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# Introduction

ON 4 FEBRUARY 1794, the legislators of France's revolutionary government passed a historic decree: "The National Convention declares slavery abolished in all the colonies; as a consequence, it decrees that all men resident in the colonies, regardless of color, are French citizens, and will enjoy all the rights assured by the constitution."<sup>1</sup> With this one sentence, the deputies proclaimed the end of an institution that had been fundamental to the entire enterprise of European colonization in the Americas for the previous three centuries and that was still legal in the newly independent United States and the empires of Britain, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands. The French abolition decree, issued at a moment when there were more enslaved Black people in France's Caribbean colonies than in the thirteen states of the American republic, was the most radical such law in the entire history of the struggle against slavery. It not only granted immediate and unconditional freedom, it also elevated formerly enslaved Black people to full French citizenship, and it provided no compensation to former slave owners. As a token of their seriousness, the French lawmakers welcomed two men of African descent as voting members of the Convention. They and others would sit in the country's legislative assemblies throughout the next five years.

In revolutionary France, the law passed on 4 February 1794 was known as the decree of 16 pluviôse Year II, the date of its passage according to the revolutionary calendar adopted three months earlier. The calendar symbolized the revolutionaries' conviction

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that the proclamation of the French Republic on 22 September 1792 had marked the beginning of a new era in the history of humanity, and the decree of 16 pluviôse underlined their determination to transform not just their own country but the entire world. Members of the Convention predicted that their action would free not only the enslaved Black men and women in France's colonies but also those of the other European empires with which France was at war: Surely the news from France would lead to uprisings by the enslaved populations in the colonies of France's enemies.

Even as they congratulated themselves on passing their emancipation decree, the French legislators knew that abolishing slavery would not be as simple as the short text made it seem. A few years earlier, some of them had participated in France's first revolutionary legislature, the National Assembly, when it enacted its Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in August 1789. Article 1 of that historic document stated that "men are born and remain free and equal in rights." When the declaration was passed, the National Assembly's most celebrated member, Count Honoré Gabriel Riqueti de Mirabeau, addressed France's colonists, telling them that the clear sense of the document was that "there cannot be, either in France, or in any other territory under France's laws, any men except *free men*, except *men equal to one another*."<sup>2</sup> And yet slavery continued in France's colonies, and on no fewer than three separate occasions before its session ended in September 1791, the same National Assembly that had written the Declaration of Rights affirmed its legal status. The passage of the decree of 16 pluviôse was an admission that the soaring rhetoric of the French Revolution's most famous statement of principles had not yet brought about any change to an institution that clearly violated the most basic of them.

As the deputies voted on 16 pluviôse, they also knew that they had little real choice in the matter. Before the introduction of the motion that led to their abolition of slavery, they had listened to a three-hour speech explaining that the nearly half a million Black people in France's most valuable colony, Saint-Domingue (today's independent nation of Haiti), had already obtained their freedom. For two and a half years, much of Saint-Domingue's Black population had been free in practice, thanks to the massive slave

insurrection that had broken out there in August 1791, the start of what we now call the Haitian Revolution. In the summer of 1793, the two “civil commissioners” who represented the French government, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Etienne Polverel, recognized that they could not defeat the insurrection and that they needed Black support to oppose white colonists and invasions by the British and the Spanish. To win that support, they promised the Black population legal recognition of the freedom they had already obtained through insurrection.<sup>3</sup>

When the deputies in Paris took their vote in 1794, they also knew that its impact would depend on the outcome of the struggles that threatened the future of the revolution in France. Georges Danton, the deputy whose eloquence carried the day in favor of the motion to abolish slavery, was already locked in mortal combat with the members of the powerful Committee of Public Safety, who would send him to the guillotine two months later. Neither the committee’s most famous member, Maximilien Robespierre, nor any of his colleagues was present in the Convention on 16 pluviôse. Would they actually implement such a far-reaching measure that had been passed without their approval? Even if they did, would revolutionary France emerge victorious from the war it was fighting against a coalition of all the other major powers of the European continent? A French defeat would certainly undo all of the Convention’s radical measures, including the abolition of slavery.

