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0521772494 - French Anti-Slavery: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802-1848

Lawrence C. Jennings

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I

N A P O L E O N I C A N D
R E S T O R A T I O N
A N T I - S L A V E R Y

The first French abolitionist movement centered around the Société des Amis des Noirs. Founded in early 1788 by the journalist Jacques Pierre Brissot and his associate Etienne Clavière, with the close collaboration of Count Honoré de Mirabeau, the Amis des Noirs was inspired by the humanitarianism and egalitarian currents of thought implicit in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. It was also profoundly influenced from the moment of its inception by the British precedent. The Amis des Noirs was modeled upon the London Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which had been formed in May 1787. Brissot, who had been in England in the autumn of that year, had become closely associated with the London anti-slave trade committee, and had been encouraged by it to form a similar group in France. The Amis des Noirs also followed the example of the British organization and, like it, made the strategic decision to direct its offensive against the slave trade specifically, rather than against the abolition of colonial slavery per se. Although the Amis opposed slavery in principle and favored its gradual elimination, they conformed to British reasoning that slavery would eventually disappear after the eradication of the slave traffic.¹ The British provided the Amis with

¹ A vast literature has been built up on French abolitionism during the Revolutionary period. For the above, and for the Amis des Noirs in particular, see Daniel P. Resnick, "The Société des amis des Noirs and the Abolition of Slavery," *French Historical Studies* 7 (1972): 558–69; Valerie Quinney, "Decisions on Slavery, the Slave Trade and Civil Rights for Negroes in the Early French Revolution," *Journal of Negro History* 55 (1970): 117–30; Robert Stein, "The Revolution of 1789 and the Abolition of Slavery," *Canadian Journal of History* 17 (1982): 447–67; Françoise Thesée, "Autour de la Société des Amis des Noirs," *Présence africaine*, no. 125 (1983): 3–82; Robert Stein, *Léger Félicité Sonthonax: The Lost Sentinel of the Republic* (Cranbury, N.J.: Fairleigh

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the necessary documents to attack the slave trade, disbursed subsidies to the French group, and even translated into French and distributed in France some thirty-four pamphlets against the slave traffic. The great British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson spent much time in France and was in frequent correspondence with the Amis des Noirs in an attempt to inspire and advance the French effort.² Even the seal of the Amis des Noirs was copied from the famous 1787 Wedgwood medalion of the British society; it depicted a kneeling chained slave, facing right, and stating “Ne suis-je pas ton frère?” (Am I not your brother?) rather than “Am I not a man and a brother?” British influence over French abolitionism began with the very first French anti-slave trade grouping. It also oriented French objectives toward slave trade repression rather than against slavery in general.

Besides Brissot, Clavière, and Mirabeau, other prominent members of the Amis des Noirs included the future revolutionary Abbé Henri Grégoire, the *philosophe* Antoine de Condorcet, and the hero of the American Revolution, the Marquis Marie Joseph Gilbert de Lafayette. The society, like later French abolitionist groupings, was elitist in character, and tended to center its activities in the legislative chambers. It avoided appeals to public opinion except through the published media, and never had more than 150 adherents. Besides attacking the slave trade, it became involved in the campaign for equal rights for what were then called “free persons of color” (*hommes de couleur libres*). Its interventions finally led to the law of April 4, 1792, that gave complete rights to these free blacks of mixed blood in the colonies.³ However, as the Revolution advanced, society members gradually became sidetracked

Dickinson University Press, 1985); Yves Bénot, *La Révolution française et la fin des colonies* (Paris: La Découverte, 1988); David Geggus, “Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession during the Constituent Assembly,” *American Historical Review* 94 (1989): 1290–1308; Jean Tarrade, “Les colonies et les principes de 1789: Les assemblées révolutionnaires face au problème de l’esclavage,” *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-Mer* 76 (1989): 9–34; and Marcel Dorigny, “Mirabeau et la Société des amis des Noirs: Quelles voies pour l’abolition de l’esclavage,” *Les abolitions de l’esclavage de L. F. Sonthonax à V. Schoelcher: Actes du colloque international tenu à l’Université de Paris VIII les 3, 4 et 5 février 1994*, ed. Marcel Dorigny (Paris: Editions Unesco, 1995), 153–64.

² Lawrence C. Jennings, “The Interaction of French and British Antislavery, 1789–1848,” *Proceedings of the Fifteenth Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society, Martinique & Guadeloupe, May 1989* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1992), 81–2.

