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Issues of Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Politics of the Early French Revolution

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The process of “becoming a revolutionary” was often, as Timothy Tackett has shown in his study of the deputies to the National Assembly, a complex one which might have its roots in what he terms a ‘revolution of the mind’ but which often bowed to contingency and social interaction in the Assembly itself.¹ Initiatives during the early months of the Revolution were more often responses to crisis and circumstance than the result of clearly-formulated ideas; and where ideological imperatives did exist, they mostly stemmed from domestic politics, from questions of privilege, royal prerogative or anticlericalism. Though France’s part in the slave trade might appear to raise important issues of principle, issues fundamental to the Rights of Man, it figured surprisingly little in the debates of the Assembly, where it divided rather than united opinion. Slaves were still seen as property, and property rights were sacred, enshrined in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and fundamental to the revolutionary ideal. It was a case, too, where interest often conflicted with ideology, whether national interest or that of individual members. As Tackett notes, a number of the deputies of the Third Estate owed their wealth and social position to the fortunes they had made through the slave trade or by owning plantations in the Antilles. Among those who had become wealthy and powerful figures through slave-trading or slave-owning he lists the three Monneron brothers (who had invested heavily in the plantation economy in the East Indies²), Marc-Antoine Lavie, Jean Payen de Boisneuf and Samuel-Pierre-Isaac Garesché.³ They had a strong personal interest in maintaining the status quo, an interest which, as for so many other French merchants, proved difficult to reconcile with enlightened ideals. It informed their views of the colonies and free trade, of citizenship and race, and it helped determine their approach to the most fundamental question of all: were slaves human beings enjoying human rights, and therefore entitled to freedom and citizenship, or were they the property of others, of men whose own rights would be denied if their slaves were freed?

A moral cause in France?

In the immediate run-up to the Revolution, we see the issue of slavery elevated to a new level of importance with the creation in 1788 of the *Société des Amis des Noirs*, at first glance a philanthropic society like many others in the eighteenth century, though one that had no intention of standing aloof from the political sphere and had the specific aim of turning the cause of

¹ Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture, 1789–1790* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 76.

² Edna Hindie Lemay, *Dictionnaire des Constituants, 1789–91*, 2 vols (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1991), 2: 678–680.

³ *Ibid.*, 42–43.

abolition into a central issue in French politics. The Society, as Marcel Dorigny has described it, stood at the threshold of the new revolutionary era: it was at the same time a *société de pensée* publishing tracts and philosophical works and seeking to educate the public, and a *société politique* that sought to intervene directly with government and with the interested parties in France and the colonies, and which did not hesitate to appeal to foreign opinion in order to press its case for abolition.⁴ For its members, anti-slavery was never anything other than a moral cause, and an international one at that. They cited Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce and other campaigners for anti-slavery, published French translations of their works, and were in frequent communication with abolitionists in England in the months before the outbreak of revolution. Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, Count of Mirabeau, for instance, corresponded with Clarkson on the nature of the African slave trade and the ways in which it was experienced in Senegal.⁵

Men who would become leading political figures in the Revolution were among the *Amis*' most prominent members and showed a deep and lasting commitment to the cause of abolition. Among them were Jacques-Pierre Brissot, Étienne Clavière, François Xavier Lanthenas, Mirabeau, Jérôme Pétion and the *abbé* Henri Grégoire who played a formative role in the politics of the early Revolution, either as constitutional monarchists or as republicans. Of the republicans, a majority would follow Brissot and voted with the Girondins, whose political strongholds would include many of the key slaving ports like Bordeaux, Le Havre and Marseille.⁶ Representing towns where so many livelihoods depended on the slave trade did not, it seems, contain their individual enthusiasm for the abolitionist cause. But it is notable that all their efforts were geared to abolishing the slave trade; little was said about the slave economy on the plantations which guaranteed the slavers their profits. And there was no consensus on broader commercial policy, or on issues like protectionism and free trade. Most of the deputies accepted the prevailing orthodoxy that the principal purpose of colonies was to serve the economic interests of France, and they had little time for ideas of *laissez-faire*. The colonial economy was seen as an extension of the French economy. A monopoly of sugar imports from the Caribbean had to be maintained, for instance, if French sugar refineries were to flourish and the prosperity of their constituents to be protected.⁷