And even if France triumphed over its foreign foes, would the country remain faithful to the principles laid out in the Declaration of Rights and radically broadened by the decree of 16 pluviôse? When the Convention proclaimed that liberty and equality should be extended to the enslaved populations of the colonies, it had already approved drastic restrictions to freedom in France itself, restrictions justified as necessary to win what Robespierre called “the war of liberty against its enemies.” Five years later, many of the same deputies who voted for the abolition of slavery in 1794 voted to give dictatorial powers to a general who soon enacted a constitution that made no mention of the rights enshrined in the 1789 declaration. In 1802, after having drastically curtailed freedom in France itself, that general, Napoleon Bonaparte, revoked the freedom granted to enslaved Blacks by the decree of 16 pluviôse. To

avoid being forced back into slavery, the Black population in Saint-Domingue would have to win a bloody war against French soldiers fighting under the tricolor flag that was supposed to symbolize freedom but that, in the Caribbean, had come to stand for its opposite. The Black populations in the other French colonies would have to wait until 1848, when France's Second Republic passed a second abolition decree freeing them.

Because of the complexity of revolutionary France's struggles about slavery and the short duration of the policy decreed on 16 pluviôse, the dramatic story of these conflicts has rarely received the attention it deserves. Histories of the international abolition movement in the revolutionary era, written for the most part by scholars from English-speaking countries, have privileged events in the United States and Britain, where the fights against slavery, no matter how slowly they proceeded, seem to vindicate Martin Luther King Jr.'s conviction that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."<sup>4</sup> The American and British abolition narratives are also attractive because they feature morally admirable figures, such as the Quaker Anthony Benezet, the tireless crusaders Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, the Grimké sisters, and Frederick Douglass, as well as inspiring examples of collective action by ordinary people, such as the antislavery petition campaigns in Britain in the early 1790s and the Underground Railroad in America. The French abolition movement during the Revolution, by comparison, was smaller and more elitist, and the involvement of many of its leading figures in other aspects of the revolutionary movement, such as the pro-war campaign in 1791–92 and the Terror, makes it harder to depict them as inspiring moral exemplars.

In recent decades, the greatly increased attention paid to what is now known as the Haitian Revolution has also worked to obscure the significance of the campaigns against slavery and racial hierarchy in metropolitan France. Without the slave uprising in Saint-Domingue, it is indeed doubtful that the revolutionaries in France would ever have taken a step as drastic as they did in 1794. Figures such as Vincent Ogé, Boukman Dutty, Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Louis Delgrès, and the thousands of largely anonymous people of African descent who participated in

the Haitian Revolution and the resistance to slavery in Guadeloupe played essential roles in forcing revolutionary France to confront the contradiction between its own ideals and the reality of colonial slavery and racism. Recognition of the agency of the enslaved populations in the Caribbean colonies is entirely justified, and I have contributed to the scholarship on the Haitian Revolution myself, but the focus on events in the colonies has had the effect of making the debates about abolition in metropolitan France seem somewhat irrelevant.<sup>5</sup>

Recognizing the importance of the Haitian Revolution, however, should not obscure the significance of the French revolutionaries' debates about slavery and particularly their radical decision to declare its abolition in 1794. The abolition of slavery did not come about only because of resistance on the part of the oppressed. Acceptance of the need to end slavery was a dialectical process that also required a transformation of mentalities within the white-dominated societies of the Western world. In France, debates about the legitimacy of slavery began several decades before the outbreak of the French Revolution, and political confrontations over the issue began even before the storming of the Bastille. The disruptions caused by those confrontations and by the revolutionaries' proclamation that "men are born and remain free and equal in rights" created the context in which the free people of color and enslaved Black populations in the colonies could imagine not just that their revolts might succeed but that the legitimacy of their demands might be recognized.

