

# THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND NEW WORLD SLAVERY

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In bicentennial commemorations of the French Revolution surprisingly little was made of the impact of the Revolution on French colonial slavery. Often it was ignored altogether. In a few cases slave emancipation was tagged on to a list of other consequences thought to flow from the proclamation of the principles of 1789 and of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. In a natural association of ideas it was implied that «liberty, equality and fraternity» spelt the end for slavery.

Such casual claims did the Revolution both too much and too little honour. Too much because the Revolution of 1789, or for that matter of 1791, actually did nothing – the National' Assembly and the Constituent Assembly never even debated slavery as such. But too little, also, because it is rare that the epic achievement of the eventual French Republican conversion to revolutionary emancipationism is properly acknowledged.

In a recent article Conor Cruise O'Brien felt able comprehensively to damn the impact of the Revolution on the wider world with no need even to mention the emancipation decree of 1794 («The Decline and Fall of the French Revolution» in the *New York Review of Books* February 1990). This omission is by no means confined to the Revolution's opponents – it is found alike in the classic accounts of Jules Michelet, Jean Jaurès, Albert Mathiez, and Albert Soboul, and such recent histories as those of D.M.G. Sutherland and Simon Schama. Georges Lefebvre and François Furet do at least mention slave emancipation but without conferring great significance upon it, or exploring its prodigious impact on the Americas. This blindspot in the historiography of the French Revolution is curiously matched by a lack of interest in the French Caribbean amongst most students of slavery and abolition in the English-speaking world (Eugene Genovese and David Brion Davis being notable exceptions). Too often abolitionism is portrayed as an exclusively white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant affair – as it was in three essays by Thomas Haskell in the *American Historical Review* between 1985 and 1987, with their argument that New World slavery was challenged thanks to new moral perceptions encouraged by the spread of the market in the Atlantic zone. Haskell's three lengthy contributions, each weighed down by hundreds of citations, contained no single mention of Toussaint Louverture, or Dessalines, or Sonthonax or

Victor Hugues or any of those associated with French Republican emancipationism or black Jacobinism. A more forgivable lapse is made by those who simply salute the great revolutionary Toussaint Louverture, seeing in him the very figure of an irresistible revolt against cruel tyranny. Such a romantic approach does not ask how it is that the slave rebellion in Saint Domingue triumphed. It was to be one of the very few successful large-scale slave revolts in history – some would say the only one. In the circumstances I would like to give a narrative sketch as well as some comparative observations relating to the timing and circumstances of anti-slavery breakthroughs.

## I

In order to do justice to the French revolutionary contribution it is important not to exaggerate or misconstrue it. Slavery was indeed deprecated by leaders of French opinion in the early phase of the Revolution. Mirabeau and Lafayette were members of the abolitionist society – the «Amis des Noirs» – founded in 1788; its Secretary was Brissot de Warville and its President Condorcet, so abolitionism did not lack for prominent supporters in the middle or pre-Jacobin phase of the Revolution. But for reasons to be explored below these men chose to take their stand on advocacy of the civic rights of free men of colour and did not launch direct attacks on colonial slavery or the slave trade. Moreover, in deploring slavery Brissot and Condorcet were not boldly espousing a new and unacceptable doctrine but rather echoing something like a consensus in enlightened circles in the Atlantic world. This consensus was, it is true, very recent. Slavery only began to be questioned by moralists and philosophers as late as the mid-eighteenth century – with Montesquieu's *Esprit des Lois* being a pivotal work. But subsequent to this the case against slavery had been endorsed or developed by many thinkers, including Scottish economists and jurists, contributors to the *Encyclopedie*, religious leaders like Wesley, and by the widely-read French colonial expert the Abbé Raynal in his best-selling work the *Histoire des Deux Mondes*.

