

BOOK REVIEW

Leigh A. Gardner. *Sovereignty without Power: Liberia in the Age of Empires, 1822–1980* (Cambridge Studies in Economic History). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. xxii + 340 pp. Figures. Maps. Tables. Appendices. Notes. Index. \$99.99. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-009-18110-5.

Examining the economic experience of independence in the long-understudied Republic of Liberia, Leigh Gardner asks: “What did sovereignty mean in the age of empires?” (xv). *Sovereignty without Power* provides an unprecedented reconstruction of Liberian economic performance since the mid-nineteenth century. Intervening in a field that has presented Liberia as “essentially a settler colony” or as a “de facto” U.S. colony, Gardner argues that Liberia ultimately had “more in common with other independent states” than with formal colonies (xvi). While Liberia’s sovereignty mattered, its political and economic vulnerability and lack of “internal legitimacy” also mattered (88). The result was a paradoxical “combination of weakness and persistence” in which chronic financial precarity conditioned government strategies (279).

A central accomplishment of the book is the balance of its contributions to African economic history, theory, and Liberian historiography. *Sovereignty without Power* is a self-consciously comparative work, considering Liberia in reference to Mexico, Ghana, and Japan among other countries, and speaking to adjacent scholarly disciplines. Gardner delves into topics of political economy as wide ranging as the possibility of development under autocracy, factors that make a state attractive as a hub of offshore finance, and, with particular skill, pressures to conform to global economic systems affecting small states. Contesting the interpretation that formal and informal colonialism were “effectively equivalent” (276), Gardner demonstrates how the absence of an external power with an “encompassing interest” (Mancur Olson, qtd. on 275) raised the cost of credit and complicated the development of infrastructure.

The book’s eleven chapters address a scattered and incomplete source base with a refreshing mix of candor and methodological rigor. The chapter on “Reconstructing the Fragments” explains the techniques the author used for gleaning quantitative information from diverse qualitative sources and

using quantitative methods to address data gaps. Gardner successfully uncovers trends even where year-by-year data are unrecoverable. The ensuing chapters progress chronologically and thematically. Part I begins with agricultural practices on the Grain Coast and traces the arrival of 16,000 Black Americans. Parts II and III on “The Art of Survival” and “Sovereignty for Sale?” trace Liberia’s post-1847 history as an independent country. Comprehensive appendices present data and calculations that will significantly facilitate future research.

External recognition of independence functions as a litmus test for sovereignty in this book. While post-1847 Liberia retained sovereignty in this sense, Gardner demonstrates how monetary and economic sovereignty proved difficult to safeguard. Liberia’s first president introduced a national currency, yet this symbol of sovereignty faltered under the weight of debts denominated in foreign currencies. The result, discussed in Chapter 5, was a dual-currency system with British, then from the 1940s, U.S. currencies. Chapter 6 demonstrates the entanglement of economic and political sovereignty, showing how debt exposed Liberia to “supersanctions,” including foreign financial controls and advisors, constraints on foreign policy, and the specter of protectorate status (148). If vulnerable, sovereignty nonetheless had material value; the state “used strategic alienation of its sovereignty” to bolster a narrow elite (30). Gardner explains in Chapter 10 that sovereignty was “not a finite resource,” which was evident in Liberia’s ability to allow ever more foreign ships to sail under its flag (248). The portrait that emerges is of “constrained,” and occasionally commoditized, sovereignty (xvii).

Throughout, Gardner deftly intervenes in Liberian studies, making a series of important, interrelated contributions. She debunks the orthodoxy that Liberia transitioned from a “closed door” to an “open door” trade regime, noting that restrictive port of entry laws may have reflected administrative strategy rather than opposition to trade. Revisiting the modern slavery scandal that began in 1929, Gardner concludes that the Liberian government’s involvement in unfree labor “fit in a wider pattern” of efforts “to diversify its tax system” (180–81). Questioning the thesis of post-World War II growth without development, Gardner infers from education data that Liberia’s economic gains “may have benefitted more of the population than previous work has suggested,” even as patronage and foreign concessions precluded an inclusive politics (244).

Overcoming source challenges that have deterred decades of economic historians, Gardner’s pathbreaking book paves the way for overdue inclusion of Liberia in comparative analyses. Gardner identifies fertile grounds for future inquiry, including on the dynamics of sovereignty between the Monrovia-based government and the interior. *Sovereignty without Power* is required reading for scholars of Liberia, political economists interested in small states, and economic historians alike. While questions surrounding

Liberia's political sovereignty remain active, Gardner has written the definitive work on Liberia's economic and monetary sovereignty.

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