The “Trap” of Representation:
Sovereignty, Slavery and the Road
to the Haitian Revolution

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As Montesquieu has quite rightly observed, each climate must have its particular laws, and what is good in Europe is worth nothing in Asia. One of the mistakes of our deputies was to have asked to be assimilated to the provinces of France. A trap was set for them in the National Assembly by treating of the rights of man in general.

— Gaspard Alexis de la Barre, colonist of Saint-Domingue, to his wife in France (November 30, 1789)¹

The decision of the planters of Saint-Domingue to seek representation in the Estates General of France was the crucial turning point in the road to the Haitian Revolution—or so thought one of them, Gaspard Alexis de la Barre. Even though he could hardly have known where that road would ultimately lead, his reference to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of August 26, 1789 suggests cognizance that a fundamental breach

¹ Cited in Gabriel Debien, Un Colon sur sa plantation (Dakar, 1959), p. 130.
with the existing colonial order had taken place. Representation was a “trap” the colonists had set for themselves. Two months later de la Barre repeated in another letter to his wife his conviction that the planters’ dilemmas were self-inflicted, the result of the decision to request “assimilation” to the metropole. “It is indeed the fault of the colonies. Why did they canvass for assimilation to the provinces of France and for having deputies in the Estates General?”

This essay develops the idea that the problem of representation effected a critical change in the relationship between Saint-Domingue and France, and that the colonists were themselves responsible for introducing this change. To say as much is not to say that the Haitian Revolution was “caused” in any measurable way by admission of the colony’s deputies to the Estates General in the summer of 1789 or by any other single event or factor. Historical causation is simply far more complicated and ambiguous than such assertions would allow. But we have yet to understand the full range of ironies and unintended consequences that were involved in the overthrow of slavery in Saint Domingue. Many of those ironies and consequences were a function of continuities between the Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution. In this Tocquevillean spirit, the essay argues that representation introduced a variation of the same competition between rival forms of sovereignty that had characterized Saint-Domingue’s eighteenth-century history, a competition driven by the debate over the legitimacy of racial discrimination and slavery.

A shorthand version of that rivalry would look as follows. On the one hand, some legislators and commentators in the metropole favored a monistic or assimilationist form of sovereignty that would subject Saint-Domingue and its “interior regime” to the will of a unitary nation. This assimilationist vision was always tightly correlated in the colonists’ minds with efforts to abolish slavery and with the disenfranchisement of gens de couleur (free persons of color). On the other hand, the colonists responded with their own creole form of “interior” or “particularistic” sovereignty.

2. Ibid., p. 147.

3. For the argument that the Haitian Revolution was driven essentially by local slave resistance, and by the practice of marronage specifically, see Carolyn E. Fick, The Making of Haiti: The Saint-Domingue Revolution from Below (Knoxville, 1990), pp. 1-10. See also Michel Rolph-Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston, 1995), who is less concerned than Fick’s book with untangling chains of causation.

4. For the idea of “revolutionary monism” see Pierre Rosanvallon, La Démocratie inachevée: histoire de la souveraineté du peuple en France (Paris, 2000), pp. 65, 70. In a discussion of the Terror, Rosanvallon writes that “the difficulty of thinking about sovereignty in a complex and plural manner is also rooted in what seems an insurmountable revolutionary monism” (65).
They linked this notion of an autonomous or “interior regime” to the argument that slavery was a system of domestic proprietorship beyond the purview of metropolitan oversight. Any attempt to interfere with that system, in their view, would upset the balance of power that held together the French empire.5

Paralleling the debate between competing forms of sovereignty, in other words, there unfolded a debate over who had the power to decide the fate of slaves and free persons of color in Saint-Domingue. These related debates were driven sometimes by events in the metropole, sometimes by those in the colonies, and at all times by each side’s picture of the relationship between the two. In the course of those debates we can observe not only the progression of events that would constitute the Haitian “prerevolution,” but also the crystallization of a basic tension between assimilation and local autonomy that became fundamental to French colonial policy in the postrevolutionary era.6 As will be clear, what follows does not purport to provide even a partial interpretation or account of the Haitian Revolution itself, but only of the events from 1789 to 1791 that preceded and helped to prepare the way for the revolt.7

The Debate over Colonial Representation: The Question of Admission

The colonists quickly came to identify the ideology of assimilation with the threat of abolition. But if colonial representation in metropolitan assemblies was the basic institutional precondition of that threat, then de la Barre was indeed correct to say that assimilation was originally the work of the planters themselves. What explains this paradox? Perhaps, one might argue, in the early summer of 1789 the colonists simply could not

5. It is no accident that very similar competition informed the constitutional struggles over “federalism” and North-South relations in the antebellum and Civil War United States.
have anticipated the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen would issue from the National Assembly. More specifically, they could not have anticipated that antislavery voices in the metropole would seek to apply such a declaration beyond the metropole. There is something to be said for this theory, insofar as it helps to check the teleological tendency to read subsequent developments in Haiti’s history back into the beginnings of the revolutionary period. It is also important to remember that not all later developments pushed in the direction of the abolitionist agenda. With respect to Saint-Domingue, the revolution swung back and forth between moments of proslavery and antislavery intervention.