By the year 1789 several major political figures had already advertised a sympathy for anti-slavery thought – William Pitt, Benjamin Franklin, even Thomas Jefferson and George Washington despite their own slaveholdings. In France the formation of the «Amis des Noirs» belongs as much to the last reforming spasm of the Ancien Régime as it does to the revolutionary impulse of 1789. One quarter of the members of the «Amis des Noirs» were in fact high officials of state, mainly in the financial departments. Louis XVI himself graciously received an abolitionist deputation; Necker and other senior ministers or advisers were known to be sympathetic. To someone influenced by Condorcet, anti-slavery was symbolic of a new ideal order, without odious distinctions or discriminations. As the Ancien Régime tried to jump out of its own skin it was an appealing vision for many of its servants.

Just as remarkable as this consensus was the paucity of action flowing from it. However lamentable New World slavery was thought to be it was neverthe-

less protected by powerful interests and ideas capable of neutralising and blocking it. The slave plantations might embody great inhumanity but they also constituted a crucial source of national wealth, above all in the United States, Britain and France. In these countries national commerce crucially depended upon an intercourse with the slave plantations.

The knot of New World slavery had been tied by national interest, regard for private property and racial disregard of those of African descent. The form of capitalism which thrived in the Atlantic zone in this epoch still entailed extensive exchanges with the slave plantations which were the chief or only suppliers of such coveted produce as sugar, tobacco, coffee, and cotton. Those statesmen who deplored slavery might be ashamed of their country's sanction to the institution, and find it difficult openly to justify denying Africans the attributes of men, but they refused to countenance unilateral actions hostile to national interests or tending to put property rights in question. Thus the British abolitionist movement chose to attack the slave trade rather than slaveowners' property, in the first instance, and they found themselves blocked, nevertheless, by the argument that if Britain abandoned the slave trade then this would simply provide new openings for their commercial rivals.

The protective complex to which I have referred effectively defended French colonial slavery for three or four years after 1789. The French colonies were the richest and most dynamic in the Americas allowing the merchants of Bordeaux and Nantes to become continental Europe's chief suppliers of plantation produce. As it happened, the organisation of both Girondins and Jacobins drew upon the commercial networks radiating out from the Atlantic seaboard. In the Assembly itself as many as a tenth of the deputies owned property in the colonies. Thus it is scarcely surprising that it was not thought possible to make any head-on challenge to colonial slavery. Brissot and other supporters of the «Amis des Noirs» did, however, eventually bring themselves to press for a modest quasi-abolitionist measure when they undertook to campaign for civic rights to be given to qualified – that is propertied – free men of colour in the colonies. Restricting the vote to men of property had itself been contentious – denying it to wealthy and respectable coloured proprietors would be more difficult still to justify. And beyond questions of justification there was also the important consideration that the free men of colour were inclined to be much more loyal to the metropolis than were the resident planters of the Antilles. While the white planters dreamt of autonomy, or even independence on the North American model, the free people of colour were open to an alliance with the Paris government. Girardin attempts to construct a new political order in the colonies did not harm commercial interests, while humanistic rhetoric actually reinforced them in the given circumstances. But this still did not mean a challenge to slavery as such. Indeed, many mulattoes were slaveowners themselves.

The years 1789-91 witnessed a ragged conflict between metropolis and colonies, and in the Caribbean between whites and free mulattoes. Weakening the apparatus of slave domination, this set the scene for the celebrated slave

