

H-France Review Vol. 8 (June 2008), No. 76

Frédéric Régent, *La France et ses esclaves: De la colonisation aux abolitions (1620-1848)*. Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 2007. 354 pp. 19.50 €. ISBN 2-246-702119.

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The issue of colonial slavery is so central to debates in contemporary France that it is a shock to realize that Frédéric Régent's *La France et ses Esclaves* is indeed, as the author claims, the first attempt at a comprehensive account of that institution during the two-and-a-quarter centuries from the establishment of the first French slave colonies in the 1620s to the second and final abolition of slavery in 1848. Modern French leaders have often celebrated the fact that France was the first western nation to abolish slavery, in 1794, and in 2001 the French legislature passed the *loi Taubira*, officially labeling slavery and the slave trade as crimes against humanity, but there has been little serious effort to bring together the details of this history or to integrate slavery into the larger story of the development of modern France. Régent, author of a detailed study of slavery and race in Guadeloupe in the revolutionary era,<sup>[1]</sup> has thus performed a real service with his new volume. In view of the subject's importance and the passions the topic still raises today, however, this rather dry and schematic book, while certainly useful, does not do full justice to the importance of its subject. The history of slavery in France's colonies still awaits its equivalent to Ira Berlin's *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*, a book that combines careful scholarship with the eloquent writing that truly brings the past to life.<sup>[2]</sup>

Régent traces the development of slavery in France's Caribbean and Indian Ocean possessions and its African trading stations. Although the French colonial empire was always smaller in size than those of Spain, Portugal, and Britain, French slavery was a significant part of the story of European exploitation of non-white--primarily African--labor. Régent estimates that over the course of more than two centuries, some four million human beings were enslaved in the French colonies. Half of them were survivors of the Middle Passage; the other half were born in the colonies. By the time France rather belatedly embarked on the acquisition of tropical colonies, slavery had already existed in the Americas for over a century. Like the other European settlers, the French tried, with limited success, to enslave the Indians they encountered. The first African slaves in the French islands were captured from the Spanish, not imported directly from Africa. Early French empire building was a haphazard process, carried out by adventurers and entrepreneurs with limited government encouragement, and it was the colonists, rather than the government, who took the initiative in introducing slavery. As production shifted from tobacco, sometimes grown with white indentured labor, to sugar, which required a larger labor supply, the economic value of the slave colonies surpassed that of France's other possessions. By 1763, when Louis XV abandoned the settler colony of Québec in order to keep Guadeloupe, it was clear that the French government had opted for an empire built on slavery.

No laws regulated French colonists' initial experiments with slavery, and the social structures that developed varied somewhat from one colony to another. In the seventeenth century, racial lines were not as strictly drawn as they became later, and descendants of mixed unions were often treated as white. Louis XIV's *Code noir* of 1685 reflected existing practices, but applied only in the Antilles. Although it contained some provisions to protect slaves from the worst abuses of their masters, these were not enforced, and in practice the authority of owners over their slaves was virtually absolute. Nevertheless, since slaves in the French colonies soon came to outnumber their masters and since a certain amount of

cooperation was essential to maintain productivity, owners had to make some compromises with their work force, and indeed they were never able to run their plantations solely according to economic criteria. Régent estimates that about 40 percent of the slave population was either too young or too old to do much productive work (p. 112). By the late seventeenth century sugar had become the dominant crop in the Caribbean colonies, generating an economy based on large plantations with a complex division of labor. In the Indian Ocean island colonies, whose racial structure was complicated by the importation of labor from South Asia and Madagascar as well as Africa, the emphasis was on producing supplies for shipping, while the small trading posts along the west coast of Africa were organized to support the slave trade itself.

Any study of slavery has to face the questions of how the masters' domination was maintained and how much autonomy or agency the slaves were able to exercise within the system. French slaveowners were backed up by their government, by an organized police force, the *milice*, and by a church whose message to those slaves admitted to its ranks stressed the duty of obedience. The masters benefited as well from the fact that the slaves did not constitute a unified community with common interests. Women did most of the agricultural fieldwork, while men monopolized the more skilled positions that offered certain privileges; on the other hand, some slave women could improve their situation by becoming the mistresses of white men. Slaves born in the colonies looked down on those from Africa, and those of mixed race considered themselves superior to those who were entirely black. According to Régent, "The slaves themselves contributed to their own alienation. The 'cascade of disdain' assured the masters' primacy" (p. 116). The low birth rate among the slave population and the very high rate of infant mortality "reveal the atrocity of the slaves' living conditions," he concludes, but nevertheless, "on an individual level, some slaves managed to achieve a certain autonomy, and even to free themselves." Collectively, the Caribbean slave population developed its own language, Créole, and a distinctive culture combining African and European elements, notably in the domain of religion (pp. 153-54).