Until the passage of the decree of 4 February 1794, the freedom that the insurgents in Saint-Domingue had obtained for themselves was menaced from all sides. Not only the French but two other great imperial powers—Britain and Spain—were committed to restoring white supremacy in the troubled colony, and the United States, the newest player in the politics of the American world, was equally opposed to the Black movement. The Spanish had allied themselves with the Black rebels, but Madrid's aim was to defeat their French enemies, not to abolish slavery; the British, whose valuable slave colony of Jamaica was separated from Saint-Domingue by only sixty miles of ocean, were even less favorable to abolition. In revolutionary France itself, there were many, even

among those who supported the Revolution, who were prepared to accept the occupation of the country's overseas colonies by foreign foes in order to preserve the system of slavery. Without the French decree of 4 February 1794, the Black fighters who had forced the end of slavery in Saint-Domingue would have been isolated in a hostile world.

Necessarily preoccupied with the struggle for their own freedom, the Black insurgents in Saint-Domingue had little reason to concern themselves with the implications of their movement for the wider world and few means for addressing audiences outside the island. Although the revolt's leaders were familiar with the language of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, they did not necessarily embrace its universalist principles. Even after the French civil commissioners Sonthonax and Polverel proclaimed the abolition of slavery in Saint-Domingue in the summer of 1793, the leaders of the insurrection maintained their loyalty to Spain, which was providing them with arms and ammunition. In August 1793 Toussaint Louverture denounced the French as "republican traitors" who had murdered their king and atheists who had "trampled under foot" the "unshakeable pillar" of the Catholic Church.<sup>6</sup> Had the Black movement and its Spanish allies defeated the French in Saint-Domingue in 1793, their victory would have been a triumph for the cause of "throne and altar," the principles of the European counterrevolution, rather than for the ideals of liberty and equality associated with the French Revolution.

Although it was the Black movement in Saint-Domingue that forced the French revolutionaries to take a stand against slavery, it was in the debates that followed the passage of the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789 and their translation into law in 1794 that slavery and racial discrimination were indelibly stamped as violations of universal natural rights. For five years after the passage of the 1794 abolition decree, France offered the world an unprecedented example of a multiracial polity spanning the Atlantic Ocean. Until Napoleon silenced talk of natural rights in France and reinstated slavery in its colonies, the weight of the most powerful European nation of the day was thrown onto the scales on the side of abolition. Napoleon's reversal of emancipation also had implications that went far beyond France. To justify reenslavement

and counter the impact of the revolutionary experiment, French advocates of slavery became the most outspoken proponents of the pseudoscientific racist doctrines that pervaded the Western world for the next two centuries. Had Napoleon not deliberately sabotaged the experiment launched in 1794, the history of France and that of a Western world still invested in slavery might have taken a very different course.

Uncovering the history of the French revolutionary confrontation with race and slavery is important not just for understanding the wider history of the struggle for abolition but also for comprehending the history of the French Revolution. Mentions of the slave uprising in Saint-Domingue are now *de rigueur* in serious accounts of the period, but the full extent of what contemporaries called “the affair of the colonies” in the metropole remains less explored. Although revolutionary politicians had many other concerns, practically every prominent participant in revolutionary politics took an active part in debates about slavery and the colonies. The careers of a number of them, including not only the dedicated antislavery activist Jacques-Pierre Brissot and the staunch defender of colonial interests Antoine Barnave but also figures as important as Mirabeau, Robespierre, and Napoleon Bonaparte, were dramatically affected by their stands on these issues. Every one of the revolutionary-era legislative bodies, from the Estates General of 1789 to the assemblies of the Napoleonic Consulate, engaged in debates on these issues. As they organized campaigns to shape public opinion, supporters and opponents of slavery were pioneers in creating the Revolution’s political culture. The two movements were among the first to form political clubs to support their causes. They deployed all the political media of the time to publicize their ideas and organize campaigns to influence legislators.<sup>7</sup>

Although the French Revolution’s abolition of slavery resonated throughout the world at the time, it faded from historical memory once Napoleon repealed the abolition law in 1802. What was remembered instead of the revolutionary decree of 4 February 1794 was the uprising of enslaved Blacks in the French colony of Saint-Domingue that began in August 1791 and culminated, in 1804, in the declaration of the independence of Haiti. Today this “Haitian Revolution” is recognized, alongside the American and French

Revolutions, as one of the great movements for freedom that laid the bases for modern ideas of liberty and equality.<sup>8</sup> At the time and for decades afterward, however, lurid accounts that depicted Blacks, “with daggers in one hand and torches in the other,” massacring planters and burning plantations shaped public reactions to slavery throughout the white world. With such images in their minds, it was difficult for Europeans and white Americans to think of the revolutionary abolition decree as anything but a disastrous mistake, like the campaign to abolish religion that the revolutionaries had undertaken at almost the same moment.

