

‘What determined the fate of slavery?’

The role of views and wider contexts in influencing slavery in the 18th century Saint Domingue/Haiti and the United States.

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Introduction

In 1804, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, African-born former slave and military leader of the uprising of slaves in the French colony of Saint Domingue, proclaimed a declaration of independence. He, and those fighting alongside him, rejected Emperor Napoleon's attempt to reintroduce slavery, and attested that 'we have dared to be free'.¹ 28 years before this proclamation, in what was then the 'United Colonies' of America, Virginian Thomas Jefferson also penned a declaration of independence. Like Dessalines, Jefferson asserted his commitment to freedom in the face of an oppressive power. He argued that he and his countryman had an innate right to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness', which justified their overthrow of the British King George III, a man 'unfit to be the ruler of a free people'.² Interestingly, Jefferson also made the same argument as Dessalines - that slavery was oppositional to inherent freedom, a, 'a cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty'.³ Thus both Dessalines and Jefferson led a revolution in the name of freedom, and, crucially, recognised that slavery was oppositional to true liberty.

Yet, despite these similarities, there are clear distinctions between the historical trajectory of slavery in the two territories these authors resided in. Saint Domingue followed through with its promises wholesale; slavery was absolutely outlawed in the newly created nation of Haiti by 1805.⁴ The United States, on the other hand, had a more torturous and complicated history of putting abolitionist rhetoric into action. Whilst action was taken in Northern states towards abolition, by the early years of the 19th century, the United States, bold proclaimers of liberty, paradoxically defended slavery on a national level. Slavery wouldn't be outlawed nationally until much later, as per the 13th Constitutional Amendment of 1865.⁵

¹ "The Haitian Declaration of Independence, 1804", in L. Dubois & J. D. Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History With Documents* (2016), p. 188.

² "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription" (1776), available online at "U.S National Archives", <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

³ Ibid.

⁴ As per the Haitian Constitution of 1805. See "The Haitian Constitution, 1805", in L. Dubois, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, p. 191.

⁵ "13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, 1865", available online at "National Archives", <https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/13th-amendment#:~:text=Passed%20by%20Congress%20On%20January,within%20the%20United%20States%2C%20or>

In this essay, I intend to explore this comparison of Saint Domingue/Haiti and the United States, and focus it around two key comparative questions: how did views on slavery change, and in what circumstances did changing views lead - or, crucially, not lead - to the political or institutional changes of abolition? To put it a different way, why, despite the fact that abolitionist ideas were emerging in both Saint Domingue and the United States did abolition occur on a much larger scale in the former than the latter? My contention is that views were changing in similar ways in both territories, but that an ideological support for abolition led to external outcome change only where the institutional and wider contexts were able to properly mediate and guide these view changes.

In the United States, during the Revolutionary period and after (1776-1800), a combination of broader demographic, political and institutional contexts meant that, despite much support for the freedom of slaves, abolition was not introduced in law. In specific, its demographic composition, and dominance of white citizens, dissuaded against a national slave revolt emerging, as would happen in Haiti. Moreover, its federalised political structure, and decentralisation of power, encouraged abolition on a state level, but dissuaded bold action on abolition on a national level. The result was a series of fragile compromises on the issue of slavery between Northern and Southern states which ruled out abolition in the short term. In Saint Domingue, contrastingly, during the Revolutionary period and after (1791-1805), the institutional and wider contexts were favourable to institutionalise support for abolition. A myriad of demographic, political, military and environmental contexts - The strength of numbers of African slaves; the chaos of colonial authority, and the growing internecine struggle between its different factions; the military strength of the slave army; the resulting centralisation of power in the hands of a dictator military-governor; the plethora of diseases that Europeans were vulnerable to - all of these factors meant that, in comparison to the United States, view change on slavery led to engender genuine, radical and wholesale abolitionism on a national scale.

Section One: ‘that freedom, which the Almighty Father intended for all the human race’

The growing support for the liberty of slaves in Saint Domingue/Haiti and the United States

In the first section of my essay, I will focus on ideas. Here, I will show that there was a similar process of ideological change in both Saint Domingue and the United States in the late 18th century; in both territories, a swathe of individuals and groups acquired an abolitionist view: that slaves were entitled to freedom, and that slavery should be ended.

