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## Review / Reseña

Dale T. Graden. *Disease, Resistance, and Lies: the Demise of the Transatlantic Slave Trade to Brazil and Cuba*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2014.

### **A Certain View of History, or History Itself? Subaltern Agency and Political Context**

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In a 1966 edition of the *Times Literary Supplement* historian E. P. Thompson complained that the history of “common people has been something other than—and distinct from—English History Proper”. Thompson’s dated complaint, entitled “History from below”, launched a significant historiographical shift that has since undergone such a great change that the rare specimen Thompson searched has been institutionalized in history department worldwide under the name of “social history”<sup>1</sup>. Associated with different fields of Social Sciences—Sociology in the 1970s, Anthropology and Cultural Studies in the following decades—, the ever-changing history from below has become popular and covered a wide range of research

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<sup>1</sup> E. P. Thompson, “History from below”, *Times Literary Supplement* (April 7, 1966). Reproduced in Dorothy Thompson (ed.). *The Essential E. P. Thompson* (New York: The New Press, 2001), 481-489.

topics, from British labor to women in nineteenth-century Iran to black slavery in the New World. In spite of their variety, the multiple streams of social history currently practiced share some basic tenets. They describe concrete social actions by common people that suggest that abstract sociological categories designed to analyze political and economic processes fail to accommodate the plural complexity of social life. In addition, social historians argue that social systems have motions, and that such motions derive mainly from the agency of subaltern actors.

Dale T. Graden's latest book, *Disease, Resistance, and Lies: the Demise of the Transatlantic Slave Trade to Brazil and Cuba*, is a self-proclaimed historical narrative from below. It belongs to the "Subaltern School", as Graden himself capitalizes. Clearly written and easy to read, its main narrative line depicts the "decisive role" (216) Africans played in helping suppress the illegal transatlantic slave trade to Brazil and Cuba in the mid-nineteenth century. Here, common and ordinary people do uncommon and extraordinary history. Such a narrative, improper at Thompson's time, has definitely triumphed as proper now.

*Disease, Resistance, and Lies* has a three-fold argument that Graden, professor of Latin America History at the University of Idaho, has developed over the last years.<sup>2</sup> The first (Chapter 1) shows deep US involvement in the reorganization of the transatlantic slave trade after Great Britain signed treaties with Spain and Brazil outlawing the activity for the Spanish and Brazilian Empires in 1820 and 1830, respectively. As David Eltis, Gerald Horne, Leonardo Marques and Stephen Chambers have argued, the republic provided traffickers with speedy clippers, goods exchangeable in West and Central Africa, diplomatic protection against seizures by the Royal Navy, experienced crews

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<sup>2</sup> Dale T. Graden, "United States Involvement in the Transatlantic Slave Trade to Brazil, 1840-1858", *Afro-Asia*, 35 (2007): 9-35; "Slave resistance and the Abolition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade to Brazil in 1850", *História Unisinos* (rio Grande do Sul) 14, 3 (Sept.-Dec. 2010): 283-294; "Interpreters, Translators and the Spoken Word in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade to Cuba and Brazil", *Ethnohistory*, 58, 3 (2011): 393-413.

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and almost everything else needed to carry out a polemic trade condemned by the world's greatest power at the time (Great Britain), but stimulated by the growing global markets for tropical commodities.<sup>3</sup> Graden's second reasoning (Chapters 2 and 3) is bioclimatic. Africans and slavers carried microbiological diseases to slaveholding regions (mainly yellow fever and cholera), that spread epidemically in the New World's tropical zones deforested by the plantation regime or occupied by densely populated cities, building up a public and popular resistance to the transatlantic slave trade. Finally, Graden argues that collective slave and free African resistance in Cuba and Brazil added to the multiply-caused suppression of the contraband slave trade to both Cuba and Brazil. Although Graden could have turned to many authors on this topic, he pinpoints Jeffrey Needell as his straw man.<sup>4</sup> Taken together, the book chapters suggest that, alongside other reasons (mainly, British diplomatic and military pressures), the poverty-stricken of the Atlantic World (Africans) were crucial in impacting the political world and in dismantling a big international business dependent upon capital, technology and diplomacy of a big nation (the United States).