Even today, when an increasingly multiracial France is grappling openly with the place of slavery in its history, more is said about the second abolition of slavery under France’s Second Republic in 1848 than about the decree of 16 pluviôse. To be sure, the 1848 law proved more durable than the one passed in 1794, but it was also less radical; among other things, it provided financial compensation to former slave owners. The date of France’s annual national commemoration of “the memories of the slave trade, of slavery and of their abolition,” 10 May, marks neither the anniversary of 4 February 1794 nor that of the 1848 abolition law, but instead the anniversary of the passage of the “loi Taubira” in 2001, a law named after Christiane Taubira, the Black French legislator who proposed it, that defines slavery as a violation of human rights.<sup>9</sup>

While the history of the French Revolution’s confrontation with slavery is important because it led to the earliest abolition decree in the Western world, it is also important to understand the reasons why that decree proved so short-lived. As the United States Supreme Court’s 2022 decision to overturn a previous ruling that established a right to abortion shows, individual rights can be taken away as well as expanded. Slavery was reintroduced in France in 1802 not by an arbitrary decree, like the *statut des Juifs* issued by the collaborationist Vichy government in October 1940, but by a legislative process during which Napoleon’s henchmen took pains to persuade members of the regime’s assemblies that repealing the decree of 16 pluviôse was necessary and desirable. Indeed, the debates about reimposing slavery in 1802 were more extensive than the hurried discussion that led the National Convention’s decree in 1794. Napoleon’s success in pushing through the law restoring slavery is a reminder

that even rights loudly proclaimed as “natural” at one moment can be rescinded when political circumstances change.

Previous histories of the French Revolution’s debates about race and slavery have adopted various strategies to make sense of the complexity of this story. The anticolonial activist Yves Bénot’s *La Révolution française et la fin des colonies*, published in 1987, was a pathbreaking attempt to bring attention to the subject. Bénot chose to deal separately with the different issues involved in the “affaire des colonies,” which sometimes obscured the connections between them and made it difficult for readers to understand the chronology of events. Florence Gauthier’s *Triomphe et mort du droit naturel en Révolution 1789-1795-1802* and Jean-Daniel Piquet’s *L’Emancipation des Noirs dans la Révolution française (1789-1795)* expanded on Bénot’s work and did much to underline the importance of the issues of race and slavery. Both also made dubious claims about key issues, such as their assertion that Robespierre was a main contributor to the abolition of slavery in 1794, a contention that cannot be justified by the evidence. Like Bénot’s earlier volume, Piquet’s account also stops midway through the revolutionary decade. Tessie Liu’s *A Frail Liberty: Probationary Citizens in the French and Haitian Revolutions*, published in 2022, extends into the Napoleonic period, but it is concerned primarily with the ideas of the French abolitionists, which are often treated in isolation from the political context in which they were put forward. If Piquet credits the revolutionaries with more radical views than they actually held, Liu tends to fault them for falling short of present-day standards of universal human rights.<sup>10</sup>

