

Saint-Domingue

Changing Concepts of Race in the Graveyard of the Enlightenment

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Abstract

The Haitian Revolution is often overlooked in Historical analysis, but had far reaching effects. The Revolution changed perceptions and attitudes toward race in Western culture, and saw the failure of the Enlightenment. In pre-revolution Saint-Domingue, race was very fluid, and had less to do with skin color and ancestry than it did with an individual's legal status, bond or free. This was a major barrier, which prevented previous slave revolts from succeeding, as the free people of color were just as strong of opponents of slave rebellion as were the white colonists. The Haitian Revolution did change that though, by first, abolishing slavery in Saint-Domingue, bringing all people onto a level playing field, without heed for former legal status, or even the color of their skin; however, what ultimately unified them, was the attempted reinstitution of slavery, as they all now had a great deal to lose, and a common enemy. As a result of the Haitian slave revolution's success, there was a great deal of fear in the other Western slave societies, such as the US and Great Britain, with responses such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1794 in the US. The Enlightenment policies of the newly republican France failed in Saint-Domingue. Too drawn by the specter of vast wealth from slave driven sugar plantations, the French government struggled at first, came to a decision to offer citizenship to free men of color, then abolished slavery, but ultimately, re-instated slavery. The war, at that point, became, fundamentally, a race war, once again, perpetuating fears of slave revolt in the United States, or in Britain's colonies.



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Although often overlooked, the Haitian Revolution marked a watershed moment in Western history. The Haitian Revolution provided one of the first test cases of Enlightened Republicanism, and would forever change attitudes toward, and concepts of race in France and her colonies. This in turn, would then affect the other Western slave societies, such as the United States in the shaping of our own slave policies and attitudes toward race.

By 1789, the opening of the French Revolution, a slave fueled plantation society had developed in the French colony of Saint-Domingue on a scale unlike any other that the world has known. Saint-Domingue produced sugar, and a lot of it. On the eve of the French Revolution, it was the most profitable colony in the world because of the sugar plantations. This wealth was built almost exclusively upon the backs of African slaves.

Sugar plantations required a lot of slaves, and the market for sugar was only growing. By 1789, it is estimated that there were 465,000 African slaves in Saint-Domingue, with only 31,000 white colonists, and an additional 29,000 free people of color.¹ Not only were there a lot of slaves, but they were slaves that had a particularly great deal to be unhappy about. Conditions in the Caribbean sugar colonies were notoriously bad, even by standards of slavery. There were environmental concerns, such as the hot, humid climate, and the various tropical diseases, which they bred (which slaves coming from Africa often did not have immunities to). Beyond disease and climate, the slaves of the sugar colonies were subject to very harsh treatment at the hands of their new masters, and squalid living conditions.²

These factors coupled together led to a high death rate, and low birth rate. For many planters, the economic solution was simple: rather than keep high quality living conditions for their slaves in order to lengthen their lives, they found that it was cheaper to work slaves to death, and continually import new slaves from Africa.³ Because of the constant and overwhelming flow of slaves to Saint-Domingue, it's estimated that Saint-

¹ L. Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 30.

² University of Michigan, "Sugar in the Atlantic World." Accessed April 1, 2013. <http://www.clements.umich.edu/exhibits/online/sugarexhibit/sugar06.php>.

³ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 40.

Domingue alone was the final destination for 10% of all victims of the Atlantic slave trade.⁴

Despite poor conditions for slaves, pre-revolution Saint-Domingue was a remarkably open society, racially speaking. In 1685, King Louis XIV of France issued the *Code Noir*, the black codes. Most of the *Code Noir* dealt with the particulars of institutionalized slavery, such as prescribed minimum living conditions. There are though, several articles in it of particular interest, showing just how open pre-revolution Saint-Domingue was. Articles LIVII and LIX both detail the way in which the law ought to deal with those of African descent, including those who were not in bonded servitude. They are to “enjoy the advantages of our natural subjects,” and have “the same rights, privileges, and immunities enjoyed by freeborn persons.”⁵

Interracial marriage as well, was not only common, but often, very desirable. Initially, the practice started out of necessity. When the colony was very young, there was a great deal of single white men coming to the colony seeking fortune, but very few single white women. Naturally, interracial marriage ensued. The children from these marriages, mulattos, created an entirely new racial and social class. They were free from bondage, making them legally equal to their white counterparts, and with land owning slave holders for fathers; they often inherited slaves and land of their own.⁶

Interracial marriage was not confined just to the very early days of the colony either, it continued on. More single white women were arriving in the colony, but the single white men were still often choosing to marry mulatto women, children of these interracial couples, as they were still a wealthy class, most owning slaves and land. Thus, interracial marriage was a lucrative business venture for a newly arrived colonist.