Contemporaries were aware, of course, that there was a tension between the institution of slavery, and especially the practice of the slave trade, and the ideals that underpinned the Declaration of the Rights of Man. But though, as we know, the Revolution went on to abolish slavery – and was the first Atlantic power to do so in 1794 – abolitionism was far from being a popular cause during the early months of the Revolution. The slave trade continued to have

⁴ Marcel Dorigny, 'La Société des Amis des Noirs: antiesclavagisme et lobby colonial à la fin du siècle des Lumières, 1788–1792', in Marcel Dorigny and Bernard Gainot (eds), *La Société des Amis des Noirs, 1788–1799: Contribution à l'histoire de l'abolition de l'esclavage* (Paris: Éditions de l'UNESCO, 1998), 31–32.

⁵ Françoise Thésée, 'Au Sénégal, en 1789', in Serge Daget (ed.), *De la traite à l'esclavage : actes du colloque international sur la traite des Noirs, Nantes 1985* 2 vols (Nantes: Centre de recherche sur l'histoire du monde atlantique, 1988), 1: 223–241.

⁶ Michael Sydenham, *The Girondins* (London: Athlone Press, 1961), 222–26.

⁷ Marcel Dorigny, 'Recherches sur les idées économiques des Girondins', in Albert Soboul (ed.), *Actes du Colloque "Girondins et Montagnards"* (Paris: Société des Études Robespierriennes, 1980), 84.

passionate defenders, both in the Assembly and in the Atlantic ports. Municipal councils, chambers of commerce and individual merchant houses all raised powerful objections to any move to free France's slaves. And though there were few dissenting voices when abolition finally became law, and ports even organized public festivals in 1794 to celebrate abolition, anti-slavery was not a cause that enthused the French public.⁸ It remained associated in too many minds with the tender consciences of the liberal elite.

The issue had, of course, been raised by many authors of the French Enlightenment. We find traces of anti-slavery in Voltaire and Rousseau, for instance, as well as more frontal attacks on the idea of slavery in the writings of Montesquieu, the naturalist Georges Buffon, Grégoire, Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis of Condorcet, and the *abbé* Guillaume-Thomas Raynal. But how widely did these ideas reach the population at large? They were mostly works of the High Enlightenment, philosophical writings rather than popular pamphlets or speeches, and linked to humanist arguments about mankind and society as a whole.⁹ What may appear to be lacking in French writings of the eighteenth century is the depth of moral outrage that is to be found in the English abolitionist tracts of the day, in the works of men like William Wilberforce or Thomas Clarkson; their contribution to the debate was too often pitched in terms of philosophical absolutes and did little to suggest how the slave trade might one day mobilize public opinion or become a popular political cause in its own right. And of course, until 1789, there was no elected body, no parliament, through which such feeling could be distilled, as there was across the Channel.¹⁰ It was only after 1789, in the debates of the Constituent and Legislative Assemblies, that anti-slavery could be turned into an actively political, rather than a purely philosophical, cause.

Indeed, when the abolitionist movement in France did become more militant and started to win over the public, it was often to English publications that it turned, overseeing their translation into French and citing their authors – particularly Clarkson – as pioneers and leaders of liberal opinion. Yet the distinction remained. Anti-slavery as a moral cause did not arouse the same level of indignation in Catholic France as in Protestant England, where huge crowds gathered to hear abolitionist speakers. Indeed, where members of the clergy did comment on the slave trade in the port cities of western France, it was usually without any hint of condemnation. The trade was simply part of life, of economic reality. In 1765, for instance, the *abbé* Jacques-Olivier Pleuvri published a history of Le Havre which enjoyed considerable success. His coverage of the eighteenth century dismissed the slave trade in half a page in a chapter on the city's commerce,

⁸ AD Loire-Atlantique, L 1043, letter of congratulation to the Convention from District of Nantes on granting liberty to free men of colour and blacks.