The French Revolution’s confrontation with slavery is a story about how the revolutionaries came to decree the abolition of slavery in 1794, but is it the story of an abolitionist movement? The question is more complicated than it may seem. If one reserves the label of “abolitionist” for people who saw slavery as a violation of fundamental human rights and consequently advocated the immediate emancipation of its victims and the granting to them of all the rights held by whites, without any compensation for their owners, then it has to be said that there were few, if any, white abolitionists in the revolutionary period, either in France or anywhere else in the world, prior to the passage of the decree of 16 pluviôse. Even

the Black leaders of the Haitian Revolution did not always embrace such an unqualified position. In negotiations with the white colonists at the end of 1791, after the first wave of the Saint-Domingue insurrection, the movement's leaders offered to end their movement in exchange for personal freedom for its leaders and a promise of more humane treatment and amnesty for the other Black participants, who would then return to work on their plantations. During the years when he held power as the appointed French governor of Saint-Domingue, Toussaint Louverture imposed a rigorous regime of forced labor on the majority of the colony's Black population, a regime that was not always easy to distinguish from slavery.<sup>11</sup>

As we will see, there were many French writers and politicians, before and during the Revolution, who denounced the evils of slavery in seemingly uncompromising terms and then gave various reasons why it could at best be phased out gradually, with compensation for slave owners, or "humanized" by limiting its "abuses." For this reason, some modern scholars prefer the term "antislavery," which defines an attitude, to "abolition," which suggests advocacy of a definite action.<sup>12</sup> It is sometimes difficult to distinguish such exponents of antislavery from its more moderate defenders, who often insisted that they, too, recognized slavery's inhumanity and hoped to find ways to make it less cruel. There was, nevertheless, a clear distinction, recognized by participants in the revolutionary debates, between those who sincerely aimed to promote the abolition of slavery, even if they considered immediate emancipation impractical, and those who were at best willing to envisage the end of slavery as a possibility in the distant future. Figures such as Brissot, Condorcet, and Henri Grégoire, the leaders of the *Société des Amis des Noirs*, even though they were all advocates of gradual emancipation, were unquestionably not in the same camp as men like Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, Pierre-Victor Malouet, or the other outspoken defenders of slavery. In 1794, however, the French legislators did declare the abolition of slavery, and from then on there was a clear distinction between those who defended Black freedom in the colonies and those who, even if they carefully avoided using the word "slavery," sought to confine the emancipated Blacks to a second-class status that often amounted to enslavement under other terms.

Even if we accept that the word “abolitionist” is appropriate for the French opponents of slavery of the revolutionary period, can we describe them as a “movement”? In Britain, from 1787 onward, there was a recognized abolitionist movement, led by Clarkson, Wilberforce, and their associates, which, in 1807, achieved its aim of pressuring Parliament to abolish the slave trade. This was the model Jacques-Pierre Brissot had in mind when he established the *Société des Amis des Noirs* in 1788. Even for its own leading members, however, the *Amis des Noirs* quickly became a secondary concern, overshadowed by political clubs and movements focused on a wider range of issues, such as the Jacobin Club. Many of the activists who plunged into the revolutionary debates about race and slavery were not members of the *Amis des Noirs*, and the organization had essentially ceased to exist by the time the law of 4 April 1792, which granted rights to free people of color, was passed. By 4 February 1794, when the National Convention voted to abolish slavery, almost all the prominent members of the *Amis des Noirs* had fallen victim to the Terror. Paradoxically, that radical emancipation decree was pushed through the Convention by politicians who had rarely shown much previous commitment to the abolitionist cause and who were careful to avoid any mention of Brissot or the *Amis des Noirs*. In contrast to Britain and the United States, abolition in France was achieved at a moment when there was nothing resembling a coherent movement advocating for it.

The victory of abolition in France in 1794 was especially surprising because, while there was no coherent group advocating for it, there definitely was an organized group opposing it: the representatives of the white colonists from the Caribbean, who were meeting with the members of the Committee of Public Safety at precisely the moment on 4 February 1794 when the National Convention passed its decree. The story of the French Revolution’s struggles over slavery cannot be comprehended without taking into account the efforts of slavery’s defenders, who proved themselves as adept as the abolitionists at exploiting the possibilities for political action created by the Revolution. Eventually, under Napoleon, they succeeded in reversing the emancipation decree and extending the era of slavery in most French colonies by nearly half a century. Without understanding the many groups and individuals who opposed the

abolitionists, we cannot understand either the obstacles that stood in the way of emancipation or its fragility.