uprising of August 1791 in Saint Domingue. Deservedly famous as it is, this tremendous revolt of the slaves of Saint Domingue's Northern plain did not immediately lead to a general assault on slavery as is sometimes supposed. This slave rebellion was remarkable for its scale and stamina but it did not set itself wider objectives than those which characterised other slave revolts – the liberty of those immediately involved. The rebel chiefs did not aim at liberty for all slaves and they chose to call themselves soldiers of the King. The mass of slave rebels – numbering several tens of thousand – were inspired by the quite specific objective of escaping from underneath an extraordinarily oppressive system. To begin with, they were scarcely concerned at a struggle articulated in terms of French juridical categories. At best they hoped for liberty for themselves and their families but there were also many calls for reforms in the plantation regime – for example, for their free days to be increased from one or one and a half, to two or three days per week. In 1792 the main rebel chiefs engaged in a negotiation with the French Commissioner according to which only four hundred of their number would have received outright freedom with others having to rest content with more time to cultivate their garden plots. The black generals thus adopted a stance towards slavery that might be compared with the modern trade union leaders' approach to wage labour: negotiate for better terms and conditions not for abolition. In the event the leaders of the black rebels reached a deal with the Spanish King rather than the French Republic. Some French royalist officials and proprietors were willing to help the black soldiers so long as the latter lent themselves to no generalised attack on slavery. A number of the black rebels believed that only the King was competent to confer a valid emancipation and that the increasingly bold proposals of Sonthonax, the Republican Commissioner, were a species of trickery without legitimate political sanction. One could even compare the slave uprising in Saint Domingue of 1791-3 with the revolt in the Vendée in that it was anti-Republican in character and eschewed alignment with general emancipationist goals. This having been said, in the long run the revolt did greatly weaken slaveholder power and constitute a continuing pressure on the Republican authorities.

Though the latter managed to pacify much of the Northern plain in 1792-3, the rebels maintained themselves in the mountains and border districts. Moreover, there were repeated outbreaks of revolt in different parts of the colony. The factional struggles within the free population even led rival groups to arm their own slaves. The existence of local markets in slave produce furnished an opportunity for slaves from different plantations to meet. According to legend, voodoo ceremonies also sometimes performed this role. For some slave rebels, simply driving out the whites and claiming what they saw as their land was a quite self-sufficient programme. But the rebel leaders did use the word liberty and some will certainly have seen the peril and offence of a selective and partial liberty that left vengeful slaveowners in place.

The French Republic belatedly adopted emancipation in February 1794, two and a half years after the slave rebellion in Saint Domingue had made

black rebels crucial protagonists in the struggle for the New World. C.L.R. James' magnificent book *The Black Jacobins*, first published in 1938, remains one of the outstanding attempts to understand this pivotal moment in the history of New World slavery. James' thesis is not that the rebels were «black Jacobins» from the outset, but rather that Black Jacobinism eventually emerged as a precariously negotiated alliance between the most far-seeing of the black rebels – notably Toussaint Louverture – and the most consistent of the Jacobins, notably Léger Felicité Sonthonax, the Convention's Commissioner in Northern Saint Domingue. For a time these two men competed with one another in the liberationist appeals they directed at the mass of blacks, though neither was really in a position to proclaim general emancipation – Toussaint because he was a Spanish General and Sonthonax because he was a representative of the Convention. From the end of 1793 Toussaint began to distance himself from the Spanish authorities, so much so that royalist planters allied to Spain complained that he could not be trusted. For his part Sonthonax began publishing appeals in «Kréyole», the language spoken by the great majority of blacks, instead of the French that had hitherto been the sole medium of official communication. The great majority of slaveholding whites now abandoned any hope in seeing their interests secured by the Republic and looked instead to Britain for their salvation. The French Republic was now at war with Britain so this was an appeal heeded by the British government. It forthwith dispatched a huge expedition to seize the French Antilles and to rescue the French planters from their own slaves. The British Parliament had dropped abolitionism. Edmund Burke, an erstwhile opponent of the slave trade, declared that he would far rather see a properly regulated slave trade and system of slavery than the abrupt suppression of either.

In Saint Domingue, the Jacobin Commissioner knew that the Republican presence could best be defended by liberating and arming the blacks within his jurisdiction and urging general emancipation upon the authorities in Paris. At the end of 1793 Sonthonax sent a delegation – three men, one of whom was a black officer, another a mulatto – from Saint Domingue to the National Convention to demand general emancipation. This proposal was approved by acclamation in Pluviôse An II, February 1794.