A second and more convincing possible explanation runs directly counter to the first, emphasizing that the colonists, even as early as the summer of 1789, were all too aware of the radical changes the revolution might introduce into metropolitan-colonial relations. Given their fears that abolitionists would induce the French government to take decisive action against slavery, the colonists realized they could better defend their interests by having representatives on the legislative scene in Paris.

A third possible explanation, related to but also distinct from the second, is that the colonists demanded representation in the metropole in order to air their own grievances against the existing economic and political order. The two principal objects of protest concerned the metropole’s longstanding policy of mercantilist restrictions (despite their having been “mitigated” in 1784) and the “ministerial despotism” of the monarchy’s colonial administrators.8 This interpretation has the advantage of exposing the unintended consequences of the colonists’ decision to seek representation.

A fourth and final explanation would emphasize that the colonists genuinely prized their relationship to the metropole for the security it afforded.9 The planters therefore found it necessary to defend in Paris a definition of the nation that transcended the physical and political division between colony and metropole. Despite this vision of a broader transatlantic national community, however, the push toward assimilation was also moderated by an all-too-familiar rhetoric about the local

8. This was a colonial variation on the critique of “despotism” in France that followed the Maupeou revolution of 1770-71 and lasted until the end of the Old Regime.

particularity of Saint-Domingue.\textsuperscript{10} In their approach to the question of representation, the colonists embodied this tension between assimilationist and localist principles. That tension helps to explain the paradox of why the colonists placed their bets on a strategy that quickly turned against them.

We can see evidence for all four of these explanations, albeit at different moments and to differing degrees, in the debate over colonial representation during the summer of 1789. This debate began in earnest on June 8 when a delegation of ten deputies from Saint-Domingue, led by the marquis de Gouy d'Arisy, appeared at the doorstep of the Estates General in Versailles and requested admission.\textsuperscript{11} According to one source, the deputies entered the assembly, attempting to take a place in the Third Estate. But members of the latter responded by accusing the colonial deputies of having declared in a petition to the King that they belonged to the nobility.\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, the enthusiasm of the Saint-Domingue deputies for the company of the Third Estate appears to have been minimal: only after being rejected by the Second Estate did they seek to assert their membership in the Third.\textsuperscript{13}

Lacking a welcome from their metropolitan counterparts, the colonial deputies found it necessary to deliver what amounted to a self-reception speech. The desire to demonstrate the legitimacy of their claim to representation was apparent from the opening reference to Saint-Domingue as “one of the greatest provinces of the empire, one of the most powerful, [and] without doubt the most productive.” The colonies formed part of a “family” that could not be considered “complete” until the deputies from the Caribbean were properly seated in the Estates General. Here was the idea of assimilation in a nutshell, issuing from the mouths of the colonial deputies themselves. But the speech then took a somewhat different direction: of all the islands that had served to “extend” the “territory of France” over the high seas since the last Estates General in


\textsuperscript{11} Most but not all of these deputies were also founding members of an organization of absentee planters residing in Paris known as the Comité des Colons de Saint-Domingue, which had been formed in July 1788.


1614, only Corsica had the good fortune to be admitted “into the sanctuary of the patrie.” The reference to Corsica was a swipe at those who wished to deny representation to the Caribbean colonies while granting it to an island that failed to compare by any measure of economic or political influence. Of these colonies, Saint-Domingue was clearly the “capital,” the one most deserving of a voice in “the sovereign tribunal of the empire.” “Never conquered, never acquired, hitherto independent, voluntarily French,” Saint-Domingue now wished to “reclaim the honorable exercise of an imprescriptible right to which the honor and felicity of its inhabitants is attached.”

The speech then returned to the theme of the colony’s “Frenchness” with an incongruous description of its 6,000 plantations “that are as so many villages” and its 40,000 white residents “who set going a million African arms.” The allusion to plantations as “villages” may have revealed more than the planters desired, but it went hand in hand with the description of Saint-Domingue as a “hitherto independent” entity. Its autonomous character had been threatened by the ministerial despotism of the royal governor and intendant, whose “immediate empire of abuse and of arbitrary power” served both to offend the King and “oppress” the planters. The speech then closed with a reference to the “noble and fraternal request” for representation the colonists had charged their deputies to present to the assembly, a request that, if granted, would “secure forever the indissoluble ties that, for the welfare of the empire, must intimately unite the colonies and the metropole.” The ten deputies signed their address as “your brothers, your children.”

Some idea of the broader political context for this proclamation can be gained from an anonymous pamphlet dealing with the problem of colonial representation from a perspective sympathetic to the planters. Aux colonies de Saint-Domingue, despite its title, was directed more at metropolitan critics of slavery than the colonists themselves. It suggested, for example, that the colonial deputies’ primary concerns were the calls for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade found in certain metropolitan
The pamphleteer, in turn, employed a line of rhetoric about the particularity of Saint-Domingue that would grow more familiar during the debate over colonial representation. The demand for abolition, he wrote, reflected all the “errors, injustices and disastrous consequences” that result from failing to appreciate the “absolutely different” lifestyle of creole society. If the assembly were to change the constitution of the Caribbean colonies “in that which interests them most essentially, namely the maintenance of negro slavery,” then it would destroy those colonies.