Fortunately, the sources for studying race and slavery during the French Revolution are abundant. Throughout the Revolution, both the advocates of reform and their opponents relied on the printing press to circulate their arguments, generating a voluminous library of pamphlets and newspaper articles, as well as caricatures and engravings. The period's often explosive legislative debates on these subjects are documented in the press and in the records of the revolutionary assemblies' proceedings. Figures ranging from the abolitionist Brissot to his bitter opponent Moreau de Saint-Méry preserved important materials that are now available in the French national archives and other repositories.

While sources are abundant, translating the language used to argue about race and slavery is a fraught issue, with the additional challenge of negotiating differences in usage in the United States and in France. In the revolutionary era, French authors used the terms *Nègre* (Negro) and *Noir* (Black) interchangeably for individuals of pure African ancestry; these words might or might not be capitalized, depending on the preference of individual authors. Advocates of abolition showed some preference for *Noir*, with a capital *N*, as opposed to *nègre*, which was more commonly used by defenders of slavery; nevertheless, *nègre* did not usually have the pejorative connotation of the American "N-word," and some committed abolitionists continued to use it.<sup>13</sup> *Africain* was another term sometimes used, often but not always with the purpose of implying that the individuals it described did not deserve to be considered French. In contrast to present-day American usage, revolutionary-era writers of all political persuasions normally capitalized *Blancs*, a practice I have not adopted here. No one at the time hesitated to employ the term *esclave* to describe enslaved individuals. In present-day American scholarship, it is now accepted that to describe someone as a "slave" is to imply that servitude was one of their inherent characteristics. I have followed current usage by using formulations such as "enslaved persons," except in translations of documents from the time and in phrases such as "slave uprising," where the clear implication is that the participants were revolting against the condition imposed on them.

A particularly complicated question of linguistic usage arises in describing the group that scholars of the French colonial empire sometimes describe as its “third race,” people of partial or full African descent who were legally free before the revolutionaries’ abolition of slavery in 1793–94. At the time, a wide variety of terms were used to refer to the members of this group. They were sometimes called *jaunes* or *rouges* (“yellows” or “reds”) to distinguish them from Blacks. Whites, including some of their most outspoken allies, routinely referred to them as *mulâtres* (mulattos) or sometimes as *sang-mêlés* (mixed bloods). Defenders of the colonial system of racial hierarchy often labeled them *affranchis* (freedmen), implying that they all owed their freedom to the beneficence of the whites; members of the group vigorously objected to that term, insisting that many of them had been born free.

Representatives of this group in revolutionary France generally referred to themselves as *hommes* or *gens de couleur libres*, and sometimes as *hommes de couleur et nègres libres* (men of color and free Negroes), a formulation that distinguished those who had some white ancestry from those who did not. Translating these terms into present-day English presents difficulties. “Mulatto” is derived from the word for “mule,” an unacceptable pejorative equating human beings with animals. “People of color” would be misleading: In current American usage, it refers to nonwhites generally, including Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans as well as Blacks, whereas in the French revolutionary context it was reserved for a much more specific group. (A small number of dark-skinned people of South Asian ancestry were sometimes included in the category, but it definitely did not take in East Asians or the various nonwhite populations of the Americas.)<sup>14</sup> To avoid undue linguistic contortions, except in translations of documents I have generally used the term “mixed race” even though it occludes the fact that some members of the group did not have white ancestry.

The account of the French Revolution’s debates and decisions offered here seeks to put the ideas and actions of the French advocates of abolition and racial equality in the context of their chaotic times. I hope to have brought the protagonists of these tense, high-stakes struggles to life and to have made the reasons for what they said and did understandable. Even Condorcet and Henri

Grégoire—the two major abolitionists who, in 1989 at the celebration of the bicentennial of the French Revolution, were singled out for the honor of reburial in the Panthéon, France’s shrine to its national heroes—were not perfect human beings. They sometimes felt compelled to compromise their principles, and they, like all the other politicians of the time, made some serious political misjudgments. Nevertheless, they and their even more problematic colleagues, figures such as Mirabeau and Brissot, made important contributions to the battle against the evils of slavery and racism that deserve to be understood.

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