

# Paul Ortiz, *An African American and Latinx History of the United States*

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*Ortiz, Paul. An African American and Latinx History of the United States. Beacon Press, 2018. 298pp.*

At the time of writing this review, far-right supporters of Jair Bolsonaro had stormed the buildings of the Brazilian government branches, in a clear coup attempt against the recently formed government of Lula da Silva. This attack paralleled the series of events with those perpetrated by Donald Trump's followers three years earlier in Washington D.C.. Brazil and the United States constitute the two largest concentrations of the African diaspora in the American continent, and both are scenarios of deep anti-Black racism, the result of their entire histories of colonialism and white supremacy. However, both American countries have also seen scenarios of resistance, of social fabric construction, and of worker, indigenous, and black organizations and movements that have been at the forefront of social change, and which have nurtured each other's political practices and cultural realities. This is thanks to what Paul Ortiz calls "emancipatory internationalism" in his book, *An African American and Latinx History of the United States*.

Emancipatory internationalism implies a series of historical connections between our American countries at the hemispheric level, connections whose nodes are multiple throughout our continent, America, and which unite our peoples and their histories beyond categories of race, language, or cultural specificities, attending to their diversity. This is in opposition to the predominant historical narrative that places the United States as a champion of Western civilization, an advanced, free and exceptional country above the other American countries, which in their backwardness, underdevelopment and lack of civilization deserve to be conquered and subjugated. However, this narrative is a fiction that does not coincide with the facts of the actual history of the US; I am referring here not to the grandiloquent and convenient history of white civilization, but the one written by the hands of the working class in all its nuances, the one that Ortiz places in opposition to "American exceptionalism" in this book.

Ortiz presents an account of the history of the working class of the US as a proposal to rethink and reconceive its history in a more pluralistic, heterogeneous and democratic way. His fierce criticism of "American exceptionalism" is rooted in an alternative narrative centered on the different social movements and political processes that various peoples of the American hemisphere devised and embodied against slavery, colonialism and in favor of freedom, democracy and the interests of the working class, often against seemingly unfathomable obstacles. Ortiz's archival work traces the histories of US African and Latin Americans who, from the margins and borders of the country, built democracy from the different angles of popular movements and organizations as opposed to the nation-state centered mythologies that divide us through superfluous differences.

Emancipatory internationalism can be understood then as internationalism made in the Americas. This concept springs from Ortiz's reading of the archive, and it is valuable to develop a hemispheric perspective on the continent that serves not only as a radical critique of myths and imaginaries of the Eurocentric West, but also as an invitation to understand our history as that of pluri-ethnic and pluricultural working-class peoples with multiple connections in common, particularly regarding the different movements and social organizations through which they have fought to achieve rights and freedoms both in the United States, and in the Caribbean and Central and South America. Emancipatory internationalism arises from decades of struggle against slavery, colonialism and the full range of oppressions from which we still suffer. It also accounts for the need for self-determination of peoples as a mechanism for expanding guarantees for the full development of the potential of our societies, and as a way of overcoming the sociopathic mandates of economic entities and white supremacy.