Historians will find good insights in Graden's book. The description of the nineteenth-century slave trade circuits linking United States, Cuba, Brazil and Africa; the analysis of Africans' testimonies against their oppressors when rescued by British cruisers; the comparative and ambitious scope comprehending different zones of the Atlantic system: all these are good achievements based on extensive research. They deserve a reading

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<sup>3</sup> David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); *The Deepest South: United States, Brazil, and the African Slave Trade* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Leonardo Marques. *The United States and the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the Americas, 1776-1867*. PhD Dissertation. (Atlanta: Emory University, 2013); and Stephen Chambers. *No God but Gain: The Untold Story of Cuban Slavery, the Monroe Doctrine, and the Making of the United States* (London: Verso, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey D. Needell. *The Party of Order: The Conservatives, the State, and Slavery in the Brazilian Monarchy, 1831-1871* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

from a broad readership in the Social Sciences and Humanities. Nonetheless, a professional historian needs to wonder if Graden's narrative reaches the main goals of the so-called history from below it proclaims to be. Does it offer a more historically accurate context to understand the subject it deals with, that is, the political impact of free and enslaved Africans' actions in the destruction of the transatlantic slave trade? Moreover, does it convince the reader that systemic transformations in contraband emanated from the actions taken by subaltern social agents? My inclination is to say that, all its quality notwithstanding, it does not.

*Disease, Resistance, and Lies* has two methodological shortcomings that Graden may well be aware of, but are not explicitly introduced to the reader and should be mentioned here. The first one is the heuristic gap between the main subject of the book and the evidence used to examine that subject. Graden aims at tracing the *political* impact of subaltern actors on government *policies* in both the Brazilian and Spanish Empires. In order to exam this topic, Graden should have better analyzed the internal logic of the Brazilian and Spanish politics. Also, he should have paid attention to the larger political context within which the Brazilian and Cuban slave societies were embedded. However, most of the evidence Graden presents when handling the subject consists of diplomatic dispatches written by British and American representatives. To what extent do these affect his interpretation?

For example, Graden characterizes Spanish rule in Cuba as a heavy-handed regime unilaterally imposed upon Cubans.<sup>5</sup> The author argues that Cuban creoles deplored the protraction of the illegal transatlantic slave trade to the island over the 1830s and 1840s on the grounds that such a commerce destabilized the colonial social order and public health, problems they faced daily

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<sup>5</sup> This vision, somewhat inaccurate, came into being thanks in part to a minority of white Cubans who opposed Madrid; outsiders, including the Americans and the British, subsequently saw Cuban local politics and Spanish imperial policy through the prism of this white minority.

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by experiencing slave revolts and outbreaks of tropical epidemics. The main evidence Graden explores to convey this view comes from British diplomatic dispatches, as British representatives used to copy and translate Spanish-Cuban political papers that could have been of interest to the powerful geopolitics of the Foreign Office (56-61; 107-115). Among them are memorials from distinct colonial corporations (*Junta de Fomento, Ayuntamiento de la Habana*) and slaveholders (from Matanzas and Havana) written between 1841 and 1844. Based on these papers, Graden concludes: "Internal conditions in Cuba fueled by the actions of slaves and free blacks induced the authors to take a position critical of the slave trade" (111). After the La Escalera Conspiracy, a plot of a general black insurrection imputed to slaves and free people of color in 1843-1844, the Spanish Empire eventually suppressed the infamous commerce in 1845.

What is left out of such an analytical framework? The papers Graden analyzes were primarily motivated by the actions of British consul David Turnbull, an abolitionist who acted on behalf of slaves and freed Africans in Cuba with a great deal of (but not unqualified) support from the Foreign Office in the early 1840s. His relevance is just too great to underestimate, but Graden plays it down by stating: "Turnbull has gone down in history books as a committed reformer willing to confront the many beneficiaries of the slave trade. What has been overlooked in this story are the many acts of collective and personal resistance shown by Liberated Africans themselves" (96). This is a strategy of filling in a blank space. But Turnbull cannot be dismissed as a figure overly studied; first, the very evidence Graden interprets is directly or indirectly connected to him. When writing their memorials, white Cubans interweaved the Turnbull affair into a much larger framework that included the final abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1838, the transfer of the hub of the colonial economy from the Caribbean Atlantic to South Asia, the growing annexationist movement in the United