The colonial deputies were clearly motivated to assert their “right” of representation by the possibility that the metropolitan assembly would decide the fate of Caribbean slavery. But if the prospect of abolition was enough to draw the colonial deputies to Versailles, other obstacles had to be overcome before the marquis and his colleagues could begin the actual work of lobbying in order to generate sympathy for the colonial cause. One obstacle consisted of allegations that Louis XVI had decided to exclude the colonies from representation. On June 12, four days after delivering their supplication to the Estates General, the Saint-Domingue deputies published a curious pamphlet containing a letter they had sent to the editors of the Journal de Paris. The letter began by protesting the newspaper’s decision to publicize rumors about the purported exclusion in reliance upon what the deputies described as forged correspondence from the governor and intendant of Saint-Domingue. In fact, the deputies argued, in convening the Estates General the King had implicitly extended an invitation to “all the subjects of his obedience.” It was no accident, they continued, that the efforts of the Journal de Paris occurred at the moment when the colonists’ “properties” and “interests” were being threatened by proposals of abolitionists and their political allies in Versailles.

In their pamphlet the deputies accused the editors of refusing to publish their letter. This, they explained, “opened [their] eyes” to the fact that the journalists were acting under the orders of the despised Naval Minister César-Henri de la Luzerne and his collaborators (“the ministerial ascendancy,” as the deputies put it). “We recognized the finger of despotism that wanted in vain to distance us from the road that leads us to the Nation,” they wrote. The deputies then concluded that the “forged” correspondence alleging that Louis XVI intended to exclude the colonies


21. That relatively few *cahiers de doléances* contained abolitionist proposals was not, apparently, a source of reassurance: Tarrade, “Les colonies et les principes de 1789,” p. 18.
from the Estates General was in fact all too authentic, not because the King had issued the arrêt in question, but because the governor and intendant had tried to portray him as having done so.22

The pamphlet also included a copy of a document addressed by the provincial committee of the northern district of Saint-Domingue to its counterparts in the western and southern departments.23 It described the administrators' letter as a “tissue of impostures” developed in concert between Naval Minister La Luzerne and his crony administrators in the colony. Moreover, it argued the neither the king, his ministers, nor even the Assembly of Notables could decide whether the colonies were an “integral part of the Monarchy.” Rather, that privilege belonged solely to the “ASSEMBLY OF THE NATION.” Even assuming that the prerogative of the Estates General to decide on the matter of colonial representation was “under question,” the committee’s letter continued, that was all the more reason for the colonies to have deputies in Versailles to guard over “the place that we must occupy in the great general assembly of the nation.” By way of a parting shot at La Luzerne, the committee blamed the “deluge” of abolitionist pamphlets and journal articles on the minister’s “hatred” of the colonists.24

This mix of arguments pointed to the underlying anxieties of the colonists in the face of the question of representation, anxieties fed by fears of abolitionist influence over the Estates General and the royal administration. Five days after the colonial deputies published their pamphlet on the Journal de Paris controversy, however, the Third Estate proclaimed itself the National Assembly. After the Tennis Court Oath of June 17 the conflict between assimilation and “interiority,”25 and the related debate over the implications of Saint-Domingue’s status as a “province,” would be waged within a new context of politics and institutions.

22. Lettre des députés de Saint-Domingue, à messieurs les rédacteurs du Journal de Paris (N.p., [1789]), pp. 5, 7-8

23. Saint-Domingue was divided into these three provinces for administrative purposes under the Old Regime.

24. Ibid., pp. 9-12. Emphasis in the original.

25. Neither the term “interiority” nor the word “representation” should be read to imply the idea of “subjectivity” in poststructuralist thought. “Interiority” was clearly a euphemism for slavery and a synonym for the domestic sphere, and I understand the term representation in its legal and institutional senses to refer to the theory and practice of delegating individuals to act for a larger group.
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The Debate over Representation: The Question of Numbers

Among the signatories to the procès-verbal of the Tennis Court Oath were the ten deputies from Saint-Domingue who, only a little more than a week before, had appeared at the doorstep of the Estates General requesting admission. By June 17 it had become clear that neither of the first two estates was inclined to consider admitting a group of Caribbean slaveholders into its midst. Moreover, even the members of the Third, for all of their desperation to gain support and legitimacy, harbored reservations about the propriety of admitting those who had previously asserted their solidarity with the nobility and turned to the Third Estate as a matter of last resort. Given the situation, the colonial deputies' decision to sign the Tennis Court Oath on June 20 would have been as much a tactical maneuver as a vote of confidence in the agenda of the Third Estate. But whatever advantage the signatures may have earned from metropolitan delegates, they did not clear away all the obstacles that lay in the path of colonial representation.

Gabriel Debien has argued that June 20, 1789 marks the moment at which Saint-Domingue officially requested to be "assimilated." Unfortunately for Gouy d'Arsy and his colleagues the question of representation did not depend upon the colonists alone. The assimilation of Saint-Domingue to the metropole occurred in the context of a debate between delegates from the Caribbean and those from the metropole. In a strict sense this debate over representation unfolded in the meetings of the National Assembly between June 27 and July 7, but in a broader sense it lasted throughout the entire revolutionary period.