The holy trinity of property, race and national interest could no longer block the anti-slavery impulse. The complex of interests and ideas protective of slavery had broken down. Under the pressure of the sans culottes, private property was no longer sacred; indeed, the rich were now held to be suspect in their patriotism. The emancipation decree was taken up with vigour by the Hebertists and other radical currents. As Britain moved to capture France's slave colonies with the active collusion of the colonial slaveowners, the argument from national interest no longer militated against emancipation. As for ethnic identification, the universalistic elements in Revolutionary ideology had led to widespread rejection of the notion of an «aristocracy of the skin». The breakthrough made by the Convention coincided with Toussaint's abandonment of the Spanish and his re-alignment with the French Republic. In

Saint Domingue, revolutionary emancipationism and black power became a formidable – indeed unconquerable – force. The British were forced to give up their ignominious attempt to grab Saint Domingue and to defend slavery within it. The first British forces had landed in December 1793; despite some 40,000 re-inforcements they were obliged to evacuate in 1798.

The alliance of Jacobinism and black power effected the first major breach in the New World slave systems. Slave insurgence and emancipationism were allied for the first time to the resources of a great power. They inflicted a blow to colonial slavery from which it would never recover.

## II

Saint Domingue in the early 1790s was the richest and most dynamic slave colony in the Americas. It contained about half a million slaves; adding in the slave populations of Guadeloupe and Martinique there were nearly three quarters of a million French colonial slaves. Prior to this, anti-slavery had had no impact on the plantation zone where the large slave populations were concentrated. In Britain the celebrated Mansfield decision of 1772 had prevented an American slaveowner from returning his slave to the colonies, but there were only a few thousand slaves in England at this time and Mansfield did not deny that they owed some service to their masters. In 1780 the state of Pennsylvania had passed an Emancipation Act which may have been drafted by Thomas Paine. This was a moment of difficulty and of social radicalisation but even so the emancipation measure was a modest one. Under its terms no existing slave had to be freed. Instead, freedom was to be conferred on children to be born to slave mothers and on them only after they reached the age of twenty five. There were, in any case, very few slaves in Philadelphia or in those other Northern states which adopted similar legislation. In 1787 the Constitutional Convention had solemnly enshrined the condition of the unfree in the basic document of the new Republic. Against this Anglo-Saxon record the boldness and radicalism of the decree of Pluviôse An II stands out unmistakably. The British Government was to wait thirty nine years before, in the aftermath of the Reform Crisis and pressed by a newly radical working class, it was to introduce its own measure of slave emancipation. And it was to be seventy years before President Lincoln, at a critical junction in the Civil War, followed suit.

The story might be better known if the French Revolution had attacked slavery during its innocent and generous phase. But the record shows that vested interests prevented the great orators of the Revolution from bringing the matter before the Assembly. The contribution of the « Amis des Noirs » was limited but not negligible: their fight for the civic rights of the free coloured proprietors challenged the legitimacy of racism, thus weakening one of the defences of colonial slavery, though still leaving unchallenged the arguments from property rights and national interest.

The pro-emancipation policy of the French Republic must be credited, firstly, to the persistence of the black rebellion, making it a potential ally

against the British: and secondly, to the more radical Jacobins, who accepted the decree of Pluviôse An II, and thirdly, to the Directory, which upheld the results of the policy in the Caribbean. It is odd that pro-Jacobin historians have not, on the whole, made more of this hugely redeeming act of the period of the Terror; and not, perhaps, so odd that generations of radical historians have failed to register the audacious revolutionary deeds of the corrupt Thermidorian Directory in the Caribbean.