Ortiz's aim emerges from "ordinary people's capacity to create democracy in action (...) the capacity of workers, immigrants, and marginalized people to organize for social change" (Ortiz, 2018, p. 233). This is the root of emancipatory internationalism as reflected in the different accounts that comprise each of the eight chapters of the book, organized according to important events that have marked the trajectory of the US and of the Americas since the 19th century. Chapter 1 details how the struggle for African American emancipation, later seen in the context of the Civil War, was deeply linked to a precursor event, the liberation processes of the Haitian Revolution, which influenced the later struggles of emancipatory internationalism (Age of Revolution 1770s to 1840s). Chapter 2 explores several visions of emancipation that started flourishing in the antebellum era (1820s to 1950s), when figures like Douglass and Tubman wove links between the Mexican War of Independence, the anti-slavery movement in the United States, and the myriad of concurrent endeavors to abolish racial oppressions elsewhere in the Americas. Chapter 3 describes how the Civil War was viewed by African Americans through an internationalist lens, in which anti-slavery struggles unfolded simultaneously across the hemisphere and were seen as struggles for borderless emancipation (1850s to 1865). Ortiz's perspective broadens our understanding of the conflict by showing how the roles of Afro-American workers in it were diversified, making it possible to characterize their actions in this event as the first great general strike in the country's history. In chapter 4 (covering the period from the 1860s to 1890s), Ortiz shows us how the African American General Strike influenced and transformed the idea of emancipatory internationalism by connecting the experience of the African American struggle for rights and freedom with similar struggles of oppressed peoples; despite the constant disenfranchisement at the hands of white supremacy, African American anti-slavery abolitionists launched a solidarity campaign supporting Cuba's struggle against the Spanish, which constituted a precedent for the liberation and anti-apartheid struggles of the following century. In chapter 5 (1890s to 1920s), Ortiz delineates how anti-imperialism took root as a way of life inside US African American communities, a cultural shift that, on one side, defined the actions of US corporations in Latin America as an imperial culture disguised as foreign policy, and, on the other, allowed for several organizational initiatives that attempted to translate internationalist visions of social justice into political, institutional and electoral expression. Chapter 6 describes some of the reconfigurations of racial capitalism that arose during the Great Depression era where class conflict was generalized in public life in the US (1890s to 1940s). These include the exploitation of racialized agricultural workers through the establishment of agribusiness based on dispossession of land, and its legitimization when the New Deal politics, in collusion with cohorts of politicians who guaranteed extremely poor conditions for workers, failed the working class. This perpetuated the country's imperialism under the cloak of the military-industrial complex and racial capitalism. Chapter 7 introduces the reader to the events of the Chapultepec

Conference, which are seen as the origin of the farmworker and Civil Rights movements as well as the Rainbow Coalitions, all rooted in emancipatory internationalism and flourishing as diverse social movements during three decades (1960s to 1980s). Finally, in chapter 8 Ortiz discusses the Great American Strike of 2005, a manifestation of popular discontent brewed in the context of the Hurricane Katrina tragedy, the introduction of several anti-labor, and anti-immigration and racial profiling laws following from the strong reactionary backlash against the social justice movements of the 1990s; this chapter also addresses several events from Barack Obama's election and administration, and the current endeavors of the African American social justice movement embodied by the Black Lives Matter organization and its role as inheritor of the struggles related to emancipatory internationalism in the US.

Why is this book relevant then in 2023? Events such as those mentioned at the beginning of this review show the importance of understanding history from different angles, in its heterogeneity and diversity, while evidencing the need to understand it beyond a linear narrative. This would allow us to access our present and think about types of social organization that challenge the state of affairs, with an ultimate aim of transforming it. Ortiz's proposal is anchored in this scenario. Not only does he seek to demystify the idea of what the US is and has been, but by presenting its history as that of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation, he makes it possible for us to see what can be achieved through the actions of its peoples. US citizens should read this book because it is a solid starting point in exploring the history of the US from a critical perspective focused on the working class and its connections to the rest of the hemisphere. Also, if one is familiar with the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, this text will recall it, as the archival work here is heavily influenced by Du Bois' work on the Reconstruction period, particularly the emphasis on emancipatory internationalism. Now, for those who come from Latin America like me, Ortiz offers us a vision of the north that invites us to think of the US as a heterogeneous place, irreducible to the idea of Empire, a place where resistance and community have historically flourished, and where workers and people of color have undergone various struggles in tune with the rest of Nuestramérica (Our America). Despite the overall significance of this book, however, a "negative" aspect has to do with its last chapter, which feels cut off, incomplete, because it is a work in progress that continues to be written; perhaps a follow-up with recent events would be a nice way to keep the book relevant. It does, however, give us the chance to continue reconsidering this history, especially in its most recent outcomes, the ones that have us as protagonists in the search for a more just and livable world for all.

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