On June 27 the reporter of the National Assembly's committee responsible for verifying the credentials of deputies presented his findings relative to the delegation from Saint-Domingue. He began by stating that the delegation's legitimacy involved two distinct matters. The first concerned whether the delegation should be admitted. If the answer was yes, a second question followed: how many deputies should the colony be allowed? At this point the Assembly's president intervened to call for a debate and vote on the first question, which was answered by a unanimous, affirmative vote. With the monarchy no longer in charge of designating delegations and with the first two estates effectively shunted

26. Debien, Un Colon sur sa plantation, p. 130.
27. The "desperation" is noted by Davis, The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, p. 109. For the objections of some members of the Third, see Creuze-Latouche, Journal des Etats généraux, p. 75 at note 2.
aside in the aftermath of the Tennis Court Oath, this brought to an end the confusion over the problem of admission per se. While the unanimity of the vote suggests the Assembly was eager to claim sovereignty over the Caribbean colonies in the name of its right to speak for the nation, it also masked the lack of consensus over the second question, that of numbers.  

Saint-Domingue had originally nominated no less than thirty-seven deputies to the Estates General and sent twenty to France, ten of which had taken an active role in the petition and controversies of early June. In his presentation to the Assembly the reporter for the credentials committee observed that the second question “admitted of more difficulties” than the first because the committee deadlocked on whether to reduce the delegation’s size to twelve or accept it as it was. Gouy d’Arsy then requested the floor to defend the planters from the suspicion they hoped to exert a disproportionate influence over national proceedings. For those on the committee who worried that seating as many as twenty deputies from Saint-Domingue would embolden other colonies to seek large delegations and thereby flood the assembly with Caribbean planters, Gouy d’Arsy responded along the lines of his deputation’s address of June 8 to the Estates General: Saint-Domingue was an exceptional case, far more populous and wealthy than all the other colonies combined. At most, the Assembly would have to accept a total of forty colonial deputies. Even more significant than these calculations, however, was Gouy d’Arsy’s underlying assumption that representation should be based on a combination of population, wealth, and overall contribution to the economic welfare of the nation.

It was the element of population that caught the attention of a deputy from Brittany named Jean-Denis Lanjuinais, whose mandate, he noted, charged him to “raise up his voice against the slavery of the negroes.” Until the time was ripe for “humanity and politics . . . to pronounce” on the fate of the slaves, Lanjuinais observed, Saint-Domingue should only be allowed to count its 40,000 white residents in determining representation. To allow the colonists to factor in their 450,000 slaves when everyone knew they “cannot be represented by their masters” was flagrantly contradictory. The point of his critique was, of course, not simply to underline the fallacy in Gouy d’Arsy’s argument, but to draw attention to a disenfranchisement far more egregious than the one colonial deputies were seeking to prevent.

30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
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These comments made clear that the debate over colonial representation would not proceed without raising questions about the propriety of slavery. In fact, some of the more astute critics of slavery seem to have understood that representation could be used as a bargaining chip in the campaign to end black servitude in the Caribbean. Thus a deputy from Provence named Boucher took the floor after Lanjuinais to propose a quid pro quo informed by the principle of colonial assimilation to the metropole. He suggested that the terms “provinces, islands or possessions” of France be substituted for that of colony, with the colonists allowed “in the manner of the French” (“comme les Français”) to participate in the National Assembly. Moreover, the Assembly ought to take seriously colonial complaints about the conduct of royal administrators as well as grievances over mercantilist restrictions and taxation. But Boucher also suggested that the “Franco-Americans” be “invited” to supply proposals “on the freedom of the negroes and on the means of ameliorating their condition.”

This suggestion emboldened other metropolitan deputies to declare that they, too, had been charged by their cahiers to act on behalf of slaves in the Caribbean. Before too long no less an authority than Mirabeau raised a question that added to the colonial deputies’ troubles. Why should Saint-Domingue be allowed to use a different calculus of representation than the one used by “all the provinces of France?” If trade and wealth are to be counted, should not the commercial centers of the metropole be allowed to send deputies in proportion to the “millions” that they too put into circulation? With good reason domestic provinces would protest against such an arbitrary distinction and demand an increase in the size of their delegations. Mirabeau then proceeded to criticize the population factor used by the colonists in terms analogous to the argument of Lanjuinais. Where the latter had insisted it was hypocritical to count the slaves while denying them representation, Mirabeau pointed to the hypocrisy of factoring in roughly 30,000 gens de couleur, whom the planters treated as so many “beasts of burden” (bêtes de somme). Despite the fact that some of these gens de couleur were free citizens, none could vote in the local elections that decided the colony’s slate of deputies. The “residents of the

32. Ibid., pp. 68-69.

33. Ibid., p. 92. The parallels between Mirabeau’s argument and the claims of northern delegates to the American Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia two years before are noted in Davis, The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, pp. 106-112. In 1787 Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts and William Paterson of New Jersey questioned why the southern states should be allowed to factor slaves into their quotas of representation when northern chattel property (in the form of cattle) was excluded.
continent," he retorted, failed to understand the conditions of life in the colonies. It was not from "ambition" that the colonists felt justified in seating twenty deputies, but rather out of a conviction that "Saint-Domingue must not be compared to the provinces of the kingdom."34