In contrast to scholars who have wanted to see slaves as locked in an unremitting struggle against their masters, Régent emphasizes the variety of reactions. "As in all human societies," he writes, "many subjugated individuals chose the path of self-preservation rather than open resistance. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the slaves could not yet conceive of a total overthrow of the system; each followed an individual or familial survival strategy" (p. 155). Some slaves did contest their situation by running away (*marronage*), the use of poison and the abortion of pregnancies, but Régent concludes that more slaves sought to take advantage of the possibilities for manumission that always existed within the system than to confront it openly (p. 162). Régent follows Anne Pérotin-Dumon in arguing that the development of urban societies in the colonies offered slaves greater opportunities to achieve de facto and even legal freedom;[3] the difference between urban and plantation slavery created yet another division in the slave population (pp. 123-27).

One of the particularities of the French colonial system was the emergence of a significant population of free people of color, most of them of mixed racial ancestry but some of them, such as the future leader of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint Louverture, entirely black. Relatively tolerant toward this group in the early decades of colonization, the French authorities officially tried to limit its growth and its privileges in the eighteenth century, but with little success. Mechanisms built into the colonial system promoted the growth of this "intermediate class": slaves could earn their freedom through wartime military service, and white masters often freed their concubines and children. As Régent says, the existence and continued expansion of the free colored population "shows... the complexity and the contradictions" of the system of slavery and racial hierarchy (p. 192). Although free people of color were often themselves slaveowners, "the very existence of (this group) sowed the seeds of abolition," Régent concludes. "In effect, colonial authorities recognized that an individual not classified as white could be free" (p. 211).

The revolution that broke out in France, proclaiming that "all men are born and remain free and equal

in rights,” shook the equilibrium of the slave colonies, but not always in the manner that might have been expected. As is by now well known, the French revolutionaries of 1789 were careful not to extend the promise of liberty to the slaves.[4] Reactions to the events in France in the various colonies depended on the balance of power between whites—often themselves divided between wealthy supporters of the old regime and *petits blancs* attracted to the Revolution’s anti-aristocratic program—and free people of color, who were quick to seize on the movement’s promise of equality but less eager for the abolition of slavery. As for the slaves, “in the revolutionary context, the shortest road to freedom was not docile collaboration with the master, but the choice of the faction that looked likely to come out victorious,” Régent writes (p. 241). Slaves were armed and fought on all sides in the conflicts in the colonies; they did not necessarily see the French revolutionaries as their best hope for emancipation. It is perhaps his desire to underline this point that leads Régent to embrace a dubious claim that the plan for the August 1791 slave uprising in Saint-Domingue was devised by a white royalist and that Louverture served as “the intermediary between the royalists and the conspirators” (p. 237).[5] Furthermore, even after the National Convention’s emancipation decree of 4 February 1794, French policy did not always offer the ex-slaves real freedom. The decree was never applied in the Indian Ocean colonies, and in Guadeloupe and Guyane, former slaves were still required to perform plantation labor. Régent is thus less emphatic than American scholar Laurent Dubois in seeing the period from 1794 to 1802 as one in which France and its colonies truly realized the possibility of a universalistic, multiracial definition of citizenship.[6]

Régent is also less certain than Yves Bénot, however, that Napoleon came to power in 1799 already determined to restore slavery in the French colonies where it had been abolished.[7] The prospect of peace with Britain in 1801, which meant the recovery of Martinique, where slavery had continued uninterrupted, led to a change of policy. Military expeditions to Saint-Domingue and Guadeloupe in 1802 had initial successes because Louverture’s authoritarian government in the larger colony and Magloire Pélagé’s similar regime in Guadeloupe had alienated a good part of the population. In Guadeloupe, the French succeeded in re-imposing slavery. In Saint-Domingue, although the French managed to capture Toussaint Louverture, the military experience of a large part of the black population enabled them to put up stronger resistance, despite major divisions among the black leadership. In 1804, the victorious ex-slaves proclaimed the independence of the new nation of Haiti, depriving France of what had been by far the most valuable of its pre-revolutionary colonies.

