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Tessie P. Liu, *A Frail Liberty: Probationary Citizens in the French and Haitian Revolutions*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022. xiv + 427 pp. Map, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. $65.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781427294; $65.00 U.S. (eb, pdf). ISBN 9781496232298; $65.00 U.S. (eb, epub). ISBN 9781496232281.

Review by Lauren R. Clay, Vanderbilt University.

In this provocative study, Tessie P. Liu raises important and uncomfortable questions about the nexus of race and citizenship during the French and Haitian Revolutions. Focused loosely on France's first antislavery group, the Société des amis des noirs, and its advocacy work during the revolutionary era, *A Frail Liberty* explores the paradoxical ways that the society contributed to the evolution of discourses of racial and colonial citizenship. After the society's initial mobilization to abolish the slave trade was decisively defeated in March 1790, the Amis des noirs pivoted to advocating for civic equality and voting rights for France's free mixed-race colonial population, the *gens de couleur*. The leaders of the Amis des noirs may have seen these goals as complimentary, with rights for free nonwhites an intermediary step on the path to gradual emancipation. Their choice was complicated, however, by the fact that many elite free coloreds were at that point unapologetic slave owners and their leaders who had initially sought an alliance with the white planters living in Paris. Moreover, at key moments, leaders of the Amis des noirs such as Jacques-Pierre Brissot and the abbé Grégoire would argue that the *gens de couleur* should be given citizenship rights in order to better secure the colonies against slave insurrection and to maintain the colonial plantation economy, "oddly promot[ing] racial equality at the expense of abolition" (p. 7).

This trajectory, Liu suggests, set the Amis des noirs apart from British and American abolitionist organizations and has perplexed scholars of slavery and abolition. *A Frail Liberty* brings welcome renewed attention to the politics and actions of the Amis des noirs during its most active phase (1788-1792) and also during its reestablishment by Grégoire as the Amis des noirs et des colonies (1796-99), excavating the society's seemingly paradoxical trajectory and its silence in the face of racist attacks on Saint-Domingue's new Black citizens.[1] In the process, it takes up broader questions of race, freedom, inequality, and colonial citizenship, engaging with the work of scholars including Jeremy Popkin, Laurent Dubois, Lorelle Semley, and Frederick Cooper.[2]

A Frail Liberty explores the problem of colonial citizenship within the context of revolutionary upheaval in the metropole and colonies, including France's first abolition of slavery in 1793-94, the new colonial regimes established by Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Toussaint Louverture, and Napoleon's failed invasion of Saint-Domingue. Yet, if it gestures towards the influence of

contingent political events in France and Saint-Domingue, including slave rebellion and war, this study is primarily concerned with tracing a continuity in the logic of the Amis des noirs across this era, which Liu identifies in the concept of "meritorious citizenship." Convincing legislators to extend full rights to prominent, wealthy, and assimilated free coloreds such as Julien Raymond proved to be an easier pitch than abolitionist goals during the early Revolution in part because arguments could be made that these men had been illegitimately denied their rights by an oppressive colonial "aristocracy of the skin" (p. 108).[3] Drawing on discourses of sympathy already circulating during the late Old Regime, the Amis des noirs made the case that these men clearly deserved equality, not least because they were so like white citizens, literally "children of a common father," in the words of Grégoire (p. 108). Liu proposes that such "meritocratic formulations of equality" underpinning the society's opposition to racism actually undermined the more ambitious, longer-term project of a "full dismantling of the racial caste system of French Caribbean slavery" (p. 13).

One of this book's most interesting contributions is the linking of probationary citizenship in the colonies to theories of hierarchical citizenship developed in the metropole. Liu argues that the theory of "active" and "passive" citizenship proposed by the Amis des noirs member abbé Sieyès provided a model and justification for exclusionary citizenship not only in the metropole but also in the colonies. Spokesmen for colonial planters were quick to point out: if citizenship rights could be limited based on age, sex, and wealth, why not race? Various members of the Amis des noirs conceded that certain rights and freedoms, in practice, would not automatically be extended to all. Rather, they needed to be earned. Effectively, this meant that racial equality was conditional. It could be restricted if those in question were not found to be sufficiently deserving. The society thus provides the author a lens to evaluate "the *failures* of antiracism" (pp. 23-24, emphasis in original).

A Frail Liberty sets the stage for its exploration of revolutionary antiracism by examining the cultural and intellectual milieu in which the Amis des noirs was founded. Liu begins by examining antislavery sentiments expressed in sentimental literature, enlightenment writings, judicial briefs, and works of political economy, with a focus on Negrophile narratives that privileged feeling. Even as such works established emotional connections with Black characters and called for greater sympathy for their plight, almost all stopped short of proposing emancipation. Even Olympe de Gouges, who sought "to paint dramatically all the rigors of black slavery" in a play performed at the Comédie-Française in late 1789 and early 1790, would later condemn the slave insurrection that broke out in August 1791 (pp. 36, 62).

