Philanthropy, Allyship, and the Best-Laid Plans

Reading Erica R. Johnson’s monograph, *Philanthropy and Race in the Haitian Revolution*, about the efforts of “philanthropists” (typically white French men, with notable exceptions) during the Haitian Revolution to create an integrated, and eventually antislavery, colonial society during the 1790s and early 1800s, prompted reflection on major themes in conversations about the histories of revolutionaries and antiracism. First, what do the actions of these philanthropist priests, scholars, teachers, printers, soldiers, and politicians tell us about the opportunities for a French Revolution that was truly universal in its principles of liberty, at least in regard to people in its colony Saint-Domingue? What does this story contribute to the history of race and racial thinking in the Francophonie? Or in the Americas writ large, where white supremacy, colorism, and “myths of harmony” and claims of color blindness continue to be powerful? Second, what is the history of allyship, particularly when it comes to white participation in projects for black liberation, in the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth, or twenty-first centuries? How can white saviorism or other motives lead people who claim to be allies to co-opt revolutions for liberty and equity? How do members of learned societies define “race,” “philanthropy,” and “humanitarianism” in terms that made racism, either structural or interpersonal, something that other people did but in which they were faultless? And third, how do white colonists in colonial slave societies understand slavery, race, and the need for liberation? How do people who benefit from such systems, or potentially stand to benefit from such systems, come to embrace liberation movements, even on limited terms?

These are sensitive and important issues in the histories of slavery, antiracism, and decolonization, particularly when opponents of liberation movements criticize the movements’ specificity to blunt their urgency (in other words, the response of #AllLivesMatter to #BlackLivesMatter). But as Johnson notes, reformers in the “revolutionary French Atlantic” (p. 3)—thanks in no small part to self-liberating actions by enslaved people in Saint-Domingue—achieved key legislation before any other European or American power, including the abolition of chattel slavery, abolition of de jure racial discrimination, and colonial representation in metropolitan legislatures. Perhaps by studying the way these reformers in France and Saint-Domingue comprehended the activism and liberation efforts of free people of color and the individuals liberating themselves from slavery and made the cause their own, we can better illuminate how colonists, lobbyists, and bureaucrats understood race, slavery, and colonialism and possible universalist paths forward before the backlash that prompted the Haitian War of Independence.

Johnson approaches these questions through the frame of philanthropy. The idea emerged during the early Enlightenment and was closely connected to the concept of *humanité*. Defined in part by Denis Diderot...
and Jean le Rond d’Alembert as “a feeling of good will towards all men,” it was more about attitude than a specific approach to solving such problems as slavery and racial inequality (p. 5). Philanthropists took action outside of the Catholic Church or the French state and, importantly, “assumed that the recipients of their efforts wanted or needed their assistance,” rarely “ask[ing] the blacks or people of color if they wanted their help or how they envisioned the future of the colony” (p. 6). Johnson positions her book as a counterpoint to Ashli White’s Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic (2010) and Barbara L. Bellows’s Benevolence among Slaveholders: Caring for the Poor in Charleston, 1760–1860 (1993) on how elite white enslavers used philanthropy to reinforce racial solidarity in the antebellum United States.

The intellectual history of universal humanitarianism sketched out here is also a key complement to James Alexander Dun’s Dangerous Neighbors: Making the Haitian Revolution in Early America (2016), which argues that the French and Haitian Revolutions diminished fervor for a “universal” American Revolution centered on liberty. Johnson’s book makes an important contribution by examining how philanthropists in Saint-Domingue sought to implement ideas of “universal liberty” across civil society, responding to events on the ground by establishing or reforming institutions.

The source base is extensive, including colonial and revolutionary-era newspapers, officials’ memoirs, letters, and reports drawn from several French archives. Secondary sources show a deep engagement with the historiography of the Haitian Revolution and the French Atlantic during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. There are many chronicles of the events in Saint-Domingue between 1789 and 1804, and so Johnson divides the analysis by sectors, examining, in turn, Capuchin missionaries, academic societies, educators, the media, the military, and political activists, concluding with a chronological epilogue that further links the chapters. Throughout, Johnson notes that abolitionist white officials, clergy, writers, and teachers did not just come from France to enact a revolution but that some also had long lived in the colony.

