

Civil Rights for Les Gens de Couleur

In March of 1790, an abolitionist group called La Société des Amis des Noirs (The Friends of Black People; often abbreviated as “Les Amis”) pushed a resolution through the Paris-based Assemblée Nationale that extended citizenship and other basic civil rights to free persons of color (les gens de couleur) in St. Domingue. Les Amis was a powerful abolitionist organization with considerable international connections and support in addition to that given by French and French colonial populations. The latter included some important mixed race planters who came to be the public faces of the abolitionist movement in France.

Les Amis sought the abolition of the slave trade as an ultimate goal. However, the coalition politics of 1789-1790 did not allow them to directly propose a law designed to attack the institution of slavery. The group instead focused on a more achievable goal. They successfully argued that the notion of universal rights (affirmed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man) should apply to all persons regardless of race. The wording here is important: by arguing for extension to all *persons*, les Amis des Noirs avoided a confrontation with slavery, as slaves were legally defined as property, not persons.

Extending citizenship rights to free persons of color simply incorporated into the polity a population of free people who were already a powerful socio-economic force in St. Domingue. In the view of the members of les Amis, there was no necessary connection between the extension of citizenship rights to all persons and the next step, which would use the same claim in the Declaration to undercut the idea that human beings could be defined as property. The separation was tactical, however; in the longer run, les Amis des Noirs hoped that slavery itself would become the issue and that the outcome would be the destruction of the legal basis for the institution of slavery. And it is possible that, had the Haitian Revolution not happened, this would have been an important step toward that end.

The Assemblée passed a law that extended citizenship rights to free persons of color in March, 1790. In October of the same year, Vincent Oge, a prominent member of Les Amis des Noirs, arrived in St. Domingue hoping to persuade the colonial governor to put the resolution into effect. The governor refused to do so. With that, Ogé joined forces with Jean-Baptiste Chavennes and called on the free persons of color to revolt. The action was not able to raise a substantial number of partisans because neither the leadership nor the revolt’s supporters from amongst the planter class made any attempt to mobilize amongst the slave population, which was by far the numerical majority. The abolition of slavery (the engine of the colonial economy) did not enjoy the widespread support that did civil rights for les gens du couleur, even among those who answered Ogé and Chavanne’s call to arms. As a result, the revolt remained small and isolated and was quickly defeated by a white planter militia (alongside African slaves and volunteers).

By November of 1790, Ogé and Chavanne had fled to the Spanish portion of the island. They were soon captured. In March, 1791, they were publicly tortured and executed in a grotesque piece of theater designed to discourage any further revolts.

Why is this significant in the unfolding of the Haitian Revolution? After all, the extension of citizenship rights to the free persons of color was not about slavery as an institution and did not involve slaves in the action. The action was important because, first, the extension of citizenship rights to free persons of color undermined the purely race-based distinction between citizens and others. This happened just after around 30,000 people were classified legally as free persons of color in 1789. Many from this group were quite successful economically; many were property owners, planters, and slaveholders in their own right. Though they had no formal legal or citizenship rights, they owned property and carried on business as matters of custom. Collectively, the free persons of color were better off financially and socially than the “petits blancs” or shopkeepers and artisans, who often supported slavery on racist grounds and resented les gens du couleur.

When citizenship rights were extended to free persons of color, there was already considerable political mobilization underway in St. Domingue. The French Revolution inspired many to agitate and organize for independence from France, and many inhabitants of the island supported the Revolution as a means toward that end. Colonial society was deeply divided between the white planter class, les gens du couleur, and les petits blancs on the one side, and the colonial administration on the other.

Prior to 1790, partisans of independence had organized an uneasy coalition of white planters and petits blancs against agents of the French state and their supporters. Socially and economically speaking, it made more sense for the white planters to ally with the free persons of color because their interests had much more in common than did the interests of planters and les petits blancs. The move to grant civil rights to the free persons of color, even though it did not succeed on the island, was enough to split the tenuous coalition that had taken shape against French colonial control. This contributed to the fragmentation of power within the colonial system. A situation in which factions opposed other factions replaced a situation in which a unified bloc had managed a brutal slave economy from the position of a numerical minority.

The relationship between the extension of citizenship to the free persons of color, the results of that extension of rights, and the revolt of the summer of 1791 (which opened onto the Haitian Revolution) is more difficult to determine. Historians rely on written traces of the past; the further back in time one goes, the more we depend on written records. The absence of such traces explains why little is known of the period between March 1791 and the outbreak of the initial slave revolt in August. Many historians have speculated that there were organizational and political continuities between those who participated in the revolt led by Ogé and Chavannes, but the nature of these continuities remains no more than speculation.