodology. What was the real transformative power of the Haitian Revolution within the Caribbean context? This is, perhaps, the core question that emerges from the three parts into which the book is divided.

As Fischer herself points out, this excellent piece of academic work attempts to take on the silences and gaps surrounding the Haitian Revolution and its impact on Cuba and Santo Domingo. What Fischer does not say, maybe out of modesty, is that her imaginative research is based on an array of historical, literary and artistic sources that present her study with a highly unusual and ingenious scope. The choice of Cuba and Santo Domingo to assess the impact of the Haitian Revolution shall not surprise anybody. It is well known that because of their geographical closeness to Saint Domingue/Haiti, both Cuba and Santo Domingo – together with Jamaica and Puerto Rico – lived in a permanent state of alertness, fearing the revolutionary influences blowing from the convulse neighboring territory.

The book, as already mentioned, is divided into three main parts. Part I discusses the impact of the Haitian Revolution on Cuba. I must admit that in Part I Fischer truly surprised me with her use of the Havana mural paintings as a historical source. Some years ago, I myself did some work on these paintings,

not academically, but as a restorer for the Office of the Historian of the City. The mural paintings of Colonial Havana provide us with a fascinating glimpse of life in the ‘most European capital of Hispanic America’ that so far has been almost completely ignored. Havana’s notorious ‘sixteen chapel’, with its vast depictions of eighteenth century Cuban daily life, is a sort of window into a long gone past; a window through which nobody up to now has seen as far as Fischer has. In discussing José Antonio Aponte’s book of drawings and the very Conspiracy of 1812, she also entered a very lively debate to which scholars such as Stefan Palmié and Matt D. Childs have recently made important contributions.

Part II addresses the Dominican case. Here Fischer correctly affirms that it was in Spanish Santo Domingo where the Haitian Revolution left a ‘deeper and more warped trace’ (p. 131). This trace was conditioned by the Haitian invasion and occupation of Saint Domingue from 1822 to 1844, and by the successive and diverse Haitian attempts to bar Spanish Colonialism from the eastern part of La Hispaniola. Fischer discusses at length the trauma left among the Dominican people by these recurrent interventions. Other issues tackled by Fischer in this chapter are Indigenism, the ‘otherness’ of the Haitians, and the shortcomings of Dominican national history present throughout the nineteenth century.

Albeit still original, Part III feels somehow disconnected from the rest of the book, maybe due to the author’s incisiveness in discussing Haitian and Haiti-related literature produced before, during and after the Revolution. Having said this, her discussion of the post-revolutionary constitutions is, undoubtedly, one of the highlights of her work. Moreover, in Part III Fischer does get our attention with her close-ups of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Henry Christophe, and Alexandre Pétion, and yet falls short of offering a truly fresh interpretation of Haitian culture(s) in the post-revolutionary epoch.

Possibly the main problem with this book is the fact that its prose is sometimes too dense, in particular for a non-native English speaker, such as myself, as well as for the vast majority of Cubans, Dominicans and Haitians. Still, Fischer’s book deserves the necessary extra reading time it demands. The author has raised the significant connection between Slavery and the Age of Democratic Revolution to a new level of methodological and theoretical conceptualization – partly due to her own perspective as a scholar and partly due to the singularity of the sources that she uses throughout. *Modernity Disavowed* is therefore a satisfactory attempt to challenge Euro- and North American academic centrism while giving pre-eminence to the legacy of the most extraordinary event which occurred during this period, the Haitian Revolution.

**Manuel Barcia**

*University of Essex*