On July 4 the deputy Lepeletier de Saint-Fargeau offered what proved to be the final proposal on the vexed question of numbers. Arguing that "we must regard Saint-Domingue as a province of France," he observed that population offered a more certain basis for counting than land. In an apparent attempt at compromise, Saint-Fargeau suggested that the figure of 100,000 offered the best measurement of the colony's population, thereby implying that both whites and free persons of color (but not slaves) ought to be treated as "citizens." Even better than population, however, was the criterion of wealth. Saint-Fargeau noted that Saint-Domingue was not the only jurisdiction requesting the right to count its wealth and contribution to the national economy in determining the size of its deputation. One had only to consider the conspicuous case of Paris.35

Through a series of proposals and counterproposals, then, the principle of assimilation to the metropole (and its corollary, the idea of the colonial province) was used to pare down the Saint-Domingue delegation to a size more amenable to the Assembly majority. In substantial accordance with Saint-Fargeau's proposal, the Assembly voted to grant Saint-Domingue six deputies, two each for the colony's provinces, and to allow the remaining twelve members of the deputation to observe Assembly proceedings without either a deliberative or consultative voice. This latter provision was explicitly modeled on the status of "substitute deputies of the provinces of France." Three days later the Saint-Domingue delegation fell into line and submitted the names of six deputies and twelve observers. Among the six was the marquis de Gouy d'Arsy, serving as a representative of the western province.36 With that the debate in the National Assembly over the size of Saint-Domingue's deputation came to a close. But the broader debate over the implications of colonial representation in the metropole, for both Saint-Domingue and France alike, had only begun.

34. Journal des débats, pp. 93-94.
35. Ibid., pp. 96-97.
36. Ibid., pp. 98, 121-122. The Assembly later added deputies for Martinique and Guadeloupe.
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The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen

If Gouy d’Arsy and his colleagues worried about whether their small delegation in the National Assembly could protect Saint-Domingue from abolitionist legislation, their anxieties were somewhat misplaced. Despite the vehemence of the debate over numbers at the end of June and the beginning of July, that debate remained secondary to the more fundamental question of whether a colonial delegation belonged in the Assembly at all. Once the line of representation in the revolutionary metropole had been crossed, there would be no going back. Arguments over which calculus to use unfolded in the shadow of this underlying reality; they reflected only the surface of competing visions of the consequences of colonial representation.

Of these, none was more important than the belief that representation gave the National Assembly the power to legislate over the colonies. Whether they numbered twenty or six, the colonial deputies were destined to be a minority in any legislative debate over the future of slavery and racial discrimination in the Caribbean. Even the colonists knew this. A group of planters residing in the metropole in the summer of 1789 organized a lobbying organization under the name of the Société correspondante des Colons, soon to be known as the Club Massiac.37 Created as a rival to Gouy d’Arsy’s Comité des Colons de Saint-Domingue (the name of the “official” delegation to the National Assembly), the Société correspondante advocated that only local assemblies in Saint-Domingue should make decisions affecting the colony.38 Membership in the National Assembly, from this perspective, was incompatible with the principle of colonial self-determination, and no amount of talk about the sacredness of local customs or the special role of Saint-Domingue in the French economy was going to change the situation.

The Paris-based members of the Société correspondante had company in their belief that Gouy d’Arsy and his colleagues were working to establish the principal of metropolitan sovereignty over the colony. This was also the view of planters observing events from the ground in Saint-Domingue. For Gaspard Alexis de la Barre, representation implied “assimilation,” and assimilation meant Saint-Domingue would have the

37. The Club was named after its meeting place, the Hôtel Massiac, where the marquis de Massiac resided. He was an absentee owner of plantations in all three parts of Saint-Domingue.

same constitutional relationship to the center as any metropolitan “province.” If that condition implied a considerable degree of autonomy, it also involved acknowledging a province’s subordinate status within the nation of which it formed a part. For de la Barre, the legal fact of subordination mattered more than the implication of autonomy.

In the meantime, a significant event had intervened. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, promulgated on August 26, changed the stakes of the conflict between metropolitan and colonial authority, significantly raising the level of planter anxiety. The problem was not that the National Assembly was about to take action against slavery. But several such proposals were circulating in Paris, thanks to the efforts of the Société des Amis des Noirs. The combined effect of these proposals and the abstract language of the Declaration, which proclaimed in Article 1 that “men are born and remain free and equal in rights,” made the planters aware that representation was a kind of Pandora’s box for the colonies.39

Thus de la Barre noted in his letter of November 30 that “[t]he pretentions to the equality of men in France have put fire to the heads of some mulattos.” That the news of August 26 had reached the Caribbean by November 30 is also apparent from his observation that the National Assembly had set a “trap” for the colonial deputies “by treating of the rights of man in general.” For de la Barre, the Declaration was a veiled threat meant to mask the National Assembly’s unmistakable designs on the institution of Caribbean slavery. In a January 25, 1790 letter to his wife, he again confessed anxiety about the changed political climate in Paris:

The admission of mulattos to the National Assembly has caused a lot of commotion. We hold to prejudices here that are unknown in France. It is ridiculous to want to dictate laws to a land (pays) whose regime, culture and even population do not resemble those of [the metropole].