⁹ Jean Ehrard, *Lumières et esclavage: l'esclavage colonial et l'opinion publique en France au 18e siècle* (Paris: André Versailles, 2008), 107.

¹⁰ For an account of the parliamentary campaign in Britain, see Stephen Farrell, Melanie Unwin and James Walvin (eds), *The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament and People* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

treating it without emotion as an unexceptional part of mercantile life. Nothing about it caused him to express any repugnance or seemed to prick his clerical conscience.¹¹

This apparent lack of moral concern is not easy to explain. Christians had, after all, played their part in profiting from the slave trade, with little discernible difference between Catholics and Protestants, both deeply implicated in slaving. Perhaps it was because the great Catholic nations of Iberia were so deeply involved in the slave trade; or perhaps because the Pope did not get round to condemning slavery until 1839, by which time, of course, the issue had ceased to be so contentious. But it meant that the case for abolition was not made, as it was in England, in religious terms or in a specifically Christian context.¹² Indeed, the Church authorities in France largely refrained from comment. They either approved of the institution of slavery, or else simply kept quiet, leaving a void for others to fill, with the consequence that the movement for religious anti-slavery evolved only slowly, largely after Napoleon's reinstatement of the slave trade in 1802 or through the activities of organizations like the *Société de la morale chrétienne*. But that did not really take off until the 1820s.¹³ Until then the French Church appeared to offer little in the way of moral leadership, leaving the field open to others. English Non-conformists, and especially the Society of Friends, the Quakers, would have a disproportionate part to play.

It was not that the question was not discussed. The programmes of several provincial academies show that the slave trade was debated and its morality questioned in Bordeaux and Marseille in the 1770s. It was the subject of an essay competition in the Academy of Bordeaux in 1776.¹⁴ The elites of these cities, in particular the legal profession, the royal administrators and the *parlementaires*, were often deeply divided on the issue, with some passionate in advocating reform. But what of the merchants and ship owners, many of whom depended on the slave trade for their livelihood and who were seen as among the natural leaders of their towns and cities? Their views were often critical to the political stance adopted by the city authorities.

1789 and the merchant community

The initial responses to the Revolution from the mercantile communities of the Atlantic ports suggest quiet satisfaction rather than any alarm or apprehension for the future. Their views were largely in accord with the demands of the Third Estate for greater political rights and civil equality, they favoured moves away from company privilege in favour of economic liberalism, and many of them, like the Protestants of La Rochelle or the Jews of Bordeaux and Bayonne, benefited personally from the steps taken to guarantee religious freedom. Their civil status appeared to be enhanced, and they could only welcome the attack on noble privilege which the Revolution promised. Besides, if they had expressed some unease in the last years of the Old

¹¹ Jacques-Olivier Pleuvri, *Histoire, antiquités et description de la ville et du port du Havre de Grâce, avec un traité de son commerce, et une notice des lieux circonvoisins de cette place* (Paris: Dufour, 1765).

¹² For a fuller discussion of the religious responses to the slave trade, see Alphonse Quenum, *Les Églises chrétiennes et la traite atlantique du 15^e au 19^e siècle* (Paris : Karthala, 1993).

¹³ Marie-Laure Aurenche (ed.), *Le combat pour la liberté des Noirs dans le Journal de la Société de la Morale Chrétienne, 1822-1834* (2 vols, Paris : Harmattan, 2011).

¹⁴ Marie Bové, 'Mémoires présentés à l'Académie de Bordeaux au 18^e siècle', *Institut aquitain d'études sociales* 76 (2001): 144-74.

