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Florence Gauthier. *L'Aristocratie de l'épiderme. Le combat de la Société des Citoyens de Couleur 1789-1791*. Préf. Pierre Philippy. Paris: CNRS Editions, 2007. 446 pp. €22.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-271-06576-6.

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As they tried to square their ringing declaration that “All men are born and remain free and equal in rights” with the reality of a society constructed on very different principles, the legislators of the Constituent Assembly quickly found themselves confronted with the issue of race. France’s tropical colonies had a significant population of individuals who were legally free but of African descent, in whole or in part: were they now to enjoy the same rights as whites? The question posed by these *libres de couleur* was distinct from the issue of slavery, although certainly related to it, since the individuals concerned were wholly or partially the descendants of slaves. Laws and practices regarding them were ambiguous: the *Code noir* of 1685 had promised them the same rights as whites, but many subsequent edicts—not all of which were enforced—defined a second-class status for them. At the same time, however, the more prosperous members of the free colored group were themselves slaveowners, and the maintenance of the slave system in the colonies depended on militia forces largely composed of *libres de couleur*. The debate about the rights of the *libres de couleur* retraced in Florence Gauthier’s *L’aristocratie de l’épiderme* thus had profound implications for the interpretation of the revolutionaries’ doctrine of natural rights and for the French colonial system.

Although every inhabitant of the colonies was familiar with the issues raised by the existence of the *libres de couleur*, their status was ignored in metropolitan debates about colonial issues in 1788 and the early months of 1789. The Société des amis des noirs, founded in February 1788, occupied itself only with the questions of slavery and the slave trade. The issue of the *libres de couleur* surfaced when the newly created Constituent Assembly discussed whether to admit deputies from the colonies: Mirabeau, among others, objected that the delegation from Saint-Domingue seated on 4 July 1789 did not represent all the free people of the islands, since it was chosen by and made up only of whites. Unless they had lived in the colonies, however, most metropolitan Frenchmen probably had only a hazy notion of the role of those usually called “mulattoes” in colonial society. The small band of *libres de couleur* in the metropole was therefore driven to take action to put their case forward.

The campaign for rights for free men of color has been studied by a number of scholars, starting with Armand Brette in 1895 and continuing through more recent works by Gabriel Debien, Yvan Debbasch, Yves Bénot, and John Garrigus. [1] Gauthier’s account is longer than any of its predecessors, but not always as convincing or coherent. Determined to present the free people of color and especially their most prominent representative, Julien Raimond, as idealistic proponents of a universalistic definition of human rights, Gauthier minimizes or simply ignores the abundant evidence of their ambivalence on the subject of slavery. Equally convinced that the meaning of the doctrine of natural rights was and is self-evident, Gauthier fails to acknowledge that there were many possible readings of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and many controversies about how to implement its principles. Finally, Gauthier’s narrative of the campaign for free-colored rights is confusingly written; among other things, she cannot decide whether she is telling the story of a triumph, as her lengthy description of the furious debate of 12–15 May 1791, which resulted in a decree promising rights to *libres de couleur* whose

parents had been legally free, suggests, or of a defeat, as her briefer account of the Constituent Assembly's last-minute revocation of its earlier action on 24 September 1791 implies.

Like all previous historians of the free-colored movement during the Revolution, Gauthier finds herself focusing heavily on a single man: Julien Raimond, a wealthy free colored planter from the South Province of Saint-Domingue.<sup>[2]</sup> According to the epoch's racial terminology, Raimond was a *quarteron*: three of his four grandparents were white. Encouraged by royal officials in Saint-Domingue, some of whom saw the *libres de couleur* as more loyal to the mother country than the colony's whites, Raimond arrived in France in 1784 to lobby for improved status for his group. He submitted four lengthy *mémoires* to the minister responsible for the colonies, but by 1786, realizing that his campaign was going nowhere, he left Versailles for the provincial estate of his second wife. The revolutionary excitement of 1789 brought him back to the capital, where several other free men of color were attempting to put their cause in the public eye. (One might have hoped that Gauthier would go beyond earlier scholars in identifying these lesser-known figures, but she doesn't.) Rather than turning to the Société des amis des noirs for support, Raimond and the other free colored activists initially attempted to make an alliance with the white *colons*, arguing that they shared a common interest in maintaining slavery. Rebuffed by the colonists of the Club Massiac, some *libres de couleur* formed their own group in early September 1789 and demanded that "the Declaration of Rights decreed by the National Assembly be applied to them as well as to the whites."<sup>[3]</sup> It is significant that Raimond did not sign this document (which Gauthier does not mention), and he evidently did not subscribe to its radical program, which included the opening up of all occupations and offices to *libres de couleur*, the emancipation of all slaves having any white blood, and the immediate emancipation of any black woman made pregnant by a white, along with her children. Once Raimond's signature began to appear on the group's pamphlets, their content became much less provocative, stressing their role in defending the colonies and their right to representation in the National Assembly. The difference in tone between the group's first declarations and those to which Raimond subscribed underlines the difficulty in sustaining an argument like Gauthier's, in which the *libres de couleur* are presented as a unified group dedicated to a universal notion of human rights.

