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The French Revolution and Haiti

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I have become increasingly interested in the potential of using Saint-Domingue/Haiti as a prism through which to study French society during the Revolutionary era. Not only is the story of the revolution in Saint-Domingue important in its own right, but the complex and contradictory reactions it provoked back in the metropole offer an opportunity to put Revolutionary and counter-revolutionary principles under the microscope. The Haitian revolution was, after all, a test case for revolutionaries in France, who were debating the limits and potential of liberty and equality – as set against concerns over issues like the sanctity of private property, public order and geopolitical security. A Haitian prism on French politics has two further distinct advantages. First, it encourages, or perhaps even demands, a much broader timeframe than is usually employed in Revolutionary historiography, with French recognition of Haiti’s status as an independent nation in 1825 one obvious end point. Second, it leads naturally to engagement with the developing transnational
historiography of the Atlantic world during this period – for example, work that looks at American condemnation and support for a successful slave rebellion in its vicinity. (Geggus and Friering, 2009; Sepinwall, 2012) This is therefore an opportunity to site French Revolutionary historiography in a truly international context.

One illustration of what such an angle can bring to the table can be found in the trials of two former governors of Saint-Domingue, Philibert François Rouxel de Blanchelande and Jean-Jacques-Pierre d’Esparbès, at the Paris Revolutionary Tribunal during the Terror. In spite of the high profiles of both these men, Haitian and French Revolutionary historians seem to lose interest in these individuals once they are removed from the colony. However, both men publicly campaigned for their freedom while sitting in the Abbaye prison in Paris from the end of 1792 onwards (until they were tried separately in April 1793), and both campaigns provoked positive and negative reactions in the Revolutionary public sphere. The fact that the prosecution of both trials, playing to a sans-culotte public gallery, laid out a strikingly anti-slave discourse regarding the causes and course of the rebellion in Saint-Domingue calls into question essential parts of traditional chronologies of the abolition movement during the French Revolution, which often do not clearly interrogate the differences between the slow, tortuous path to 4 April 1792 (the reaffirmation of political rights to a limited number of free people of colour) and the uncharacteristically quick ratification in February 1794 of Sonthonax’s unilateral decision to offer the slaves of Saint-Domingue their freedom. It may be that the influential accounts of Yves Bénot and Jean-Daniel Piquet rely on too selective a range of sources in their desire to provide a chronology for a consistent, popular abolition movement during 1792-4. (Bénot, 1988, Piquet, 2002) By 1793 this requires the filtering out of a significant amount of evidence pointing towards the opposite phenomenon in public discourse – as the cases of Blanchelande and d’Esparbès clearly show.

Beyond the Terror, I believe more can be done to unpick the influence of Saint-Domingue/Haiti on the French Revolution. Indeed, Jeremy Popkin has recently been working on Thermidorian interactions with Saint-Domingue, when there is a very interesting debate about the conflicting rights of white colonists, slave owners and former slaves and how they fit into the metropolitan republican vision as it develops.
post-Terror. (Popkin, 2009) Yun Kyoung Kwon, meanwhile, has demonstrated some of the ways in which these links underwent further development during the Bourbon Restoration, with both the real-time story of the young Haitian Republic and narratives of its bloody genesis important weapons in the ongoing political struggles between liberals and counter-revolutionaries over the direction France should take in the new century. (Kyoung Kwon, 2011) It would be interesting to chart the way in which competing narratives developed on these issues, all the way from Blanchelande and D’Esparbès to the reign of Charles X and France’s official recognition of Haitian nation status, on 17 April 1825.

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WORKS CITED


Geggus, David and Norman Fiering eds, *The World of the Haitian Revolution* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2009)