Regime about the potential impact of enlightened ideas on the future of the colonies, nothing had yet happened to threaten their commercial interests, and merchant vessels continued to leave for West Africa and the Caribbean. They did not rush to involve themselves in politics by seeking election to the range of new offices that became available. And their correspondence consisted mainly of commentaries on business affairs, combined with personal messages to and about family members. The culture of merchant communities in the eighteenth century had been largely individualistic and family-orientated, their values defined by family, commerce and religion.¹⁵ In as far as they spoke with a collective voice it was through their representation on the various chambers of commerce (until their abolition as privileged corporations in 1791). It would be the first municipal elections, in 1790, before they would have a broader political presence, on the new municipal authorities of the Atlantic ports. But it was, in the words of the Nantes historian Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, “the calm before the storm.”¹⁶

During the early months it was still difficult for most merchants to see the Revolution as a threat, as their commercial activities remained relatively intact and there was little in their personal experience to suggest the upheavals to come. They were well aware, of course, of events elsewhere in France, some of which could not but arouse fears: they heard the uncompromising language that was used, the hatred shown towards the noble and privileged, the denunciations of the rich. And some of their number had spent a large part of their lives buying exactly that kind of privilege to gain access to the select society that Paul Butel terms “the patricians of commerce.”¹⁷ They could not regard everything they saw with equanimity. But revolution had not yet been translated into violence or disruption, and these were the things that merchants most feared. The La Rochelle merchant Pierre-Jean van Hoogwerff, a Protestant who had originally come from Holland, spoke for many when he wrote in a letter to his brother in St Petersburg in 1789 that, if the Revolution had unleashed troubles and disorder in other parts of the country, “thank God, our province remains utterly tranquil.”¹⁸ “Tranquillity” – the absence of social disorder at home and the maintenance of peace abroad – was the indispensable precondition if their business interests were to continue to flourish.¹⁹

Planters and merchants

But there were clouds on the horizon from the start, most notably the future of the slave trade itself. Could the Revolution come up with a policy that was pragmatic and hence acceptable to mercantile interests? Merchant opinion was not wholly united on what this should be and battle

¹⁵ See, for instance, Laure Pineau-Defois, ‘Les grands négociants nantais du dernier tiers du 18e siècle: capital hérité et esprit d’entreprise, fin 17e – début 18e siècle’ (thèse de doctorat, Université de Nantes, 2008).

¹⁶ Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, *Nantes: histoire et géographie contemporaine* (Nantes: Éditions Palantines, 2008), 106.

¹⁷ Paul Butel, *Les dynasties bordelaises de Colbert à Chaban* (Paris : Perrin, 1991), 111.

¹⁸ Brice Martinetti, ‘Les résistances du négoce rochelais et la première abolition de l’esclavage’, *Revue du Philanthrope*, 4 (2013): 156–57.

¹⁹ AD Charente-Maritime, 4J 2848, register containing the personal correspondence of Pierre-Jean Van Hoogwerff, 1784–1805, letters of 8 September 1789 and 6 November 1790.

lines were already being drawn against what many saw as two unpalatable extremes – the abolitionist claims of the *Amis des Noirs*, on the one hand, and the increasingly strident demands of the planters, on the other, who, though often linked to the merchants by blood or trade, seemed concerned above all to profit from slavery and to free themselves where possible from what they frequently described as the tyranny of France. They did not want to return to the *Exclusif* or to be controlled by a French system of imperial preference.²⁰ Their geographical position in the Americas, close to the expanding market of the United States, meant that many saw their future in the New World, outside the sphere of metropolitan control.