³ Stein, “Revolution of 1789 and the Abolition of Slavery,” 451; Geggus, “Racial Equality, Slavery,” 1300–1303; Catherine Duprat, “*Pour l’amour de l’humanité*”: *Le temps des philanthropes: La philanthropie parisienne des Lumières à la monarchie de Juillet* (Paris: Editions du C.T.H.S., 1993), 115–28, 179–85.

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into more pressing issues of revolutionary politics. The Amis des Noirs was so closely connected to the Brissotin faction – also known as the Girondins – in the Legislative Assembly that when this group was proscribed by the Robèspierrists in the spring of 1793, the society was dealt a mortal blow. Brissot and Clavière were guillotined; Condorcet committed suicide in prison; Lafayette surrendered to the Austrians; the other members of the group dispersed; and the society itself was eclipsed. The Amis des Noirs played no significant role in the first emancipation of France's nearly 700,000 colonial slaves by the Convention on February 4, 1794. This action was forced on the Republic by the slave revolt that had begun in 1791 in Saint-Domingue. Having lost control of the black population, commissioners of the Republic sent to the colony had issued decrees in August and September 1793 declaring the slaves free. In undertaking these moves they had hoped to rally blacks to the Republic and preserve French control over Saint-Domingue, for the colony was menaced by British and Spanish intervention once France had declared war upon these two powers in early 1793. The move by the Convention in February 1794 had simply formalized a *fait accompli* brought about by the Saint-Domingue slave uprising.

The first formation of the Amis des Noirs had effectively been stifled by the Terror. Due to the initiative of the inveterate abolitionist Abbé Grégoire, a small remnant of the Amis began to convene again as of 1796 under the name of the Société des Amis des Noirs et des Colonies. It exercised little influence, never united more than a small number of members, and was a mere shadow of its former self. Headed by the economist Jean Baptiste Say, and then the ex-Jacobin delegate to Saint-Domingue, Léger Félicité Sonthonnax, its main aims were to acclimatize blacks to their new-found freedom and to encourage their work under free labor. By the end of the 1790s its defense of the abolition of the slave trade and slavery was being undermined by a strengthening colonial lobby advocating coerced labor. The Amis des Noirs et des Colonies was finally suppressed in 1799 when Napoleon came to power.⁴ Married to the Creole Josephine, and

⁴ Daniel P. Resnick, "Political Economy and French Anti-Slavery: The Case of J.-B. Say," *Proceedings of the Third Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, 1975 (n.p.: Western Society for French History, 1976), 177–87; Duprat, "Pour l'amour de l'humanité," 186–8; Ruth F. Necheles, *The Abbé Grégoire, 1787–1831: The Odyssey of an Egalitarian* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1971), 157–64.

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favorable to colonial interests, Napoleon was no friend of freed blacks. Citing the economic needs of the colonies and the requirements of French overseas trade, Napoleon proceeded to reintroduce colonial slavery and the slave trade in 1802, at the same time that he undertook the reconquest of Saint-Domingue. He was unsuccessful in the latter, but did effectively rout out the last remnants of the first French abolitionist movement. It would be two decades before a society devoted to the ending of the slave trade and slavery in the French colonies would emerge once again within France.

With his draconian restrictions on the press, speech, meetings, and opposition groups, Bonaparte effectively stifled abolitionism in France from 1799 until his fall in 1814–15. Censorship prevented most abolitionist writings, or even publications on the colonies in general, from 1802 until 1817.⁵ The failure by Bonaparte to reconquer Saint-Domingue, and the publicity given to massacres of whites perpetrated there, reduced sympathy for blacks in France. Proponents of slavery and the slave trade emerged victorious. Already in 1802–3 Pierre Victor Malouet and Bory de Saint-Venant wrote that slavery was required to force blacks to work and to maintain the security of colonial whites. The great Romantic writer François René de Chateaubriand argued in his *Génie du christianisme* (1802) that crimes by blacks in Saint-Domingue had erased any pity that might have existed for them. He and other animators of the officially sanctioned *Mercur de France* defended the reestablishment of slavery and the slave trade, while attacking at the same time the principles of the Enlightenment. Other works, such as the *Précis historique des derniers événements de la partie est de Saint-Domingue* (1811), by an army officer who had served in that colony, G. Guillermin, reinforced these themes and made a passionate plea for slavery as the only means for France to exploit tropical staple products.⁶ Napoleonic officialdom gave full support to a whole series of publications promoting colonial interests while systematically blocking any organized abolitionist effort.

⁵ Ibid., 177; David Geggus, "Haiti and the Abolitionists: Opinion, Propaganda and International Politics in Britain and France, 1804–1836," in David Richardson, ed., *Abolition and Its Aftermath: The Historical Context, 1790–1836* (London: Frank Cass, 1985), 117.