Raimond eventually found allies in the Société des amis des noirs, particularly its leader Brissot and the abbé Grégoire, who wrote several eloquent pamphlets defending the rights of the *libres de couleur*. Gauthier tries to separate Raimond and Grégoire, whose pamphlets occasionally veered from this issue to demand the abolition of slavery, from the other Amis des noirs, who were officially committed to a policy of gradual abolition of the institution, but this distinction is questionable. Although Gauthier insists that Raimond affirmed "la nécessité de détruire la société coloniale, esclavagiste et ségrégationniste," (127) Raimond himself was still writing publicly, in 1792, that "la politique doit assurément exiger que l'on conserve les colonies à la métropole; elle exige aussi que la culture des productions coloniales ne soient plus interrompues par les soulèvements des esclaves."<sup>[4]</sup> Even in private letters, he insisted that he was opposed to abolition: "On ne pouvoit guère supposer que je voulusse ruiner tout d'un coup toute ma famille qui possède entre elle 7 à 8 millions de biens à St. Domingue."<sup>[5]</sup> Raimond knew how to use anti-aristocratic arguments and the language of natural rights on behalf of his group, but Gauthier's attempt to elevate him to the status of an anti-colonialist human-rights crusader flies in the face of the evidence.

Gauthier retraces the series of debates about colonial issues that rocked that Constituent Assembly in March and October 1790 and May 1791. On all three occasions, the representatives of the white colonists and their supporters insisted vehemently that the Assembly had no right to interfere in the internal affairs of the colonies, and in particular to legislate about the "status of persons" there, a code phrase that covered both slavery and the status of the *libres de couleur*. In contrast to Yves Bénot, who argued that the success of the *libres de couleur* in diverting the energies of Brissot and his group from the slavery issue to their own cause weakened the campaign against slavery, Gauthier stresses the fact that these debates gradually drove the Jacobins to a more radical position on the race issue. When the club shouted down Charles Lameth, a pro-colonial member, on 13 May 1791, its action marked "une victoire

pour la côté gauche et un véritable tournant dans l'histoire de cette société." (299) While the Jacobin left embraced the principle of racial equality, its spokesmen could not stop the Constituent Assembly from explicitly decreeing that no legislation concerning slavery in the colonies would be passed without the white colonists' consent.

It was in the wake of that stinging defeat that the deputy Rewbell, otherwise known primarily for his violent hostility to the granting of rights to France's Jews, introduced a proposal to grant civil and political rights to those free men of color in the colonies who were the sons of free parents. There was complete disagreement about how many individuals would actually qualify for civic rights under this provision, which flew in the face of Raimond's longstanding demand that all *libres de couleur* be put on the same level, and Gauthier claims that the true supporters of their cause—Robespierre, Grégoire, and Pétion—voted against the Rewbell amendment. Its passage was nevertheless generally interpreted as a victory for the *libres de couleur* and as a statement that race, in and of itself, was not a barrier to French citizenship. In some of the French colonies—a point Gauthier fails to acknowledge—the whites were willing to accept this concession, but among the whites of Saint-Domingue, the most important of the country's possessions, the Rewbell amendment was met with explosive opposition. The Saint-Domingue colonists and their parliamentary allies waged a successful campaign to get the Constituent Assembly to repeal the measure, which it did on 24 September 1791.