After blaming the colonies again for the self-inflicted woe of “assimilation,” de la Barre noted:

I believe that at the present time we [colonists] are repenting of this move, and preparing to resist (repousser) the decrees of [the National Assembly]. France is not at the moment in a state to

39. “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen” in Lynn Hunt, ed. and trans., The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History (Boston, 1996), p. 78. It should be noted that Article 1 also provided that “social distinctions may be based only on common utility.”
oppose us with anything other than arguments and ordinances that will be poorly received. It is difficult to tell how this will finish.\textsuperscript{40}

De la Barre understood the problems that metropolitan legislators would face in trying to impose their will on an extremely wealthy colony located across a vast ocean. Colonial autonomy meant something real in practice even if threatened in principle by the seating of colonial deputies in the National Assembly. But abstract concepts, precisely because of their abstractness, had the potential to incite “trouble” in Saint-Domingue in the foreseeable future. The double-edged nature of assimilation had made itself clearly felt.

\textbf{Saint-Domingue and the French Constitution (The Principle of “Interiority”)}

When the National Assembly began debating the content and format of a declaration of rights in early August, no consensus existed among the deputies as to whether the document would stand on its own or form part of a written constitution.\textsuperscript{41} After the Declaration’s promulgation on August 26, attention turned to the task of preparing a constitution, a task finally completed in 1791. During this period discussions about the relationship between Saint-Domingue and the metropole necessarily unfolded within the context of the general debate about the nature of the French constitution.

By 1791 the question of assimilation had become more threatening for the colonial deputies and their constituents. In response to the combined impact of the Declaration of 1789 and increasingly vocal criticisms from the Société des Amis des Noirs, the planters mounted an aggressive campaign for Saint-Domingue’s autonomy in matters concerning the colony’s internal or “interior” regime.\textsuperscript{42} As it happens, the argument for colonial “interiority”

\textsuperscript{40} Debien, \textit{Un Colon sur sa plantation}, p. 147.


\textsuperscript{42} The distinction between internal and external legislation produced by this campaign drew directly from the rhetoric of local custom so central to colonial legal thought since the end of the Seven Years’ War. Here too, questions of sovereignty and assimilation interacted with specific developments in the debate over slavery to produce an understanding that Saint-Domingue, while retaining the characteristics of a province, would remain exempt from some of the most radical aspects of France’s emerging constitutional culture. On this distinction, and for a comparison of its French colonial and British North American versions, see Anthony
did not emanate solely from the colonists. In fact, its foundational expression came in the form of a speech to the National Assembly by Antoine Pierre Barnave, a lawyer from Grenoble with no apparent personal stake in the survival of slavery. Barnave served as spokesman of the Assembly’s Colonial Committee, whose members regarded the maintenance of France’s lucrative empire in the Caribbean as their overriding goal. In a lengthy March 8, 1790 speech to the deputies on behalf of the Committee, Barnave advocated exempting Saint-Domingue and the other colonies from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. The National Assembly, he argued, needed to disavow the “false extension that has been given [to some of its decrees].”

To this end Barnave proposed a decree stating that the Assembly considered the colonies “part of the French empire” and, as such, fully entitled to “enjoy the fruits of the happy regeneration that has been accomplished in the empire.” This much of the decree was a nod in the direction of the principles of assimilation and national unity. But for all that, the proposal continued, the Assembly

never intended to include [the colonies] in the constitution that it has decreed for the kingdom or to subject them to laws which might be incompatible with their particular, local proprieties.

This part of the decree spoke directly to the advocates of colonial interiority and autonomy. Another part proposed that the Assembly “never intended to introduce innovations into any of the branches of direct or indirect commerce between France and its colonies,” a euphemistic way of promising that the slave trade would continue undisturbed. Finally, in order to address immediate planter concerns, the decree provided that the colonists “and their properties” be placed “under the special protection of


44. Speech of Antoine Barnave to the National Assembly, 8 March 1790 in M. E. Laurent and M. J. Davidal, eds., Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860 (Paris, 1881) [hereafter Archives parlementaires], 12:71-72. I cite here the accurate but partial translation of this speech in Hunt, The French Revolution and Human Rights, pp. 109, 111.
the nation” and that anyone who excited “uprisings against them” would be judged a “criminal toward the nation.”

In a set of instructions dated March 28 and designed to accompany these broad statements of policy, the Colonial Committee set forth procedures to be followed in the election of new colonial assemblies in Saint-Domingue. Parisian representatives of the colony’s gens de couleur community had presented the Assembly with petitions calling upon it to grant free blacks and mulattos the same rights of “active citizenship” enjoyed by white residents. Barnave sought to avoid controversy on this point by leaving open the question of which “free persons” exactly would be entitled to vote in local elections.