⁶ Yves Bénot, *La démente coloniale sous Napoléon* (Paris: La Découverte, 1992), 186–94, 202–5.

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In comparison with this wave of procolonial propaganda, abolitionist activity was reduced to a trickle. The liberal *Ideologue* review, *La Décade philosophique, littéraire et politique*, directed among others by J.-B. Say, was pro-black through 1801, but could make only insinuations along these lines after Napoleon reestablished slavery in 1802.⁷ Only Abbé Grégoire, a member of Napoleon's senate, dared go beyond side remarks and innuendo in reiterating his principles in print, though he too was prevented from making public statements on the issues. In his *De la littérature des nègres*, written in 1808, Grégoire stressed the unity of the human race, criticized the slave traffic, and claimed that black violence in Saint-Domingue had been provoked by the planters. Grégoire's publication of 1808 had been tolerated because his old friend and minister of police under Napoleon, Joseph Fouché, had protected him. But when Grégoire attempted to publish another book in 1810 criticizing slavery, the authorities confiscated and destroyed all copies of it. Even when Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807, the French were unable to applaud this move. As one author, Yves Bénot, has pointed out, Napoleonic repression had caused French abolitionists to regress to the strategy of 1789 in clamoring first and foremost against the slave trade.⁸ The British-inspired tactic of attacking first of all the slave trade would continue to mark French abolitionism throughout the Restoration that followed the Napoleonic era.

When Napoleon faced defeat and abdicated in 1814, the restored monarchy of Louis XVIII continued to scorn abolitionism, which it identified with republicanism. The abolitionists were isolated and accused by the new Ultraroyalists of being the allies of France's conqueror, England. Because the abolitionists who still remained (Grégoire, Lafayette, Benjamin Constant, baron Auguste de Staël-Holstein, and the duc Victor de Broglie) had no popular support or financial resources, they were indeed obliged to rely on the British once again for documentation and funding. Madame Germaine de Staël-Holstein – the famous daughter of Necker, mother of Auguste, and mother-in-law of the duc de Broglie – helped circulate in France,

⁷ *Ibid.*, 234–50. On the Ideologues, see Emmet Kennedy, *A Philosophe in the Age of Revolution: Destutt de Tracy and the Origins of "Ideology"* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1978).

⁸ Necheles, Abbé Grégoire, 178, 181–4, 186; Bénot, *La démente coloniale*, 252–3.

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for example, works by the noted British abolitionist William Wilberforce as of 1814.⁹ Until her death in 1817, much of French anti-slave trade sentiment was centered around her, her sons, son-in-law, and former lover, Constant.¹⁰ British abolitionists also visited France in attempts to renew relations with their French colleagues and to persuade the nascent French regime to outlaw the slave trade. They approved of the French abolitionist policy of concentrating attention especially on the slave trade, but they were wary about encouraging the French to form a new abolitionist organization because of the opprobrium attached in France to the former republicans Grégoire and Lafayette. As a result, French anti-slave trade sentiment prior to 1815 was limited to a few publications, such as the book by the liberal economist Simonde de Sismondi issued in Geneva in 1814, *De l'intérêt de la France à l'égard de la traite des nègres*, arguing that the slave traffic was not only inhuman but economically unsound.¹¹

Although French abolitionists were encouraged when Napoleon returned to power briefly for his “Hundred Days” in 1815 and proclaimed his intention of abolishing the slave trade, nothing came of this. After the second Restoration restored Louis XVIII to power in the summer of 1815, the plight of the abolitionists did not improve. Louis XVIII’s Ultra supporters launched again into an attack on the abolitionists as radicals, and the latter remained totally ostracized. Abolitionists could take some solace in the fact that Louis XVIII now agreed to ban the slave trade, but he never applied the means to eradicate it entirely. Moreover, any attack the abolitionists might have launched against the principle of slavery was blunted by the fact that France had lost most of its slave possessions during the Napoleonic wars and did not repossess them until after the Restoration. Indeed, the French colonies of Martinique and Guadeloupe were returned by Britain only in 1814 and 1816, respectively, while Guiana remained occupied by the Portuguese until late 1817. With few colonies, and the menacing memory of Saint-Domingue dominating French minds,

⁹ Serge Daget, “The Abolition of the Slave Trade by France: The Decisive Years 1826–1831,” in Richardson, ed., *Abolition and Its Aftermath*, 141.

¹⁰ Jean Michel Deveau, *La France aux temps des négriers* (Paris: France-Empire, 1994), 279.

¹¹ William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530–1880* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 184–85.