Although Napoleon did maintain or restore slavery in the other French colonies, there was a moment during the Empire when France no longer had any slaves: by 1810, the British had occupied all of France’s overseas possessions. In the peace settlement of 1815, France regained most of these colonies, although Louis XVIII had to join the British in banning the slave trade. Using more efficient production methods, French sugar producers in Martinique, Guadeloupe and Réunion enjoyed a last brief period of prosperity under the Restoration, before foreign competition and lower-priced beet sugar undercut them. The steady growth of the colonies’ populations of free people of color, the emancipation of the slaves in Britain’s colonies in the 1830s, and the July Monarchy’s fumbling but not entirely meaningless efforts at reform showed that slavery’s days were numbered. The French abolitionist Victor Schoelcher persuaded the provisional government established in 1848 to free the slaves, but the governors of Martinique and Guadeloupe had already felt compelled to act on their own before the decree even reached them. “The Revolution of 1848 thus simply accelerated a process of emancipation that was already under way,” Régent concludes (p. 289).

There is no question that the author has made a serious effort to fill a major hole in French historical scholarship. The value of the book is enhanced by an extensive set of appendices, including a detailed chronology, maps of the slave colonies, a table showing the dates during which territories were under French control, a list of the French officials responsible for colonial affairs and the governors of the colonies, population figures, and a short glossary of terms specific to the colonies. In contrast to Gabriel Debien’s *Les Esclaves aux Antilles françaises (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles)*, which treats only the Caribbean

colonies, *La France et ses esclaves* covers the full range of France's colonies and shows that they developed a greater variety of policies and social structures than Debien's work revealed.[8] Unlike Debien, however, Régent relies largely on secondary sources, both in French and in English. His account of the Saint-Domingue uprising, for example, is based largely on the English-language publications of Dubois, David Geggus, and Carolyn Fick.[9] The literature on French colonialism and slavery has expanded so rapidly in recent years that one cannot fault Régent for not using some of the most recent publications, but there are some surprising omissions from his bibliography, including Robert Harms's account of French slave trading in the eighteenth century, Lawrence Jennings's study of the nineteenth-century abolition movement, and the works of Robert Louis Stein on the sugar industry, the slave trade, and the French revolutionary emancipator Léger-Félicité Sonthonax.[10]

Despite its virtues, Régent's book suffers from a certain narrowness of historiographic vision. I would like to briefly raise three major issues that seem to me unduly neglected in its pages: (1) the significance of slavery in assessing the larger themes of French history, from 1600 to the present; (2) the place of French slavery in the comparative history of Atlantic and world slavery; and (3) the historian's obligation to give readers a sense of the lived experience of their subjects. What does the fact that France developed a slave empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries tell us about French culture? Slavery took shape in France's seventeenth-century overseas settlements at a time when the notion of "human rights" hardly existed. It is true that the Paris *parlement* had balked at the introduction of slaves into metropolitan France in its famous declaration of 1571, and that Louis XIII had hesitated to authorize slavery in the colonies until he was persuaded that the spiritual benefits of their Christianization would outweigh the violence inflicted on them. Nevertheless, the age of Louis XIV, during which slavery became firmly established in France's colonies, was a period in which the notion that all human beings were destined to live under some form of more or less rigorous authority was widely accepted. A society that accepted judicial torture, the forcible conversion of the Huguenots, the locking up of the poor, the insane, and other groups classified as deviant, the strict disciplining of soldiers, apprentices, and schoolchildren, and indentured servitude for whites in the colonies, was unlikely to see slavery as a scandalous exception to its norms. Furthermore, as Régent points out, French slavery during this period was a relatively small-scale institution, and conditions in the colonies gave many slaves, or at least their descendants, some hope of achieving free status. It would have been surprising if large numbers of the French had objected to colonial slavery at this time.