This study then introduces the Amis des noirs, founded as a philanthropic society in 1788 by Jacques-Pierre Brissot and Étienne Claverie, and mobilized as a political club in the summer of 1789. The Revolution created new possibilities for antislavery activism, and the Amis des noirs, with prominent supporters such as the marquis de Lafayette, British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, and Honoré-Gabriel Riqueti, the comte de Mirabeau, seized the opportunity to push for the abolition of the French slave trade. Facing off against powerful proslavery forces, the Amis des noirs' hopes were dashed in "a stunning setback" (p. 79).

In the wake of this failure, the society embraced the seemingly more realizable cause of racial equality for the colonies' *gens de couleur* and free Blacks, who confronted humiliating discrimination in Saint-Domingue. *A Fragile Liberty* closely analyzes the lengthy debates over racial equality that preceded the decree of May 1791 extending voting rights to a small number

of free men of mixed racial heritage, the vote to rescind it in September 1791, and the more expansive law granting citizenship to free colonial nonwhites in April 1792. Liu proposes that the shift in priorities of the Amis des Noirs was "momentous" because it meant implicitly accepting the colonial hierarchy between free and unfree (p. 109). Both Grégoire and Brissot would explicitly argue that political rights should be granted to the *gens de couleur* in order to better engage their support in preventing and putting down slave insurrection. Such arguments helped to secure antiracist victories on behalf of the *gens de couleur* that provoked the fury of colonial whites. Yet they also damaged the antislavery credentials of these leaders. The distance between arguments for civil rights based on sympathy, identification, and merit and arguments favoring universal human rights, Liu argues, became increasingly evident and consequential. Meanwhile, certain members such as Sieyès and Lafayette would prioritize the stability of the Revolution in France over racial equality in the colonies. When faced with intense backlash from white colonial interests amid the constitutional crisis following the king's flight, both would vote to strip political rights from mixed-race men in September 1791.

A Frail Liberty then considers the ways that slave insurrection and emancipation reshaped ongoing debates about race and citizenship. The decree extending equality in political rights to all free colonial nonwhites in April 1792 was the Amis des noirs' greatest legislative victory. Yet, Liu suggests it was won at the cost of renouncing the enslaved. Brissot and others expressed sympathy with the plight of the enslaved but proposed no path to an alternate future beyond urging colonial whites to improve their conditions and prepare them for a slow transition to an eventual freedom. Consequently, Liu argues, they are best understood as "gradualists on emancipation" (p. 174).

In a detour away from the Amis des noirs, which stopped meeting around 1792, this study considers the narrow path to political inclusion in Saint-Domingue that was presented to the formerly enslaved between 1794 and 1802. Newly free Black Saint-Dominguans were coerced to return to plantation work. If this phenomenon is relatively well known, this study casts the "probationary citizenship" that Sonthonax extended to these colonial citizens in new light. Toussaint Louverture's rule provides another case for exploring "the untenable contradictions of meritorious inclusion," as various rights and freedoms were reserved for those who proved themselves deserving (p. 201).

From 1796-99, the Amis des noirs et des colonies was revived with a new name and a largely new membership. Since French colonial slavery had already been abolished, it also pursued new goals. Some leaders such as Sonthonax and Grégoire sought to consolidate general liberty for the new citizens of Saint-Domingue. Others such as the political economist Jean-Baptiste Say, focusing attention away from what he considered to be corrupted former slave colonies, proposed new colonial expansion to be based on "free" wage labor in places such as Africa and Egypt. Finally, *A Fragile Liberty* examines the Negrophobic writings that colonial whites and their allies unleashed in 1802, as the Leclerc invasion of Saint-Domingue and re-enslavement elsewhere in the Caribbean was underway. These highly selective retellings of Black violence and white plight during the uprising of 1791, deployed to justify the rescinding of emancipation, helped to consolidate new forms of racism.

The parallels and connections that this book traces between metropole and colony concerning hierarchical citizenship are thought-provoking. Liu challenges the normativity of "active" citizenship during the Revolutionary era, noting that under the conservative Constitution of

1795, all French citizens were effectively passive unless they met certain criteria. Hierarchical citizenships were implemented in both metropole and colonies, although this trusteeship took on different forms.