There is much that still needs to be found out about this fascinating episode in the making of the modern world. Indeed it is to a novelist, Alejo Carpentier, that we must turn for the most vivid account of the extraordinary developments in the Eastern Caribbean in the period after the decree of Pluviôse. In *El Siglo de las Luces* (Explosion in the Cathedral) Carpentier attempted a narrative of the life and times of Victor Hugues, the Jacobin Commissioner who brought the decree of Pluviôse to the New World. But while this novel yields insight into the mentality of the tropical Patriot it does not do justice to the grandeur of the Revolution's achievement. Carpentier wrote this novel as a Communist still reeling under the impact of Khrushchev's secret speech to the 20th Congress of the CPSU. The inventor of «magic realism» seems to have placed too much reliance on a biography of Hugues – the only one there is – written in the thirties by a French naval historian. The result is a portrait which points up the sinister and seamy side of this admittedly flawed Revolutionary while underplaying the impact the Revolution had on the Caribbean.

In April 1794 Hugues set out from Brest with a tiny flotilla of two frigates, five transports and a brigantine carrying with him to the New World the emancipation decree, a printing press and a guillotine. He arrived in the Eastern Caribbean to face a British force about six times as large as his own which had occupied the French colonies of Guadeloupe, Desiderade, and Martinique at the specific invitation of local slaveowners. The subsequent exploits of the Jacobin expedition have a New World significance which one might compare with Thermopylae or the Battle of Britain.

Hugues established a bridgehead on Guadeloupe and landed a part of his force of 1,200 troops. The British occupation forces on this island alone numbered over 4,000 and were well supplied with war materiel; Benedict Arnold, the American renegade and counter-Revolutionary had set up shop in Basse Terre and was deep in negotiations with local planters. The Jacobin Commissioner armed the newly liberated blacks and in eight months of fighting drove out the British, their American camp-follower and his clients. This triumph over the British and the royalists was achieved thanks to the revolutionary emancipation measure which enabled Hugues to arm thousands of blacks and to sow confusion in the British-occupied areas. Once the British had been driven out, Guadeloupe was converted into a spring-board for the liberation of Desiderade and a number of smaller islands. The emancipation decree was translated and printed in all the major Caribbean languages. Support was given to slave revolts in St. Vincent, Dominica, and Grenada. At one point the revo-

lutionary forces of Julien Fedon (a coloured proprietor who led the revolt in Grenada) held the whole island save its capital. Recent research shows that the so-called «War of the Brigands» waged by Hugues and the black revolutionaries of the Eastern Caribbean tied up more British troops and warships than the campaign in Saint Domingue, and led to heavier casualties. French propaganda of word and deed inspired slave revolts in Venezuela, Cuba, Jamaica and Brazil.

In the years 1794-9 the French Directory sent substantial supplies to the Caribbean; thousands of troops and impressive quantities of firearms and ammunition. The consolidation of a revolutionary black power in Saint Domingue was decisively assisted by this help and by the diversion of British forces to the Eastern Caribbean. The «War of the Brigands» accounted for two thirds of the ninety thousand or so British casualties in the Caribbean theatre. British losses in this Caribbean «side-show» were greater than in the whole of the European theatre.

The truly heroic stature of Toussaint Louverture, the main leader of the black revolutionaries of St Domingue, was widely acknowledged, both at the time and subsequently. Toussaint's acceptance as an abolitionist symbol in England dates from the time he became Napoleon's opponent, and then his victim. Without in any way challenging the pre-eminence given to Toussaint, however, we should point out that the overthrow of slavery in Saint Domingue was owed to the courage and tenacity of many thousands of black rebels who carried the torch of liberty both in the earlier period before Toussaint's role was clear and also following his arrest on Napoleon's orders in 1802. Thus prior to April 1794 Toussaint, as an officer of the Spanish King, could do little more than send out anti-slavery signals. Recent research by the Canadian historian Robert Stein has shown that Sonthonax, the Jacobin Commissioner sent to Saint Domingue in July 1792, worked his way quite speedily to a pro-emancipation policy and in the process attracted a significant black following. Amongst the latter were Belley, a member of the delegation to the National Convention in February 1794, together with many key black military commanders who later fought with Toussaint, like Henri Cristophe and Pierre Michel. It should further be said that it was Sonthonax's strong orientation towards emancipation that attracted Toussaint to Republicanism, at a time when a new and independent wave of slave insurgence was pushing him to break with the Spanish.