The merchant communities of the leading Atlantic ports lobbied hard in defence of their commercial interests. They circulated pamphlets to make common cause with others; they extended their campaign to the cities of their respective hinterlands to gather support from industrialists and shopkeepers; and they sent deputations to lobby the National Assembly in Paris. In Bordeaux, for instance, as early as August 1789 the city's chamber of commerce formed a committee of its members to instruct their deputies to the National Assembly. Here, as in La Rochelle and Nantes, it is noteworthy that some of the most important merchants in the port offered to take part, a sure sign of the significance which commercial houses attached to the Chamber's work. But what were they working to achieve? And in what respects did their demands differ from those of the planters' spokesmen in the Club Massiac and its affiliates in a number of the port cities, which sought to infiltrate the chambers of commerce and win the merchants to their cause? ²¹ Here divisions appeared, but they were less obviously divisions over slavery than differences between those who favoured protection and those who campaigned for free trade. Where they were all in agreement was on the need to defend France's position in colonial markets, and their fear that Paris – both the revolutionary government and the people of the capital – were woefully ignorant of the interests of trade.²²

It could no longer be assumed that there was a common front between merchants in the metropole and plantation-owners in the Caribbean. Self-interest drove a wedge between them. The *colons* – or the more extreme among them – were increasingly demanding help to secure their interests, most critically military intervention to put down insurrections, and that was a step beyond what most merchants were prepared to countenance. They distinguished between what was good for the islands and good for the prosperity of their ports and their fellow-citizens.²³ They increasingly resisted the relentless propaganda they received from the planters' lobby, and, though alarmed by what they heard of slave violence and plantation-burning, they often sought independent news of what was happening in the islands from returning ships' captains. They had

²⁰ Manuel Covo, 'Commerce, empire et révolutions dans le monde atlantique: La colonie française de Saint-Domingue entre métropole et Etats-Unis, ca. 1778 – ca. 1804' (thèse de doctorat, EHESS, 2013), 29–30.

²¹ Gabriel Debien, *La société coloniale aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles: les colons de Saint-Domingue et la Révolution. Essai sur le Club Massiac, Août 1789-Août 1792* (Paris: Bibliothèque d'histoire coloniale, 1953), *passim*.

²² Brice Martinetti, *Les négociants de la Rochelle au 18e siècle* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013), 251.

²³ AD Loire-Atlantique, 1 ET A 27, 'Mémoire sur la nécessité d'unir de la manière la plus avantageuse les intérêts des Colonies et du Commerce et celui des Colons et des Commerçants, par M. Joubert du Collet, Juge en chef du Consulat de Nantes', 20 November 1789.

their own interests to defend, interests which they had first outlined in 1789 in their *cahiers de doléances*.²⁴

But they still shared certain interests, too. The principal cause that united them was a commitment to the institution of slavery, from which both, in different ways, profited.²⁵ And that battle was, it seemed, won early on, in 8 March 1790, when, following a major debate on the colonies, the Assembly decreed that the principles of Liberty and Equality did not apply to France's overseas possessions. Slavery as an institution could, it appeared, be maintained. The slaving ports continued to lobby for their economic interests, but with one change: after 1789 they knew that they had to appeal to new political masters, and used new terms and new arguments to chime with the language of liberty and equality.²⁶

The merchants' concerns

There were, however, other issues that the merchant community identified as potential threats that were inherent in the climate of revolution. To these they repeatedly returned in their correspondence and in the addresses from their chambers of commerce.²⁷

(a) Fear of war

Did revolution and competition over colonies make war more likely? Their commerce and their profits had suffered in successive wars in the eighteenth century, and the merchants were only too keenly aware of the danger which another naval war with England represented. Despite the protestations of the revolutionaries that they would never initiate war against other peoples, there was reason for alarm. In July 1790, responding to demands for an enhanced armaments programme in preparation for a possible war with England, they expressed alarm lest the move be misinterpreted and actually cause a new war. They saw such a programme as menacing, as a hostile or belligerent act. They were, they said, as patriotic as any other group, but they admitted to concern. "We fear," Guienne's Chamber of Commerce wrote, "that a first hostile act, even if it were to be disavowed by the Nation and its representatives, might compromise our possessions, our peace of mind, and our fortunes."²⁸ Memories of the losses they had suffered in the Seven Years' War and the War of American Independence were too raw, and for many too painful, to ignore, and it was not in their interests to put their hard-fought prosperity at jeopardy.