Can one say the same thing for the eighteenth century, the "age of Enlightenment," when, as Lynn Hunt has recently argued, the French were moving toward a clearer notion of human rights?[11] At the same time as the metropole was turning against such practices as torture and persecution of religious minorities, the volume of the slave trade was exploding, racial hierarchies in the colonies were becoming stricter, and the French economy was growing ever more dependent on its overseas plantations. Historians like Daniel Roche have noted that France's growing consumer society was accustoming a steadily increasing segment of the population to the notion that they were entitled to such personal pleasures as sweetened coffee, but even at the time, critics like Louis-Sébastien Mercier reminded readers that these products were produced by "unfortunate Negroes, transplanted from Africa." [12] The coming of the Revolution did not immediately resolve the contradiction between slavery overseas and freedom at home. The same members of the Third Estate in Nantes who led a militant campaign against the privileged classes in Brittany in the winter of 1789 also incorporated into their *cahier* a demand that the French navy give the slave ships sailing from their harbor better protection during their voyages along the African coast.[13] A book on "France and its Slaves" ought to address more strongly than Régent does the meaning of the simultaneous expansion of liberty and slavery in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The question of what slavery means in French culture is as significant for the period since 1848 as it is for the centuries Régent covers. His concluding sentence—"With emancipation, the slaves became French citizens. They thus brought a universal dimension to the French Republic" (p. 294)—hardly does

justice to the tortured memory and legacy of the events he has recounted. It now seems telling that Pierre Nora's massive exploration of French "sites of memory," published as recently as 1992, makes no reference to slavery,<sup>[14]</sup> but Régent makes no effort to fill this gap. French colonial administrators brought their experiences in the slave colonies to the new lands the country conquered after 1830, and forced labor and racial prejudice were features of French overseas rule for generations. The *négritude* movement of the twentieth century brought together descendants of France's slaves and blacks from the country's "second empire," who asserted that they shared a common identity even as they acknowledged that their relationship with France had profoundly affected them. The 2001 Taubira law and the furious debates unleashed by the passage and repeal of a 2005 edict requiring that French school curricula teach the "positive" benefits of French colonialism are reminders that a full history of "France and its slaves" really needs to extend to the present.

In seeing the relationship between demands for freedom and the existence of slavery as central to eighteenth-century French culture, as I have suggested, historians of France would be following in the wake of scholars of the Americas, such as Edmund Morgan in his classic *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*.<sup>[15]</sup> This raises another issue on which *La France et ses esclaves* seems to me to fall short of its potential. The history of slavery has long had an important comparative and transnational dimension. In these comparisons, slavery in the French colonies, although not as well studied as the slave systems in the other European empires, has often been an important point of reference. It has at times been cited as a more flexible system than that in the British colonies, because of the greater acceptance of people of mixed race; at other times, it has been stigmatized as more brutal and exploitative, unique because of the extraordinarily low ratio of whites to slaves at the end of the eighteenth century. Régent resolutely ignores these debates, and his book will be frustrating for scholars engaged in them: it provides few grappling hooks by which they might connect his findings to a wider understanding of these issues. For American scholars, especially, research on the history of slavery and race in the French past often seems like a way of "globalizing" French history; Régent demonstrates that the subject can also be treated in a confining "Franco-français" framework.<sup>[16]</sup>

Finally, Régent's book is disappointing because it fails to bring to life the human beings whose interactions constituted the experience of slavery in the French colonies. It is true, as all scholars of slavery, particularly those working in periods before 1800, have had to acknowledge, that the source material about the life of slaves is limited. In the Francophone world, there seem to be no personal slave narratives, even from the nineteenth century, and the fact that the ocean separated the metropolitan population from France's slave territories means that we have far fewer reports from white observers than we do from the British colonies. France is, however, the country where Marc Bloch and the *Annales* School demonstrated how much historical imagination can do to reconstruct the lives of those who could not leave behind their own testimonies. For his *Les Esclaves aux Antilles françaises*, Debien consulted over 100 collections of plantation papers, many of which give valuable details about the interactions of masters and their slaves. In *The Diligent*, Harms succeeded in vividly evoking the experiences of both French slave traders and of the victims who found themselves rowed by fellow Africans through the perilous triple surf off Whydah to be shipped into the unknown. Even the French whites who shaped their country's version of slavery or tried to end it—men like Father Jean-Baptiste Labat, the energetic Dominican father and sugar-plantation director, Moreau de Saint-Méry, the colonial representative of the encyclopedic spirit who drew up a table of all the possible gradations of white and black racial mixture over six generations, or Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, the provincial Jacobin leader who found himself taking the historic step of emancipating Saint-Domingue's slaves in the summer of 1793—fail to emerge as distinct personalities in Régent's pages.<sup>[17]</sup>