States and the Atlantic internationalization of the British abolitionist movement. Those involved in the Turnbull affair mentioned all those factors as decisive events that could magnify the social effects of the collective slave resistance on the island. With that in mind, Cubans asked Madrid for a kind of deal that presupposed a new way of governing: from then on, Cubans, not metropolitans, would have the last word on the political direction of the slave trade and slavery. Documents mentioned by Graden are part of a larger political negotiation on sovereignty in the Spanish empire, the type of topic that anti-slavery British diplomats did not give its due importance in their dispatches to the Foreign Office. Equating that discourse with an expression of fear of subaltern actions is to reduce the social meaning they had at the time of their production and reception. Indeed, in 1845 the Spanish Parliament passed an anti-slave trade law made in complete accord and consultation with Cuban slaveholders and slave dealers, who always understood it to be a temporary measure until more favorable geopolitical winds could allow its reopening. Eventually, Cuban slaveholders did reopen it.

A second example involves the transatlantic slave trade to Brazil, declared illegal in late 1830 by a British-Brazilian treaty and again in the next year by a Brazilian law. Respected for a while, this law was unenforced until the government eventually destroyed the infamous commerce in 1850. Reinstating an argument put forward a couple of years ago, Graden states the great slave rebellion known as the “Male Revolt”, which broke out in Salvador, Brazil, in 1835, was “a key variable that forced a halt to the transatlantic slave trade at mid-century” to the Brazilian Empire (121). To support his interpretation, Graden quotes petitions and provincial bills sent from Bahia to Rio de Janeiro favoring the definite suppression of the illegal slave trade. As was happening in Cuba, zealous British diplomats copied and translated them (126-128). Based mainly on this British evidence, Graden’s analysis underplays the internal dynamics of Brazilian

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national politics. Had the author followed the reception of those documents in Rio de Janeiro, he might have realized that slaveholders from the so-called expanded Paraíba Valley and distinguished politicians were also redefining the sovereignty of the Brazilian state on the subject of slavery and slave trade, striking a national compromise to reopen the transatlantic illegal slave trade. Graden knows contraband gained momentum by 1835. He also knows it rather contradicts his rendering of the political effect of the Male Revolt on Brazilian national policy. But he has an answer: “planters needed workers to cultivate their crops. [...] Many planters believed that any interruption of slave importations placed their livelihood in jeopardy” (134). In sum, slaveholders acted out of economic necessity against their sense of self-preservation and public interest.

What is not being told in this story? Brazilian statesmen had too much at stake to reject out of hand the reopening of the transatlantic slave trade in the 1830s. In the second half of the decade, several regional political insurrections deprived the Brazilian state of financial resources and increased its military budget, causing a public deficit for which coffee alone could make up. Moreover, many politicians had a polemical and centralized conception of state that required the support of great slaveholders to have Parliament pass the corresponding legislation. Led by such concerns, Brazilian Parliament wildly backed the resumption of the nefarious trade. Furthermore, the illegal slave trade revived in the context of the great expansion of coffee consumption behavior in the United States over the 1830s. Readers will decide if it is plausible to reduce the internationally and nationally induced making of the greatest illegal slave trade in history to contradictory private interests of slaveholders fearful of losing their own lives.

A further methodological procedure has implications for the general interpretation of Brazilian and Cuban policies on the slave trade presented in *Disease, Resistance, and Lies*. French

linguist Dominique Maingueneau has crafted a useful concept for discourse analysis that might be translated into English as an “aphorism-making enunciation regime”. It describes the procedure that takes texts out of their discursive genre (a “socio-historically defined communication device”) and quotes them as aphorism-like sentences. This produces detached utterances whose meaning is supposed to derive from the intrinsic power of the words rather than the specific finalities with which historical actors used them.<sup>6</sup> An ‘aphorism-making enunciation regime’ is a staple procedure among historians. Scholars are used to knitting sentences together—divorced from space, time, and genre—into a single logical argument. Graden’s book is not an exception to this practice. When going over the repercussions of the 1835 Male Revolt, Graden mentions an article in a Brazilian newspaper published in 1831 to illustrate the “multiple threats posed by massive slave importations” (131). Readers are not told, however, that the author of the article was fiercely against the slave trade. The author of the 1831 article often leveraged the topic of slave revolt to campaign against a kind of commerce he hated and as such he was duly disempowered when the slave trade revived in Rio de Janeiro. The same happens when Graden analyzes why famous Cuban planter Francisco de Arango y Parreño assumed an anti-slavery stance in 1825. He says that one of the reasons was “his fears of free blacks” and quotes a text Arango had written 35 years earlier (103). The problem is that Arango also lauded the existence of free blacks in Cuba when defending the slave trade on other occasions. Quotes similar to these abound throughout Graden’s book. Just as British diplomats detached discourses from their domestic political contexts, so does Graden detach