(b) Fear of disorder in the colonies

²⁴ AM Bordeaux, AA 26, cahier de doléances de la ville de Bordeaux, sent to the Assemblée du Tiers Etat de Guienne, 6 April 1789.

²⁵ BM La Rochelle, 11877 C, 'Précis sur l'importance des colonies et sur la servitude des Noirs' (La Rochelle, 1789), 1–12.

²⁶ Hélène Sarrazin, 'Comment peut-on défendre l'esclavage?', *Institut aquitain d'études sociales* 76 (2001): 175–82.

²⁷ See, for instance, AD Gironde, 8J 703, Fonds Bigot, Chambre de commerce de Bordeaux, 1788–1793.

²⁸ AD Gironde 8J 703, 'Adresse des négociants de Bordeaux à l'Assemblée Nationale,' 13 July 1790.

Soon news arrived of the first slave uprisings in both Saint-Domingue and Guadeloupe. The chambers of commerce listened to the arguments on both sides, to the *Amis des noirs* as well as the Club Massiac which forcefully presented the case of the planters; and they received address after address from the owners of *habitations* in Saint-Domingue soliciting their support and military intervention to defend the plantations and put down slave insurrections. Was this a step too far? They were faced with a dilemma. Should they, too, urge military intervention to reinstate a social and ethnic order that favoured their commercial ambitions? Should they make sacrifices in support of planters who had expressed the desire to distance themselves from the mother country and end trading monopolies with France? Or should they take a very different risk, that by alienating the colonists they would further drive a wedge between them and Paris?²⁹

(c) Moral pressures and the Rights of Man

On 15 May 1791 a decree was voted by the Assembly granting civil equality to men of colour born to free parents: full civil rights, including the right to stand for election to the colonial assemblies. The future of slavery was not in question, nor was the legality of the slave trade; but some feared that this was only the start of a reform movement that would end in the granting of citizenship to all people of colour.³⁰ That fear led to serious divisions in the Assembly and within the French community, not least in the Atlantic port cities, where many merchants were driven to express a new solidarity with the Creoles. They had warned of the danger of escalating slave violence as a consequence of the measure, and when that violence ensued, they believed that their fears were vindicated.

What the decree of 15 May did, of course, was to create a much sharper division between free and enslaved, between whites and mulattoes, on the one hand, and black Africans, on the other. It resulted in something of a social revolution in the Antilles, with mulattoes rushing to take advantage of their new freedoms, buying property, investing in plantations, and becoming slave-owners in their turn. For the white *colons*, this had another effect: in a society where rights largely coincided with ethnicity, the reform resulted in a perceived loss of status, the loss of that particular privilege that had previously been theirs alone. Most hated it, and warned of the danger that it would incite further demands and violence, even that it would prove to be a staging-post towards the liberation of the Caribbean's black slaves. It was this prospect that won over many of the French merchants. Petitions from Nantes, Dunkerque, Saint-Malo and Bordeaux all warned of the disaster that threatened – a disaster that could mean the end of the colonial system as well as of the slave economy. It would “obliterate commerce and manufacturing in France, deprive six million men of the work they need to survive, enflame our colonies or break their link with France, and expose all their inhabitants to die, one by one.”³¹

²⁹ Jean Tarrade, ‘Les colonies et les principes de 1789: les assemblées révolutionnaires face au problème de l’esclavage’, in Tarrade (ed.), *La Révolution Française et les colonies* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1989), 9–33.

³⁰ J. Madival and E. Laurent, *et al.* (eds), *Archives parlementaires de 1789 à 1860: recueil complet des débats législatifs & politiques des Chambres françaises* (Paris: Librairie administrative de P. Dupont, 1862), 26: 89–90, debate of 15 May 1791.

³¹ A.D. Loire-Atlantique, 1 ET A 27, ‘Bases d’après lesquelles doivent être rédigées les adresses des Communes des Villes Maritimes de Commerce et des Manufactures du Royaume à l’Assemblée Nationale,’ n.d.