For France, as for the United States, slavery was a great human drama that deeply affected the lives of those caught up in its tentacles and that continues to affect our lives today. Dealing appropriately with its legacy is one of the toughest challenges facing historians. The subject requires passion and commitment, but also intellectual honesty, balanced judgment, and the willingness to face up to the



limits of our knowledge and, above all, our inability to truly right the wrongs of the past. In spite of its limitations, Frédéric Régent's *La France et ses esclaves* makes a significant contribution by recognizing that slavery was an important part of French history and by outlining some of the complexities of its story. Nevertheless, much more remains to be done to flesh out the schematic outline Régent has provided, to fully explore the role that slavery played in the development of modern France, and to fit the French story into the wider story of slavery in the making of the modern world. *Aux archives, citoyens!*

## NOTES

[1] Frédéric Régent, *Esclavage, métissage, liberté La Révolution française en Guadeloupe 1789-1802* (Paris: Grasset, 2004).

[2] Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[3] Anne Pérotin-Dumon, *La Ville aux îles, la ville dans l'île: Basse-Terre et Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, 1650-1820* (Paris: Karthala, 2000).

[4] On the revolutionary-era debates, see the fundamental work of Yves Bénot, *La Révolution française et la fin des colonies* (Paris: La Découverte, 1987).

[5] The claim that French royalists inspired the August 1791 slave uprising dates back to the propaganda debates of the time; the specific claim that Toussaint Louverture was their agent may have originated with one of his black rivals in 1793, as David Geggus has recently shown. See Geggus, "Toussaint Louverture: Avant et après l'insurrection de 1791," in Franklin Midy, ed., *Mémoire de la révolution d'esclaves à Saint-Domingue*, 2nd ed. (Montréal: CIDHICA, 2006), pp. 112-32. There is, however, no solid evidence that Louverture was even involved in the planning and early stages of the slave insurrection, much less that he acted on behalf of or in alliance with white royalists. As for the claim that the royal army officer Touzard, named by Régent, plotted to set off an uprising, it can only be said that there is abundant archival evidence of his involvement in efforts to crush the rebellion once it began. See Jeremy D. Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 93-104 and pp. 154-55.

[6] Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[7] Yves Bénot, *La Démence coloniale sous Napoléon* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991).

[8] Gabriel Debien, *Les Esclaves aux Antilles françaises (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles)* (Basse-Terre and Fort-de-France: Société d'histoire de Guadeloupe and Société d'histoire de la Martinique, 1974).

[9] David Geggus, *Slavery, War and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint-Domingue, 1793-1798* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Haitian Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

[10] Robert Harms, *The Diligent: A Voyage Through the Worlds of the Slave Trade* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Lawrence C. Jennings, *French Anti-Slavery: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802-1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Robert Louis Stein, *The French Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century: An Old Regime Business* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press,

1979); Robert Louis Stein, *The French Sugar Business in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Robert Louis Stein, *Léger-Félicité Sonthonax: Lost Sentinel of the Republic* (East Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985).

[11] Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

[12] Daniel Roche, *A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600-1800*, trans. Brian Pearce (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Panorama of Paris: Selections from Le Tableau de Paris*, Jeremy D. Popkin, ed. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), p. 32.

[13] J. Madival et al., eds., *Archives parlementaires* (Paris: P. Dupont), 4:97, cahier of Third Estate of Nantes.

[14] Pierre Nora, ed., *Les lieux de mémoire*, 7 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-92).

[15] Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975).

[16] One important recent French contribution to the comparative study of slavery is Marcel Dorigny and Bernard Gainot, *Atlas des esclavages: Traites, sociétés coloniales, abolitions de l'Antiquité à nos jours* (Paris: Editions Autrement, 2006).

[17] On Labat and Moreau de Saint-Méry, see Doris Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005); another recent volume on Moreau de Saint-Méry is Dominique Taffin, ed., *Moreau de Saint-Méry ou les ambiguïtés d'un créole des Lumières* (Martinique: Société des Amis des Archives et de la Recherche sur le Patrimoine culturel des Antilles, 2006). On Sonthonax, see, in addition to Robert Louis Stein's biography, Marcel Dorigny, ed., *Léger-Félicité Sonthonax. La première abolition de l'esclavage: La Révolution française et la Révolution de Saint-Domingue* (Saint-Denis and Paris: Société Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer and Association pour l'étude de la colonisation française, 2005).

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