Eugene Genovese has argued in his book *From Rebellion to Revolution* that the French Revolution effected a transformation in the character of slave revolts in the Americas. Prior to this period slave revolts and slave maronnage did not aim to overthrow slavery as such, but only to deliver the particular groups involved from slavery. The communities of escaped slaves might themselves practice traditional forms of bondage or enter agreements with the slaveowners to discourage or return further runaways. After the victory of the slaves in Saint Domingue the revolts of American slaves could, and often did, have a general revolutionary, anti-slavery character. Genovese's argument is



schematic but fundamentally accurate. After the victory of the slaves in Saint Domingue the revolts of American slaves could, and often did, have a general anti-slavery character, as in Jamaica in 1831, or Martinique in 1848, or in Brazil in 1887.

French Republican anti-slavery policy went far beyond anything witnessed in the American Revolution and far beyond anything envisaged by British abolitionists during the first wave of anti-slavery in Britain in the years 1788 to 1792. It permitted the consolidation of a black army committed to emancipationism and capable of defending this even against France itself. When General Laveaux, the senior Republican commander, was recalled to France in 1795 he appointed Toussaint to succeed him. By this time the French Republican forces numbered at least 20,000 the great majority of them former slaves. Toussaint not only commanded the largest army in the colony, but also showed that he could weld former slaves into a disciplined and highly effective force. With rather less success he also sought to encourage black labourers to resume work on export crops. As is well known, Toussaint never renounced allegiance to France, though as Governor of Saint Domingue he exercised great autonomy.

When Napoleon sought to destroy the black power in Saint Domingue the prestige of the French Republic was such that he found many coloured soldiers willing to collaborate with him. But black resistance nevertheless welled up and eventually engulfed the occupying force. Napoleon lost more soldiers in Saint Domingue than were to fall at Waterloo, just as the British suffered more casualties in Saint Domingue than in their hard-fought final battle against the French emperor. The new state of Haiti established in 1804 was not the first independent state in the New World but it could proudly claim to be the first to ban slavery throughout its territory. This was to be a source of inspiration for later partisans of emancipation. In 1816 Petion, the then President of the Haitian Republic, made sure that the torch of slave liberation would be carried further when he gave succour and support to Simon Bolivar in return for a promise that the Spanish American Liberator would combine the struggle for independence with the struggle against slavery.

I would like to conclude by considering aspects of this first liberation which might be thought to explain the modest role accorded to it in the historical literature.

### III

Firstly, the decree of Pluviôse might be thought to have been nothing more than crude realpolitik, a sort of desperate last throw by French colonialism in the Caribbean. I have myself acknowledged that the outbreak of war with Britain and the despatch of a large British expedition to the West Indies meant that French national interest found it easier to accept an emancipation policy that would allow them to recruit black soldiers. However I would not accept that the course of events left the French Republicans with no other

choice, nor that they did not have to accept a price for their commitment to emancipationism in 1794-9. On various occasions the British, Spanish and Portuguese Governments felt the need for black soldiers because they were in a tight spot. What they did on such occasions was to promise freedom only to those who fought for them: the Portuguese did this in Brazil in the seventeenth century in their war against the Dutch; the British did it during the War of American Independence; the Spanish King, and some French royalists, had done this in Saint Domingue itself. The decree of Pluviôse went decisively further than such limited and opportunistic measures. It also entailed risks and costs. By declaring emancipation the Paris government knew that it risked alienating some of its remaining white partisans in the Caribbean, as indeed it did – Sonthonax's policy led numbers of white patriots to defect to the royalists or to seek exile. Another significant cost of Revolutionary emancipationism was worsening relations with an important potential ally of the isolated and embattled French Republic – the United States, with its influential slaveholding class. The French revolutionary agents in the Caribbean sought to encourage slave insurgency in other parts of the Americas – while they did not directly target the Virginians, this emancipationist policy could not possibly be acceptable to the US government, as soon became apparent. Moreover, Victor Hugues unloosed a flotilla of privateers on the slave trading vessels of all other nations, practising a sort of bucaneeing Jacobinism. Indeed it was largely in consequence that the so-called Quasi-War broke out between France and the United States in which hostilities were confined to the New World. The Directory stuck by Hugues and emancipationism despite these costs. From a national interest point of view there were, of course, gains – the large casualties inflicted on the British. Moreover, Hugues probably used the fruits of his revolutionary piracy to buy influence in Paris. nevertheless it is generally true that alternative policy options themselves help to construct rival sets of interests and risks. That the path of Republican virtue also had advantages does not discredit it.