Such was the threat they believed they faced, and they sought a collective response from all the port cities to what they saw as a weak and damaging policy in Paris.

They took some comfort, however, from Reubell's amendment to the decree, which guaranteed that no law could be passed in Paris on the legal status of slaves except where it was requested by the colonial assemblies themselves, an amendment which did much to undermine the impact of 15 May.³² The Chamber of Commerce of Nantes talked comfortingly of a law that was "sublime in the eyes of philosophy, and dictated by the love of humanity," but would have had fateful consequences "but for the fact that it would be impossible to carry it into law in the colonies."³³ This clearly was the cause of great relief, since it indicated that the powers of the government in Paris were not unlimited. For many in the French merchant community this offered a crucial safety-valve, since the colonies' conservatism on the question could safely be assumed. When a conflict of interests arose, as in this case, the merchants of the Atlantic ports seemed to assume that it was their duty to speak up for the colonies and to represent them in the affairs of the nation.

(d) The hand of Albion

Behind violence, slave insurrections and other threats to France's colonies some chose to see, as they had done across much of the eighteenth century, the malign influence of London. The demands of the *Amis des Noirs*, the decree of 15 May, the instigation of the violence that followed – all could be imputed to British influence.³⁴ As French colonial trade fell away, as it did from 1791, there could be only one beneficiary. This was a repeated refrain throughout the 1790s, the constant suspicion that behind every French disaster in the colonies lay British perfidy and corruption. The suspicion was hard to dissipate, and it was encouraged by the government, especially after the introduction of the Continental System and the British blockade. In a letter to the Chamber of Commerce in La Rochelle in 1807, the Minister of the Interior denounced both the supposed machinations of the British and the cupidity of those Frenchmen who by navigating under licence from London had "renounced all thought of the independence of their nation."³⁵

Of course, events moved quickly, and French attitudes evolved rapidly, too. The outbreak of black insurrections in Saint-Domingue changed perspectives in the Atlantic ports, not least when the Republic responded by freeing the slaves. By 1794 it was generally accepted that the principles of the Revolution and the institution of slavery were incompatible. Merchant opposition had been silenced, at least temporarily, but that silence could not be taken to imply consent. As the revolution grew more radical, relations between merchants and government grew steadily more precarious. For it was not just the slave trade that suffered, but the commercial prosperity of the French Atlantic, with years of war and blockade by the Royal Navy, and of

³² *Archives parlementaires*, 26: 91–97, debate of 15 May 1791.

³³ A.D. Loire-Atlantique, 1 ET A 28, Pétition à l'Assemblée Nationale par les citoyens commerçants de Nantes', Nantes, 20 May 1791.

³⁴ A.D. Loire-Atlantique, 1 ET A 27, 'Adresse à l'Assemblée Nationale' from the merchants of Nantes, delivered by M. Mosneron Dupin and dated 15 September 1790.

³⁵ AD Charente-Maritime, 41 ETP 339, letter from Minister of the Interior to the Chamber of Commerce of La Rochelle, 24 December 1807.

violence, insurrection and massacre in France's Caribbean colonies. The most valued of them, Saint-Domingue, fell at various moments into Spanish and British hands, and, following the black revolution of Toussaint Louverture, would be lost forever to France. The French response in 1802, when Napoleon sent an army to reconquer the former colony, to reinstitute slavery and open up the slave trade to French vessels, ended in disaster, with most of his army wiped out by disease; and the Haitian republic was born.³⁶ In the years that followed, first Britain in 1807, then the United States a year later, legislated to outlaw the slave trade. International opinion on the morality of slaving was shifting, and in continuing to support slaving and arguing for its expansion and restoration, Napoleon identified with a policy of reaction that served to harm his reputation as a political modernizer.³⁷