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the issue of slavery receded into the background in France. Grégoire stood nearly alone in courageously denouncing color distinctions in an article that he published in the non-influential *Chronique religieuse* in 1819.¹² No French organization advocating abolitionist principles would emerge in the first five years of the Restoration.

Grégoire and his handful of abolitionist associates remained concerned, however, about the continuation of the surreptitious French slave trade. The regulation that the Restoration had enacted under British pressure against the slave trade in 1814–1815 was too weak to deter some slave traders, and too haphazardly applied by French officials, who were so concerned with the economic recovery of the colonies that they often turned a blind eye toward slaving activities. Already in 1814–1815 some eighteen French ships were implicated in the slave trade.¹³ Later measures of 1817–1818 against the slave trade also provided insufficiently dissuasive penalties. Moreover, Louis XVIII's regime was torn between its desires to strengthen its recently reclaimed colonies and to please the British, while at the same time not appearing dominated by the latter. Even when French officials ordered a closer surveillance of French ports and the African coast, the means for eradicating the slave traffic remained inadequate. Those French slave traders who nevertheless continued to ply the Atlantic were noticed by British observers, and reported upon by British abolitionists to their French associates.¹⁴ Besides, the French learned about the continuing slave trade through a petition in 1820 by a French functionary in Senegal, Joseph Elzéar Morenas, who also established close ties with the British and Grégoire.¹⁵ A leading British abolitionist, Zachary Macaulay – father of the famous historian – made trips to Paris, retained close contact with Grégoire, and channeled funds to France through him. Thus, following the death of Madame de Staël, Grégoire served as the chief intermediary between the London and

¹² Necheles, *Abbé Grégoire*, 196–203, 261.

¹³ Serge Daget, *Répertoire des expéditions négrières françaises à la traite illégale* (Nantes: Centre de Recherches sur l'Histoire du Monde Atlantique, 1988), 1–18.

¹⁴ Serge Daget, "L'abolition de la traite des noirs en France de 1814 à 1831," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 11 (1971): 22–30, 41; Yvan Debbasch, "Poésie et Traite: L'Opinion française sur le commerce négrier au début du XIXe siècle," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 48 (1961): 316–7.

¹⁵ Daget, "L'Abolition de la traite des noirs," 33–6; Daget, "J. E. Morenas à Paris: L'action abolitionniste, 1819–1821," *Bulletin de l'Institut fondamental d'Afrique Noire* 31 (1969): 875–85; Debbasch, "Poésie et Traite," 324–5.

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Paris abolitionists, and had the means to hold sway over his French colleagues because of their utter dependence on British funding. The British encouraged Grégoire to publish anti-slave trade pamphlets and issue petitions, but the French group suffered from the effects of the Ultras' electoral victories in 1820, which led to new intimidating press laws. It was clear that the French abolitionists required some form of organization to be effective.¹⁶

By the early 1820s British anti-slave trade activists, led by Macaulay, were pressing abolitionists in France to create just such an organization against the illicit slave traffic. In the summer of 1821, Grégoire and Lafayette actually considered founding an anti-slave trade organization, but were deterred by the knowledge that leading liberals such as Broglie, Constant, and Auguste de Staël would prove reluctant to be openly associated with the anathematized Grégoire, accused by some of even being a regicide. Fortunately, a group of French Protestants proposed to form a philanthropic society similar to the benevolent associations that had developed in England to advance charitable works of all kinds, and not just anti-slave trade activities. Realizing, though, that any such French body must be nonsectarian and ecumenical to be effective, they turned to a group of important benevolent Catholics to head it. Most abolitionists joined it, but Grégoire, who as a former bishop and devout Catholic dared not associate too closely with Protestants, was effectively excluded from the new society. Though he retained contacts with the new group, Grégoire discretely remained outside its ranks and was reduced to producing an occasional article or booklet to vector his ideas about racial equality and the need to eliminate the slave trade. The British, however, would continue to exert considerable influence over the society throughout the 1820s by taking out membership in it, and by providing it with advice, documentation, and encouragement.¹⁷

Founded in a preliminary fashion in the summer of 1821, but organized definitively only on December 20 of that year when its first general assembly was held, the Société de la morale chrétienne was most active and important during the 1820s, though it continued to

¹⁶ Necheles, *Abbé Grégoire*, 253–7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 257–8, 261–4; Charles de Rémusat, *Mémoires de ma vie* (5 vols.; Paris: Plon, 1958–1967), II, 69; Paule Brasseur, “Libermann et l’abolition de l’esclavage,” *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer* 73 (1986): 336.