Barnave’s decree was enthusiastically approved the same day it was presented to the National Assembly. From March 8 onward debate over the constitutional relationship between Saint-Domingue and France consisted of a series of elaborations on and responses to the framework established by the Colonial Committee. This framework proved to be popular among planters and their allies in Paris since it drew upon traditions of customary legal thought that animated creole political circles and emphasized local authority.

A good example of this style of thought was the 1790 cahier de doléances addressed to the National Assembly by the parish of Gonaïves, a coastal town located at the boundary between the colony’s northern and western departments. The cahier opened with a deceptively patriotic invocation of Saint-Domingue’s “Frenchness”:

If we are Frenchmen, we must adopt the French constitution and laws, have colonial Estates just as France will have provincial Estates: we must in all respects follow the order, the regime that will have been established for the other provinces of the Kingdom.

That the essential purpose of local representative institutions was to safeguard provincial privileges from the threat of administrative


47. Archives parlementaires, 12:73. The majority of deputies to the National Assembly drew their reasoning from Montesquieu’s understanding of the relationship between law and climate when it came to pronouncing on the status of slaves and gens de couleur in the colonies. Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, Les Citoyennetés en Révolution (1789-1794) (Paris, 1992), pp. 198-201.
centralization was left unsaid in this statement of assimilationist loyalty. Yet, those same institutions were made responsible for qualifying the colony as recognizably “French.” The Gonaïves cahier developed this paradox in the direction of local self-government by noting that the “organization of France” was “a little different” from that of the colony. Hence, Saint-Domingue had a right to regulate its particular “organization” while straying as little as possible from the principles consecrated by the nation. “We must maintain the colony’s right to assert itself,” the cahier read. “Though reunited to the State, it nonetheless forms thereof a separate body (un corps séparé).” Accordingly, article 3 of the cahier stated that whereas Saint-Domingue would partake of the “general constitution” and would “submit” to its “spirit,” it would also reserve the power to derogate from that constitution in order to “accommodate” its “manners, customs and position.”

On May 28, 1790 the General Assembly of Saint-Marc, consisting of representatives from the colony’s western and southern provinces, joined the discussion. It did so by issuing a decree on the “constitutional bases (bases constitutionnelles) of Saint-Domingue.” The bases took as their point of departure a putative contradiction between two principles in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. According to this line of thinking, Article 17 of the Declaration, which defined property as “an inviolable and sacred right,” and was therefore protective of slave owners, could not be trumped by Article 1 with its affirmation of equality. In the ensuing controversy the Saint-Marc Assembly in June asserted that the bases constitutionnelles were consistent with the spirit of the National Assembly’s decision on March 8 to exempt Saint-Domingue from provisions of the French “constitution” incompatible with the colony’s “particular, local proprieties.” After rehearsing the familiar creole refrain about the need to base laws and constitutions on an understanding of local climate, manners and customs, the Saint-Marc Assembly congratulated the National Assembly for disavowing any intention of “subjecting” the colonies to laws “incompatible with their local and particular” situation. As for the problem posed by Article 1 of the Declaration, it was simply brushed aside.


49. Décret de l’Assemblée Générale de la partie Françoise de Saint-Domingue, rendu à l’unanimité, en sa séance du 28 Mai 1790 (N.p., 1790); Blackburn, The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, p. 183. The Saint-Marc Assembly had come into being in February as a rival to the more moderate assembly of planter representatives in the northern department of the colony.

Free blacks and mulattos, according to the assembly, were “incapable of being equal to whites,” and slaves, for their part, were “not and cannot be free.”

**Conclusion: The Coming of the Haitian Revolution**

The argument of colonial “interiority” did not go unchallenged by some of those most directly prejudiced by it. On August 1, 1790, three days after the National Assembly finally received the text of the *bases constitutionnelles*, but with its verdict still pending, a group of *gens de couleur* residing in Paris submitted a petition to the legislators. As noted, in their instructions for the local elections in Saint-Domingue, Barnave and the Colonial Committee left open the question of whether free blacks and mulattos were to be considered “citizens” and hence enfranchised. Fearful that the *bases constitutionnelles* would be used to resolve this ambiguity against them, the *gens de couleur* underscored that the March 8 decree and ensuing March 28 instructions had been clear that free blacks and mulattos were “part of the *Conseil général*” (general assembly) of Saint-Domingue. Even though the National Assembly had intended to erase “all distinctions between the *free* colonists,” the petition continued, “our brothers had been systematically turned away from the ballot boxes for both local and general assembly elections”:

> We have thus had no part in the declaration that has just been addressed to you, and if the white colonists feel an invincible repugnance to mixing with us, we are all the less anxious to join them in committing acts of insubordination and in fighting against the legitimate authorities.