For as long as the war lasted and the Royal Navy policed the Atlantic shipping routes, the French slave trade remained moribund, but after 1815 there were many in the port cities of the West who sought – just as they had done after previous naval wars with Britain – to resume the commercial activities they had been forced to forego. Many merchants, most especially in Nantes, could see little future in the Atlantic unless they were allowed to resume the forms of commerce – both voyages *en droiture* and the triangular trade with Africa – which had contributed so much to their prosperity in the last years of the Old Regime; and, as Serge Daget has shown, they found various subterfuges to conceal their participation in a slave trade that, even under the Restoration, was increasingly illegal.³⁸ It was only with the July Monarchy, however, and the agreement which Louis-Philippe entered into in 1831, that the policing of the slave trade became truly effective and the number of slave voyages dwindled into relative insignificance. By the time the Second Abolition was decreed in 1848, French participation in the Atlantic slave trade was already effectively dead.

France's relationship with the slave trade had been an ambiguous one ever since the Enlightenment; and it is perhaps instructive how ambiguous its memory has remained, too. The abolition movement was habitually represented as the work of the Republic, the crowning achievement of the republican Victor Schoelcher, and that, of course, left indelible imprints on a bitterly divided polity.³⁹ The emphasis that was laid on French philanthropy also had the effect of turning abolition into a French story, and one in which France could take pride, rather as Britain did in immortalizing Clarkson and Wilberforce.⁴⁰ Of the slaves and their agency in achieving freedom there was, during the nineteenth and for most of the twentieth centuries, little mention. In the port cities of the West this silence may have been especially welcome, allowing them to elide any sense of guilt or regret from their view of their own past. Even a generation ago, the

³⁶ Jean-Pierre Barlier, *L'échec de l'expédition à Saint-Domingue, 1802–1803, et la naissance d'Haïti: un moment de l'horreur coloniale* (Paris: Éditions de l'Amandier, 2012).

³⁷ Thierry Lentz and Pierre Branda, *Napoléon, l'esclavage et les colonies* (Paris: Fayard, 2006).

³⁸ Serge Daget, *La répression de la traite des Noirs au 19e siècle* (Paris: Karthala, 1997), 93–115.

³⁹ Charles Forsdick, 'The Pantheon's Empty Plinth: Commemorating Slavery in Contemporary France,' *Atlantic Studies* 9 (2012): 279.

⁴⁰ Geoffrey Cubitt, 'Museums and Slavery in Britain: The Bicentenary of 1807,' in Ana Lucia Araujo (ed.), *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space* (London: Routledge, 2012), 162.

eighteenth-century history of the slaving ports was told in terms of growth and profit, prosperity and enterprise, of great merchant houses that opened the city to the sea. The last decades of the eighteenth century were a golden age, discussed without qualms or moral qualifications. Historians wrote business histories of the great merchant houses; museums held exhibitions on the colonies and their wealth. Of the sufferings of the Africans in the ships' holds there was little mention, little memory.⁴¹ It is only in the last twenty or thirty years that the memory of the period has been revived, with permanent exhibitions on the history of the slave trade in the major museums of Bordeaux, Nantes and La Rochelle; with memorials to Toussaint Louverture in Bordeaux and La Rochelle, and a major memorial to the slave trade on the banks of the Loire in Nantes, looking over the river from which the slave ships once sailed. France has declared the slave trade to be a crime against humanity, honouring its victims with a day of commemoration each year. The political landscape has changed dramatically, and with it France's memorial landscape. This has owed much to the activism of French men and women from West Africa and the Caribbean, now resident in Paris or one of the former slaving ports. As a consequence of their efforts, the history of the slave trade, the history of their ancestors, can no longer be abandoned to oblivion.⁴²

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⁴¹ Jean-Marc Ayrault, introduction to the catalogue for the exhibition, *Les Anneaux de la Mémoire: Nantes-Europe/ Afrique/ Amériques* (Nantes: Association les Anneaux de la mémoire, 1992), 9.

⁴² Renaud Hourcade, 'Commemorating a Guilty Past: The Politics of Memory in the French Former Trade Cities,' in Araujo, *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space*, 131.