Napoleon's moves to restore slavery in 1802, which met little metropolitan resistance, might be thought to detract from the grandeur of the French Revolutionary achievement. As it happens, several of those associated with the emancipationist policy did oppose the restoration, though these did not include Hugues. By this time Napoleon had constructed a formidable power and was soon demolishing other Revolutionary gains. Aristocracy was to be re-created and French labourers required to carry a carnet to show they were gainfully employed. The reasons for Napoleon's move to restore slavery are not always properly appreciated. Under the terms of the Treaty of Amiens the British returned to France the captured colony of Martinique in which the slave plantations were in a flourishing condition. Napoleon could not refuse the return of Martinique and he had no desire to see slavery overturned there. The diplomatic record shows that both the United States and Britain were happy to see Napoleon attempt to restore black subordination in the Caribbean. Whether he succeeded or not, they were going to benefit. Pointing out

Anglo-American complicity does not absolve Napoleon, but it does help explain how he was drawn into such a dangerous venture. In the event slavery was restored in Guadeloupe though only after a fierce struggle against a group of the local black military men.

Returning to the Revolutionary period it seems to me that subsequent events do not cancel out the significance of the decree of Pluviôse any more than the Restoration of Charles II cancels out the significance of the Putney Debates. Moreover slavery itself was not in fact to be restored in Saint Domingue or Haiti as it became in 1804. Those responsible for the defence of slaveholding regimes in the Americas were spurred to greater caution and vigilance from this point on. Suppression of the slave trade in Britain and the United States in 1807 was prompted in part by the desire to promote greater security in the slave zone.

A final possibility to be considered is that the record of Haiti in the post-revolutionary period should be seen as somehow diminishing the significance of the emancipation that had been defended at such cost. Thus the British writer Terry Coleman, writing in the *Guardian*, has suggested that the subsequent poverty and instability of Haiti detracts from the achievement of the «Black Jacobins». However, anyone at all acquainted with the condition of Caribbean slaves in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries will know that the post-emancipation condition of the citizens of Haiti was in every way preferable. While the slave populations invariably had a negative growth rate, Haiti's population recovered and grew. Though the Haitian peasantry was poor it did not spend six days a week working for someone else; it enjoyed freedom of movement and developed a rich folklore. The prospects for Haiti were hampered by two circumstances. Firstly, the Atlantic powers would extend neither diplomatic recognition nor normal trade facilities to the black state. Secondly, the small free state had to devote large resources to its armed forces. It may finally be said that the freedmen and women themselves could always be mobilised by any threat of a return of slavery as they had been in 1802-4 when Napoleon's army was defeated.

In Saint Domingue the French Revolution had an enabling force, attracting black partisans who triumphantly defended its emancipationist legacy against the metropolis itself. In saluting the impact of the French Revolution in the Caribbean, therefore, we salute its appropriation by former slaves few of whom even spoke French but who found in it both opportunity and inspiration for the first major blow to be dealt to the New World slave systems. It may even be that the blacks of Saint Domingue/Haiti gained more from the Revolution, albeit at huge cost, than did the poor and oppressed in France itself.