In light of this reversal, one cannot disagree with Gauthier's conclusion that "la politique coloniale de l'Assemblée constituante se révèle profondément rétrograde, non seulement parce qu'elle viole les principes de la Déclaration des droits, mais également par rapport à la politique de la monarchie elle-même..." (336): Louis XVI's ministers had at least insisted that the national government, not the white colonists, would determine the rights of the *libres de couleur*. Nevertheless, the fact that this measure was passed by the same deputies who had drawn up the Declaration of Rights in 1789 and who granted rights to the Jews four days later indicates the difficulty of deciding whether the Constituent Assembly should be considered "for" or "against" the principle of natural rights. Furthermore, the reversal of 24 September 1791 was not the last word in the story: on 24 March 1792, the Legislative Assembly overturned its predecessor's decision and granted full rights to all *libres de couleur*, thus vindicating Raimond's faith that the revolutionaries would ultimately recognize the justice of his group's cause. (This decree is usually known as the law of 4 April 1792, the date on which Louis XVI sanctioned it; Gauthier incorrectly refers to it as the decree of 15 April 1792. (336)) By this time, however, the slave uprising in Saint-Domingue, which began on 22 August 1791 and became known in Paris at the end of October, had completely changed the context of the debate. Raimond continued to dream of a society in which a racially mixed elite of free men would gradually prepare the slaves for orderly emancipation,[6] but the black soldiers of Toussaint Louverture would finally create a very different society in France's former colony.

*L'aristocratie de l'épiderme* explores a topic that is vital to an understanding of the French Revolution's confrontation with race and slavery, and highlights the actions of a complex figure—Julien Raimond—whose thought cries out for a serious and well-documented study. It is unfortunate that Florence Gauthier's determination to force the French Revolution into the mold of a movement for "la conquête de droits communs à l'humanité toute entière," (18) and to dismiss as counter-revolutionaries all those who failed to adopt this view, together with her insistence on presenting Julien Raimond as an advocate of this position, have prevented her from accurately explaining the significance of the debates about the rights of the *libres de couleur* and of Raimond's activities. A more even-handed account of the campaign for rights for free people of color during the early years of the Revolution would remind us that in France, as elsewhere in history, notions of human rights have emerged out complicated debates, and that the defenders of particular minority groups have not always been proponents of universal equality.

## NOTES

[1] Armand Brette, "Les gens de couleur libres et leurs députés en 1789," *Révolution française* 29 (Jul.-Déc. 1895), 326-45, 385-407; Gabriel Debien, *Gens de couleur libres et colons de Saint-Domingue devant la Constituante (1789-mars 1790)* (Montréal: Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française, 1951); Yvan Debbasch, *Couleur et liberté. Le jeu du critère ethnique dans un ordre juridique esclavagiste. T. 1: L'affranchi dans les possessions françaises de la Caraïbe (1635-1833)* (Paris: Dalloz, 1967); Yves Bénot, *La Révolution française et la fin des colonies 1789-1794* (Paris: La Découverte, 1987); John Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[2] For a straightforward account of Raimond's activities during the Revolution, see John D. Garrigus, "Opportunist or Patriot? Julien Raimond (1744-1801) and the Haitian Revolution," *Slavery and Abolition* 28 (2007), 1-21.

[3] *Cahier, contenant les plaintes, doléances & réclamations des Citoyens-libres et propriétaires de Couleur, des Isles et Colonies Françaises* (N. p., n.d.), 1-2. This document, not mentioned in Gauthier's bibliography, was drawn up in September 1789. A copy is in the John Carter Brown Library, call number E 771 / L651d, v. 1.

[4] Julien Raimond, *Véritable origine des troubles de S.-Domingue, et des différentes causes qui les ont produits* (Paris: Desenne, Bailly, and Patriote français, 1792), 1-2.

[5] Raimond to unknown correspondent, 18 June 1792, in Archives nationales, D XXV 13, d. 127. The letter was later published in his *Lettres de J. Raimond, à ses frères les hommes de couleur. Et comparaison des originaux de sa correspondance, avec les extraits perfides qu'en ont fait MM. Page et Brulley, dans un libelle intitulé: Développement des causes, des troubles, et des désastres des Colonies françaises* (Paris: Cercle social, an 2 de la république française), 76, under the date of 30 May 1792.

[6] He outlined his plan in his *Réflexions sur les véritables causes des troubles et des désastres de nos colonies, notamment sur ceux de Saint-Domingue; avec les moyens à employer pour préserver cette colonie d'une ruine totale; adressés à la Convention nationale; par Julien Raymond, colon de Saint-Domingue* (Paris, n.p., 1793), a pamphlet published at the beginning of 1793.

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