⁴ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 39.

⁵ Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and News Media, "The Code Noir (The Black Code)." Accessed April 1, 2013. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/335/>.

⁶ Julien Raimond, "Observations on the Origin and Progression of White Colonists' Prejudice Against Men of Color," in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, 78-82. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2006), 78-80.

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Between a new class of property owning blacks due to interracial marriage, and the *Code Noir* guaranteeing their liberty, a new class was created within colonial society, the “Gens de Couleur,” generally translated as “free-coloreds.” In this new system, class was determined by legal status. There were the white colonists, sitting atop society, the free-coloreds, and then the slaves at the bottom. The free-coloreds were referred to, interchangeably, as “mulatto,” a racial category. This is very fitting with philosophy of the day. At least a handful of European thinkers believed in a scale of superiority and intelligence among the species of apes, with the chimpanzee at the bottom, flowing all the way up to Sir Isaac Newton as the pinnacle⁷, with Africans between the two. The scale was a gradient scale, with mulattos again, somewhere between those of pure African descent and white Europeans.

There were, however, many racial “mulattos” among the ranks of slaves, just as there were many of pure African descent among the ranks of the free-coloreds⁸. One could move from the slave class to the free-coloreds merely by gaining freedom. Thus, race was as much an issue of legal and political status as it was about skin color or ancestry. Race, at least between black and mulatto, was fluid.

It should be mentioned though, that while legally, free-coloreds and white colonists enjoyed the same rights, privileges, and liberties, the stipulations in the *Code Noir* were not always carried out with precision, and by the mid-18th century, interracial marriage was quickly becoming a social taboo, threatening the free-colored’s newly carved niche in society.

The response from the free-coloreds illustrates how they perceived themselves. They saw the line between black and mulatto of utmost importance. In a pamphlet addressed to the National Assembly in France, Julien Raimond, a prominent free-colored leader, implored them to “not confuse the cause of the free-coloreds with the cause of the slave.”⁹

Increasingly it seems they identified with white colonists. Since they were often slave owners and planters too, they stood to lose just as much, if not more in a potential slave revolt than did the white planters, since fleeing

⁷ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), 455.

⁸ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 5-6.

⁹ Raimond, “Observations on the Origin,” 78-82.

to France wasn't a realistic option for most free-colored. As such, they generally resisted slave rebellions as strongly as any white colonist.¹⁰

Across the Atlantic, the French Revolution was just getting started. It was a product of two conflicting issues, money (or the lack thereof), and the Enlightenment. Saint-Domingue, interestingly, embodied both of these for France. First, money: as was discussed above, Saint-Domingue was the world's most profitable colony, and represented a much-needed boost to the national coffers. Second, it also embodied the Enlightenment, or a challenge to Enlightenment ideals rather, in that that income relied upon the forced bondage of other human beings, going against core Enlightenment ideals.

This would prove to be a great struggle for revolutionary leaders in France. After two years of revolution in France, the National Convention finally voted in favor of extending full citizenship rights to free people of color. When the Colonial government refused to enact their law in 1791, an armed revolt ensued in Saint-Domingue, which would eventually spell the end of slavery in the colony.

There were many conflicting views regarding slavery and racial superiority/inferiority coming from the Enlightenment; however, the white colonists' reactions to some of the Enlightenment philosophies reaching their shores, and being preached to their slaves does indicate a great deal as to how it was perceived generally. To them, it was dangerous.

In 1792, a free-colored man read *The Declaration of the Rights of Man*, the epitome of Enlightenment thought, to his slaves, and was imprisoned for it¹¹. There are numerous accounts as well, of slave rebellion leaders having it, and other republican revolutionary literature with them at the time of their capture, or their execution, and even demanding the rights contained therein.

At first, these rights were denied, but, as a result of the 1791 revolt, full rights of citizenship were granted to free-colored men, and eventually, in an attempt to keep power in the colony, one of the French appointed commissioners of the colony, abolished slavery in Saint-Domingue, with Enlightenment ideals as a clear influence. In the declaration of abolition in the colony, one of the colony's Commissioners, Sonthonax, stated that

¹⁰ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 54.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 151.

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The Declaration of the Rights of Man was to be displayed “everywhere it was needed.”¹²

Prior to emancipation, there was a bizarre, multi-sided war being fought. There were the British and Spanish fighting for control of the colony, along with the white French planters, mostly loyal to the British, the free-colored, mostly loyal to the French, and slaves fighting for whomever would offer them freedom, be they French, British, or Spanish. After emancipation, all people of African descent, regardless of their previous legal status, were more or less, on a level playing field. This was the beginning of the destruction of more racial barriers, and to set the stage for unifying both black and free-colored.