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exist in a diminished fashion until its final demise in 1860–1861.¹⁸ According to police reports, its founders were the duc François Alexandre Frédéric de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt – termed by the police “the banal patron of all philanthropies on earth” – the comte Alexandre de Laborde, the baron Joseph Marie Degérando, and the comte Charles Philibert de Lasteyrie du Saillant, all liberal Catholics. They were joined by several leading Protestants: Auguste de Staël, the pastor Goepf, the bookseller Jean Geoffroi Wurtz, and the highly influential clergyman and publicist Philippe Albert Stapfer. By the summer of 1823 its official membership stood at 255, but it rose to 332 by November 1824. Still, these same police reports stress the approximate nature of these official figures because subscribers could request that their names be withheld from membership lists.¹⁹ After late 1824, participation seems to have stabilized, as a list for 1829–1830 shows it to have risen to only 388.²⁰ Technically, admittance to the Société required 25 francs in annual dues, nomination by two current adherents, and approval by two-thirds of attending members, though there is some evidence that anyone who requested entrance into the body and paid dues was in fact admitted. Nevertheless, membership was clearly dominated by the political, social, and religious elite. Adherents were solicited in both the provinces and foreign countries, and auxiliary societies were established in cities such as Bordeaux, Marseilles, Mulhouse, and Nimes – the latter two cities testifying to Protestant influence. Still, a large majority of members appear to have been Paris-based. There were a great many Protestants in the society, though claims of total Protestant dominance of the organization are exaggerated if a membership count and scrutiny of its leading officers is undertaken. Indeed, an examination of fifty-one leading members of the society mentioned in this study shows that only seventeen, or 33 percent, are identifiable as Protestants. When one notes, however, that Protestants constituted only approximately 2 percent of the total French population at the time, it is apparent that

¹⁸ Rémusat, *Mémoires*, II, 69; *Journal de la Société de la morale chrétienne*, vol. 1, 1822, p. 1. For an integral account of the society’s anti-slavery stance, see Lawrence C. Jennings, “French Anti-Slavery under the Restoration: The Société de la morale chrétienne,” *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer*, 81 (1994): 321–31.

¹⁹ France, Archives Nationales, F7 6960, dossier 12024, Ministère de l’Intérieur, Direction de Police, reports dated Aug. 23, 1823, Aug. 31, 1824.

²⁰ *Journal de la Société de la morale chrétienne*, vol. 12, 1830, pp. 53–64.

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Protestants did play a disproportionately large role in the society, as they did in many nineteenth-century French reform-minded or altruistic groups.

If the Société de la morale chrétienne was influential under the Restoration it was not because of its numbers, which in themselves fail to distinguish it from other associations of its time. It was through the importance of its members, who constituted a veritable Who's Who of the leaders of the liberal opposition in the 1820s and of the future governing elite of the July Monarchy that was to follow in 1830. Among the society's officers or committee members, in addition to the founders mentioned above, were individuals such as Broglie (who became its first president), Constant, Charles de Rémusat, baron Amable Guillaume Prosper Brugière de Barante, Charles Coquerel, comte Jean Denis Lanjuinais, Théobald Piscatory, Horace de Vielcastel, the Protestants François Guizot, Admiral Carel Henrik Verhuell, and Benjamin Sigismond Frossart (a former member of the Amis des Noirs), and the Protestant leader, Paul Henri Marron (president of the Reformed Church Consistory). Some of the other more noteworthy members were the comte Antoine Maurice d'Argout, Hippolyte Carnot (son of the revolutionary), François Delessert, Prosper Duvergier de Hauranne, baron Auguste d'Eichtal, comte Charles de Montalembert, Casimir Périer, General Horace Sébastiani, François Villemain, Adolphe Thiers, and the duc d'Orleans – the future King Louis Philippe – himself. Police reports dating from 1823–1824 noted that while the society had only three confirmed royalists in its ranks, it had eight peers, nine deputies from the extreme left, twelve professors, about the same number of lawyers, several editors, no priests, but many pastors.²¹ Opposed to the government, and unable to implement its ideas legislatively, the organization was only occasionally effective in realizing its philanthropic agenda. It also had little popular support and deigned not appeal to public opinion because of its own elitist orientation. Nevertheless, by acting through the press, its own journal, petitions, pamphlet literature, and the back rooms of the legislative assemblies and government ministries, it exercised considerable moral and political sway during the last decade of the Restoration.

The Société de la morale chrétienne could be described as a liberal,

²¹ Archives Nationales, F7 6960 (12024), Aug. 23, 1823, Aug. 31, 1824.