Perhaps this draws our attention to a more general truth. There was a universalistic element in the French Revolution, but those who issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen were by no means always aware of it, or willing to follow through its logic. Here we may see the limitations of the formal and abstract mode of reasoning characteristic of increasingly market-

ised social relations. For the emancipatory promise to be fulfilled there was needed the independent action of formerly excluded, oppressed and exploited social layers - in this case slave rebels and radicalised sans culottes who refused to compromise with the slaveholders or slavery. The former slaves of Saint Domingue/Haiti found their cause assisted by geography and a favourable local relationship of forces, with blacks comprising nine tenths of the population.

A final comment is in order concerning the circumstances which permitted the abolitionist breakthrough in Revolutionary France. Obvious though it may be, it is still worth noting that the great acts of emancipation in the Atlantic world were all linked to profound political upheavals. It was only in circumstances of acute domestic crisis that a successful attack could be mounted. At such times the political culture was more open to the universalistic and emancipatory message of anti-slavery as rival political formations struggled for legitimacy, hegemony and popular support. The institution of private property was more vulnerable and national interest open to redefinition. Britain in 1832-3, France in 1848, the United States in 1862-8, Cuba in 1870-80, Brazil in 1887-8 were to offer subsequent variations on this theme. In fact none of the major emancipations were achieved as the result of a simple and slow organic development. Pressure from free persons of colour and from slave rebels also played a role in the major emancipations, though the scale and tenacity of the action of the blacks of Saint Domingue remained extraordinary. Without black witness and black resistance the necessary degree of isolation and demoralisation of the slaveholders would not have been achieved.

The memory of the revolution in Saint Domingue itself acted as a powerful inspiration of later generations of abolitionists and slave rebels. These conclusions are at odds with the argument recently advanced by Thomas Haskell, to which reference was made at the outset, to the effect that abolitionism was encouraged by the new perceptions based on market relations. While one can attribute some strands of abolitionism to forces such as those identified by Haskell, there are others which this model completely fails to account for, or to identify - notably those popular reflexes, so important in crisis periods, that were antagonistic to the wealthy and privileged. The colonial merchants and planters of 1793-4 were most definitely thought to belong to this latter category; and their market relations with Britain and the United States were thought to have led them to treason against the Republic. At times of social and political crisis the resentments of small property-holders, artisans and labourers were most likely to fix upon the activities of merchants and power-holders; a diffuse but well-established popular prejudice against slavery could come to the fore in such conditions. In the colonial world the market was not a homogeneous entity any more than in the metropolis; suppressing the market in human beings limited the options of wealth-holders, but strengthened the hand of small producers and wage or salary earners. One could, therefore, conclude that the new salience of markets did contribute something important to this first resounding success of anti-slavery, itself a doctrine of great novelty.

But this contribution came from reaction against the market and from a perception that the market needed to be challenged, regulated and controlled.

### *Bibliographical Note*

The most recent survey of the literature on the impact of the Revolution on the colonies is David Geggus, «Racial Equality, Slavery and Colonial Secession during the Constituent Assembly», *American Historical Review*, vol. 94, n. 5, December 1989. Unfortunately most studies stop short, as does this essay by Geggus, at the period immediately preceding the decree of the Convention in 1794. The best recent monographs are Yves Benot, *La Révolution française et la fin des colonies*, Paris 1988; Pierre Pluchon, *Toussaint Louverture*, Paris 1982; David Geggus, *Slavery, War and Revolution: the British Occupation of St Domingue*, London 1983; Michael Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar and Seapower*, Oxford 1987; and Anne Perotin-Dumon, *Être Patriote sous les tropiques*, Basse Terre 1985; Robert Stein, *Legér Felicité Sonthonax*, Madison 1985. For the broader anti-slavery context see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, New York 1975 and Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, New York 1979. I have attempted to trace the wider impact of the events in the French Caribbean in R. Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery: 1776-1848*, London 1988, see chapters V and VI for the events of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period and succeeding chapters for their influence of later abolitionist advances in Britain, the United States and Spanish America.