The true challenge of the Enlightenment, however, was yet to come. The new dictator in France, Napoleon Bonaparte, saw, as had others before him, the lucrative opportunity that Saint-Domingue was, if worked by slaves. Napoleon sent an army of, initially, 20,000 troops, but later, as many as 80,000.¹³ This army, headed by General Leclerc, was to convince the residents of the colony that they had merely peaceful intentions, to protect the colony. He was then to arrest and deport all the black leaders from the military, and disarm the people in preparation for his military takeover to reinstate slavery.¹⁴

When Leclerc’s intentions became clear, everything changed. Before, where the opposition forces lacked unity, they now had it. Because the colony’s hundreds of thousands of black inhabitants, regardless of whether they were former slaves or free-colored, were now all in danger of losing everything they had. Leclerc inadvertently drew a line in the sand. No longer was the Haitian Revolution about politics or nationality, but purely now, a race war¹⁵. Atrocities were committed on both sides,

¹² Leger Felicite Sonthonax, “Decree of General Liberty,” in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, 120-125. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2006), 123.

¹³ Brown University, “History of Haiti: 1492-1805.” Accessed April 1, 2013. <http://library.brown.edu/haitihistory/9.html>.

¹⁴ Napoleon Bonaparte and General Charles-Victor-Emmanuel Leclerc, “Letters,” in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, 175-180. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2006), 177.

¹⁵ Brigadier General Pierre Cange “Letter to Delpech,” in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, 186-187. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2006), 186.

and almost immediately, Leclerc, recorded that “the French will never be masters of this country.”¹⁶

In 1803, in the midst of the brutal fighting, the revolutionaries adopted a new flag, symbolizing their new country, and new perceptions of race. They had still been fighting under the French Tri-Color up until this point. For them, the Tri-Color represented the unity of the three racial classes in defense of Saint-Domingue. Now though, in a dramatic move, the white was cut from the flag, and the red and blue sewn back together. Symbolically, the whites were being shown that they had no more place in Saint-Domingue¹⁷. This would later be changed in the Haitian Constitution, making red and black the official national colors, and stipulating that “no white man, regardless of national origin, may set foot in this territory as a land owner... nor will he ever be able acquire any property.”¹⁸

Eventually, the French forces were defeated and driven out of the colony, now an independent republic, Haiti. This was groundbreaking, in that it was the first and only completely successful slave rebellion to date. While this did mark the end of the Haitian Revolution, its influence did live on, after all, if a slave revolution can succeed in Haiti, what is to keep it from spreading to Jamaica or Georgia?

Many in the nearby United States believed that Haiti would begin exporting revolution around the region, much like Cuba did in the mid-20th century.¹⁹ Although Haiti did not export revolution, the idea of revolution traveled. It's clear that there was a greater concentration of slave revolt in the United States following the Haitian Revolution than there was before,²⁰ which only served to heighten the fears.

¹⁶ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 290.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 293.

¹⁸ “The Haitian Constitution,” in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, 191-196. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2006), 192-196.

¹⁹ US Department of State: Office of the Historian, "Milestones: 1784-1800." Accessed April 1, 2013. <http://history.state.gov/milestones/1784-1800/HaitianRev>.

²⁰ Race, "Resisting Slavery." Accessed April 1, 2013.

http://www.understandingrace.org/history/society/resisting_slavery.html.

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In a letter written to St George Tucker, then Vice-President Thomas Jefferson expressed this fear. He seemed assured that slave revolution would spread not only to the other sugar colonies of the Caribbean, but next, to the United States. He treated this as not just a possibility, but an imminent reality, saying that “only a single spark is wanting to make that day [slave revolution] to-morrow.”²¹ In a later letter, Jefferson, this time to the US minister to Britain, proposes emancipation and the deportation of all slaves back to Africa as the only alternative to full scale slave revolution.²²

The US slave policy did see changes, but in the opposite direction than Jefferson was advocating. In 1793, the fugitive slave act was passed, deeply increasing the strength of the slave system in the United States. In order to minimize any contact with Haitian revolutionary ideas, as well as to punish slave revolutionaries, an international trade embargo was placed on Haiti, including the United States. This crippled the Haitian economy, as the exports of plantation grown sugar tobacco, and coffee were their main sources of income, and they now had no market in which to sell them.

While British and American attitudes toward race and slave policies were much more conservative than their French counterparts to begin with, the impact was nonetheless significant. Slave policy was made stricter, reflecting an even harsher view on race, which would continue on that path of increasing racism for some time in the United States. Had the Enlightenment succeeded in creating an open and equal society in Saint-Domingue, things may have been different, but as it happened, as far as slavery goes, things got worse before they would, ultimately, get better.

²¹ Thomas Jefferson “Letters,” in *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, 159-162. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2006), 160.

²² *Ibid.*, 162.

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