At base, this study can be seen as applying to France and Saint-Domingue one of the perennial debates concerning racial justice in the United States, namely the ethics of incrementalism versus radicalism.[4] Rather than emphasizing the benefits of realizable-yet-imperfect legislative gains, Liu focuses on the perils of gradualism in the context of revolutionary antiracism, by arguing that reducing injustice risks prolonging it. As new champions of a kind of racial uplift, this book argues, the Amis des noirs simultaneously helped to entrench racialized hierarchies based on utility and worthiness.

A Frail Liberty claims that although the Amis des noirs "never stopped identifying themselves as racial egalitarians and champions of emancipation," the group's failure to adopt a natural rights basis for liberty and political participation and its emphasis on merit meant that this self-image was little more than a "delusion" (p. 312). It thus offers a strikingly critical reassessment of a society that has more often been faulted for its small, elite membership and its political inefficacy than for promoting an approach to antiracism whose legacy proved not merely insufficient but damaging. Individuals, too, are recast. Abbé Grégoire, for example, is presented here as less invested in antislavery than in Alyssa Sepinwall's biography, which follows his engagement with the abolitionist cause in both the United States and the nineteenth-century French empire.[5]

Given the book's focus, it is not surprising that *A Frail Liberty* relies mostly on secondary scholarship in its analysis of the political forces opposing the Amis des noirs. As a result, it tends to flatten the divergent and sometimes competing agendas of various domestic and colonial interest groups into a single "colonial lobby" represented by the Parisian colonial planters' association, the Club Massiac. Liu also appears to underestimate the political pressure and even potential legal risk that the Amis des noirs confronted after the passage of the March 8 decree by the National Constituent Assembly, which almost unanimously affirmed revolutionary France's commitment to the slave economy while making it a crime to incite unrest in the colonies. At that moment, the society may have gone silent on abolitionism because as a viable political cause it was seemingly dead in the water.[6]

To this reader, some key questions remain. How much influence should we attribute to the Amis des noirs, as opposed to revolutionary events in France and Saint-Domingue and other political interests, on the laws and practices of probationary citizenship that came to dominate, especially given that the organization was dormant from roughly 1792 to 1796? Given the deaths of key leaders such as Brissot, Clavière, and Condorcet, and the withdrawal of others like Sieyès, how much continuity existed between the original Amis des noirs and its successor?[7] Finally, how unusual were the views espoused by members of the Amis des noirs in comparison to abolitionists elsewhere at this time? The abolition law enacted in Pennsylvania in 1780, for example, adopted the model of gradual emancipation and was emulated by Connecticut and Rhode Island within a few years. In practice, this march to freedom was so slow that hundreds of Black people continued to be enslaved in Pennsylvania into the 1850s.[8] More comparative analysis would be welcome.

A Frail Liberty is densely written and the arguments are abstract, making it more suitable to graduate students and scholars. Not all will agree with its assessments. Yet, it invites readers to weigh the costs that accompany advocating imperfect, provisional advances in matters of civil

rights, rather than holding out for more radical, inclusive solutions that would benefit all. Such questions are surely worthy of attention.

NOTES

[1] On the society's history, see especially 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: Editions UNESCO, 1998).

[2] Key recent studies addressing the problem of race and colonial citizenship include Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Jeremy Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Lorelle Semley, *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France's Atlantic Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). René Koekkoek takes up similar questions in *The Citizenship Experiment: Contesting the Limits of Civic Equality and Participation in the Age of Revolutions* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

[3] On the *gens de couleur*, see Florence Gauthier, *L'Aristocratie de l'épiderme: Le combat de la Société des Citoyens de Couleur 1789-1791* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2007).

[4] On the conflict in the U.S. between those advocating for incremental improvements in the conditions of Black Americans and radicals demanding immediate freedom and equality, see Ibram X. Kendi, "*Patience* is a Dirty Word," *The Atlantic* July 23, 2020. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/john-lewis-and-danger-gradualism/614512/

[5] Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 150-155, 164, 171-174, 179. Grégoire would write that at the time he felt the sudden emancipation was a "disastrous measure." Quoted in Daniel P. Resnick, "The Société des Amis des Noirs and the Abolition of Slavery," *French Historical Studies* 7:4 (1972) 558-569, p. 567.

[6] For a reassessment of the slave trade debate of 1789-90 and the March 8 decree, see Lauren R. Clay, "Liberty, Equality, Slavery: Debating the Slave Trade in Revolutionary France," *The American Historical Review* 128:1 (2023), 89-119.

[7] Resnick, unlike Liu, sees relatively little continuity from the first society to the second, which was formed by "a small splinter" of the original group. "The Société des Amis des Noirs and the Abolition of Slavery," (p. 565). Koekkoek suggests that the Société des amis des noirs et des colonies "would hardly exert any influence at the time" (p. 126).

[8] Kendi, "*Patience* is a dirty word."

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