First, it is worth noting that in its plans for formal racial integration (or not erecting de jure racial barriers), France between 1794 and 1799 was often at the forefront of European powers. That said, as Johnson’s thematic organization helps illuminate, integration (and particularly integrationist state-building) succeeded more in some areas than others and “allies” are more readily identifiable in certain sectors of colonial society. To cite a few examples: The patriot (pro-independence, pro-French Revolution, and initially against rights for people of color) paper Moniteur Général and the pro-racial equality l’Ami de Égalité both found ready audiences through the Revolution, though they shifted their positions as events unfolded. The military, often a key engine for social change, served that role in the 1790s French Atlantic, with white soldiers serving under officers of color and in the Legion of Equality, a force that supported the political and military aims of the French Republican government of the colony against British and Spanish invaders. Those residents of Saint-Domingue engaged in electoral politics (many of the newly freed were blocked by a poll tax) became so accustomed to electing a racially diverse group of men that when General Charles Leclerc took control of the island in the name of First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte, he followed that pattern in appointing a consultative council that included Henry Christophe among other men of color before disbanding the council due to suspected pro-independence leanings. The publisher P. Roux, responsible for publishing the state-backed Les Afroïdes Américaines before 1789, followed the official government line under Toussaint Louverture, Leclerc, and King Henry I, changing editorial views as the circumstances dictated.

As Johnson shows, priests tended to be more idiosyncratic in their views and actions as they navigated the nationalization of the French Church and the demands to swear fealty to the Revolution as well as humanitarian impulses to serve as mediators, instructors, and chaplains. Several administrators saw integrated primary schools, either private or public, as a key tool of integration, but revolutionary events almost invariably disrupted these plans. A notable exception was a system of schools across the North Province that at one point in 1797 enrolled 1,600 children and supported a system of rural tutors, spearheaded by French General Etienne Laveaux and Julien Raimond (pp. 103-4). An integrated scholarly society to replace the Cercle des Philadelphes appears to have never moved far past the planning stage.

The histories Johnson details so richly here help us make sense of the possibilities, and limitations, of abolitionism and antidiscrimination under the Directory. It is notable that a commission opposed to colonial representation within the Directory was making rapid progress in 1797 before being cut short by the coup of 18 Fructidor, a tool that those suspicious of abolition would be more than happy to embrace two years later in the coup of 18...
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Brumaire, eventually leading to France’s re-embracing of the enslavement of Africans and their descendants.

As Johnson acknowledges, white women left scant traces in the colonial archive, though we learn about the decision made by nuns in Le Cap to remain in the colony through the uprising and Leclerc’s decision to keep a female administrator in office. It is also difficult to access the interiority of many of the allies, though more work on Laveaux and the publisher (Pierre Catineau) and the content of l’Ami de l’Égalité would be welcome, as would work on the education system in the late colonial and early national periods, which Johnson summarizes here; much of our understanding depends on Jean Fouchard’s Les Marrons du Syllabaire (1953). Most important, it is vital to learn more about how the newly freed and the ancien libres (who were already free before emancipation) interacted with these fledgling and/or changing institutions. On that note, I encourage all historians of this period to consult “Writing about Slavery/Teaching about Slavery: This Might Help” and to, when possible, use “white,” “B/black,” and “(en)slave(d)” as adjectives rather than nouns, which I am aware has not been the convention in much of the English-language historiography on the Haitian Revolution to date.[1] Finally, Palgrave Macmillan should have invested in more thorough indexing, as the index runs a scant four pages, making it hard for researchers to appreciate fully the depth and complexity of the history presented here.

In many ways, Philanthropy and Race in the Haitian Revolution is a history of a Saint-Domingue that could have been but never, outside of fleeting moments and in a few places, was a colonial system that maintained the abolition of de jure slavery; allowed for racial integration of schools, public spaces, the electorate, and (some) professions; and enabled colonial representation in the metropole even as the plantation system continued under compulsory low-wage labor. The experiment in colonial representation, racial integration, and anti-slavery only lasted for a few years under French auspices before Haitians had to rebel to preserve their freedom. Johnson is well aware of the various motivations of the allies whose stories she tells, whether they are financial, political, or ideological, and the ways these motivations shaped the institutions and reformed the philanthropists sought to establish. By deepening and complicating the aspirations and achievements of revolutionary-era philanthropists, the book makes an important contribution not just to studies of the revolutionary Atlantic but also to the connected historiographies of everyday forms of state formation and comparative reconstructions. Scholars of the Haitian Revolution and early national Haiti will be returning to the examples Johnson details here time and again.

Note


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