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<sup>6</sup> Dominique Maingueneau, “Les énoncés détachés dans la presse écrite. De la surassertion à l’aphorisation”. In: M. Bonhomme, G. Lugin (ed.). *Interdiscours et intertextualité dans les médias* (Neuchâtel: Inst. de Linguistique, Université de Neuchâtel, 2006); “De la surassertion à l’aphorisation”. In: J. M. Lopez-Muñoz; S. Marnette; L. Rosier (eds.). *Dans la jungle des discours: genres de discours et discours rapporté* (Cadix: Presses de l’Université de Cadix, 2006); and *Les phrases sans texte* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012).



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sentences from their texts. We have here a two-level detachment procedure of which we should be aware when reading *Disease, Resistance, and Lies*.

Graden raises an important question at the end of his book: if Africans fought against enslavers equally in Cuba and Brazil, why was the suppression of the transatlantic slave trade successful in Brazil by 1850, but “fail[ed] until the early 1860s” in Cuba? The question is even more compelling if we remember that the international context in Caribbean waters was far more aggravated by anti-slavery experiments than in the Brazilian South Atlantic. Echoing opinions of British consuls and diplomats, Graden uncovers three reasons, none of them directly related to African agency. First, “the Spanish government never declared the slave trade as piracy”. Second, “the powerful slave trade bloc impeded [...] ‘more efficient discover and punishment of offenders’”. Third, the Royal Navy “never acted [against Cuba] with tenacity equal to that exhibited by Commander Schomberg along the coasts of Brazil” (206). Since piracy penalties against slave dealers played little role in the suppression of the transatlantic slave trade in Brazil, and the slave trade bloc was just as powerful in Rio de Janeiro as it was in Havana, the only cogent reason is the last one.

Still based on British consul records, Graden contends the Royal Navy did not invade Cuban waters because of the authoritarian Spanish metropolitan interest in the trade and the corruption of key colonial officials. “Aware of the connivance of captain generals and an ‘inert mass of passive resistance clothed in the garb of official routine’, naval commanders had little incentive to intercept a slaver”. There was, however, a more persuasive and forceful reason that British representatives may well have put aside: the increasing transformation of the Caribbean natural zone as a geopolitical space vital to the American South and the US. This was the main motive for the Royal Navy not to attack Cuban harbors as they had done to

Brazil. In such a case, Americans could mobilize to preemptively annex Cuba, giving the Cuban planter class a political warrant their Brazilian counterpart did not have. This is the main reason why Cubans reopened the illegal slave trade during the 1850s. The reopening of the slave trade came after tariff reforms in the United States and Great Britain created a boom in domestic markets for tropical goods. Simultaneously, Brazilian slaveholders remained incapable of reopening their market. Their respective structural position within the world system, not their respective fears of collective slave resistance, was the main factor that explains the particular outcomes of the slave trade to Brazil and Cuba.

As Thompson wrote in 1966, we should not “defend a certain view of history [from top down or from bottom up]; one must defend history itself”. Specialists and general readers of *Disease, Resistance, and Lies* will learn much about history: from the centrality of the United States in the entrepreneurial and diplomatic making of the illegal transatlantic slave trade to the participation of enslaved and free Africans in it. But they might question the emphasis Graden lays on the latter in the destruction of one of the most lucrative economic enterprises of the nineteenth-century. Subaltern actors were important. In fact, these actors were dramatically important. They must be taken into account. They must be studied. However, to gauge the real impact of their actions on the systemic transformations of the slave trade (its existence in Cuba after 1820, its resumption in Brazil in 1835, its annihilation in Brazil in 1850, its permanence in Cuba until 1867), we need to conceive the political world they influenced, embedded as they were in social life with all richness, contradictions, unequal distribution of power and cruelties that social life bears in its global context right down to our time.