The charge of “insubordination” sought to align the offense of disloyalty toward the nation with the equally serious crime of racism, all in the name of the ideals of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. That many of the wealthier colonial “brethren” of these Parisian *gens de couleur* were also slaveholders was an inconvenient fact left

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51. The Saint-Marc Assembly’s *Développement du Décret rendu le 28 mai 1790, par l’Assemblée Générale de la Partie Françoise de Saint-Domingue, servant de réponse aux observations faites sur ce Décret par l’Assemblée Provinciale du Nord, en date du 1er juin* (Port-au-Prince, Saint-Domingue, 1790), p. 4.
unmentioned. Whether the deputies of the National Assembly perceived the incongruity is unclear. But even if they did, the outcome of the Assembly's review of the *bases constitutionnelles* favored the interests of the *gens de couleur*. After Barnave's Colonial Committee rejected the proposed bases for their separatist thrust, the National Assembly moved to dissolve the Saint-Marc Assembly on October 12, 1790. With that decision the most active institutional defender of colonial "interiority" was removed from the playing field of revolutionary politics. The effect of these developments was to politicize the colony's *gens de couleur* in a way never before seen.

Nine days after the Saint-Marc Assembly was ordered dissolved, a mulatto leader named Vincent Ogé arrived in Saint-Domingue from Paris, via a detour through London where he received aid from the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson. Ogé was a merchant from Saint-Domingue who found himself in Paris pursuing a lawsuit at the time the Revolution began. In the wake of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, a group of thirty to fifty "citizens of color" had come together in Paris under the name of the Société des Colons américains, a title clearly meant to imply that the exclusively white members of the Club Massiac held no monopoly over the propertied interests of Saint-Domingue. Ogé had joined this *gens de couleur* advocacy group shortly after its formation. Upon his return to Saint-Domingue in October 1790 he began calling for new elections. Not surprisingly, this demand failed to receive any support from either the governor or planter organizations. With assistance from a mixed group of *gens de couleur* and white Freemasons, he then organized a fateful rebellion in the northern mountains of Saint-Domingue, near the border with the Spanish side of the island. The rebellion was quickly put down, and Ogé and his fellow leader, Chavanne, were publicly tortured and then executed in Cap Français in February 1791. The brutality of the punishment turned metropolitan opinion decisively in favor of the *gens de couleur* and against the white colonists. On May 15, 1791 the National Assembly punched the first genuine hole in the armor of Saint-Domingue's "interior regime," with a decree granting political rights to all free blacks and

53. The petitioners themselves were not necessarily slaveholders. Indeed, many of the Parisian *gens de couleur* were former servants brought by white colonists to France and who then remained in violation of a 1777 royal declaration. Others may have been the offspring of white colonists, sent by their parents to study, work or live in the metropole. See Sue Peabody, "There Are No Slaves in France": The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Regime (Oxford, 1996), pp. 75-85.

mulattos whose parents were themselves both free. In practical terms this enfranchised only a few hundred individuals. But it was enough to cause the colonial deputies to withdraw in protest from the National Assembly. When news of the measure reached Saint-Domingue one month later, it gave rise to vigilante resistance on the part of the colonists against what they perceived as unjustified interference in their domestic social order.55

These controversies set off a civil war between the colony’s whites and gens de couleur that proved irreversible in its effects. It was in the context of this civil war that the slave revolt of the night of August 22-23, 1791 began in the northern plains surrounding Cap Français. That revolt had its own very complicated and local prehistory,56 but it can also be seen as the final and most important happening in the chain of developments set off by the admission of Caribbean deputies to the Estates General and continued by the various decisions of the National Assembly in Paris and its colonial counterparts in Saint-Domingue. This was precisely the impression that contemporaries had of the path that led to the beginning of the Haitian Revolution. An engraving from late 1791 entitled “August 23: Revolt of the Negroes in Saint-Domingue” depicted slaves and whites in hand-to-hand combat with each other while plantations burned in the background. The caption reads in full:

The contradictory decrees of the National Assembly on the freedom of the Negroes, and particularly that of May 13 [sic], have delivered the colony of Saint-Domingue to all the horrors of civil war.57


56. Carolyn E. Fick’s scholarship is particularly noteworthy in this respect. She argues that the Haitian Revolution emerged directly out of the phenomenon of slave resistance in general and marronage in particular. Fick, The Making of Haiti, pp. 1-10.

57. The caption misidentifies the date of the May 15, 1791 decree as May 13. The engraving is reproduced in Hunt, The French Revolution and Human Rights, p. 110.
Nor was this the only example of such thinking in the aftermath of the revolt. In late 1792, J. J. Demun, a commissioner from Saint-Domingue to the Legislative Assembly (successor to the National Assembly), published a pamphlet entitled Observations sur les colonies françaises, dans leurs rapports actuels avec la France. Referring to the events of August 1791 and their repercussions, Demun insisted that "the immediate cause of this calamity has been too often unrecognized in France, or at least seems to have been." Demun defined this "immediate cause" as the National Assembly's determination to legislate over the colonies in the face of conditions that militated against such an approach: the distance separating France from the Caribbean, differences in local customs, metropolitan ignorance of the "constant or adventitious" characteristics of the colonies, etc. Moreover, Demun added, it was obvious that the metropole could not extend its legislative reach to a slave society without thereby harming the "sanctity" and "altering [the] principles" of the French Revolution, "the purity of which is so important" to France. 58

58. J. J. Demun, Observations sur les colonies françaises, dans leurs rapports actuels avec la France ([Paris], 1792), pp. 12, 16-17. The pamphlet is dated 21 November 1792.