This idea was, firstly, a foundational characteristic of the initial protests of August - September 1791 in Northern Saint Domingue. During this process, slaves across disparate plantations of the North collectively burnt down all of the sugar, coffee, indigo and cotton plantations that they worked on within 50 miles of Le Cap, a prominent town on the North coast of the colony.⁶ The demand for freedom, and an end to their immediate embodied exploitation, was central to this uprising. Through attacking the plantations, the slaves demonstrated their support for the end of the coerced, extractive slave labour which they were subjected to daily, and which the plantations engendered. Moreover, the slaves' desire for freedom was also theoretically or ideologically justified. One key influential force here was Voodoo - a spiritual and cultural practice that emanated from Africa. Many of the key leaders of the revolt in August 1791, such as Dutty Boukman, were also Voodoo spiritual leaders, who motivated followers to join the revolt through appealing to Voodoo concepts of insurgency and freedom.⁷ Alongside Voodoo, the slaves were also influenced, paradoxically, by ideas of freedom that emerged from their enslavers. During the 18th century, French revolutionaries had asserted their commitment to the idea that there existed universal and

⁶ L. Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (2004), p. 113.

⁷ Ibid, p. 101, C. L. R. James, *Black Jacobins* (1963), p. 86.

natural human ‘rights’, things that all men irrespective of race or birth were entitled to. This idea found its clearest expression in the ‘Declaration of the Rights of Man’ passed by the National Assembly in 1789: ‘Men are born and remain free and equal in rights’.⁸ Moreover, there is some evidence that the abolitionist ideas of the French Revolution inspired slaves involved in the insurrections of 1791. A French noble named Laine, for instance, cited that during the August uprisings, ‘the leader of a group of insurgents boldly came up to us saying he wanted the rights of man’, and that he had encountered a slave Gironde, who had liked to read about the ‘Jacobins and other philosophical enemies of the whites’.⁹ What is clear then, at the genesis of the Haitian Revolution, was the growing strength of the idea that slaves were entitled to freedom from slavery, and that slavery should be overthrown; this viewpoint emerged through a complex of influences - the slaves’ visceral hatred of their exploitation, and the theoretical ideas of resistance and freedom offered by Voodoo and the French Revolution.

Between 1791-1793, those in Saint Domingue and, interestingly, France increasingly developed a theorisation of freedom that includes slaves, and opposed slavery. By 1793, there were significant tensions in France over the question of slavery and abolition. Although the Declaration of the Rights of Man had argued that all were entitled to freedom, the French had not applied this principle to the slaves in its colonies between 1789-1793; the practice had continued. Whilst there had been some limited recognition in the metropole that the practice of slavery was incompatible with the commitment to universal freedom, abolitionist groups did not call for the end to slavery outright. The ‘society of the Friends of the Blacks’, for instance, created in Paris in 1788, recognised the hypocrisy in how the French, harbingers of rights, treated slaves, yet made it very clear that it did not call for the end of slavery, or even the application of ‘liberty’ to slaves, but merely a gradual reform in circumstances and very slow abolition in the long term.¹⁰ Yet, despite this initial reluctance in the metropole even amongst radicals to embrace abolitionism, by 1794, the majority of the

⁸ “Declaration of The Rights of Man” (1789), available online at “The Avalon Project”, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/rightsof.asp

⁹ D. Gerrigus & N. Fiering, *The World of the Haitian Revolution* (2009), p. 106.

¹⁰ “Address to the National Assembly in Favour of the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 5 February 1790”, in L. Hunt (eds), *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (1996), p. 106-109.

French Assembly was supportive of the end of slavery. The precise institutional context that led the French to pass such a measure will be discussed later on; for now, we will focus on analysing the ideas that were central to the declaration. On the 4th of February 1794, French revolutionaries, in response to a delegation from Saint Domingue, announced that abolition of slavery was the next step in the Revolutionary march towards universal rights, and that emancipation was a vital component of the republican cause. Whereas ‘until now our decrees of liberty have been selfish’, abolition was to be the consummation of the ideal of freedom set down in the Rights of Man - ‘today we are proclaiming universal liberty’, and revoking the ‘aristocracy of the skin’ that, like the ‘nobilities’ and the ‘Church’ stood in the way of a free and republican future.¹¹ This sense that racialised slavery was incompatible with the universal ideals of the Revolution also was characteristic of the rhetoric of the emancipation proclamation of 29th August, 1794; ‘slavery of the blacks is abolished... all men living in the colonies, without distinction of colour... enjoy all the rights guaranteed by the constitution’.¹² What we see here, rhetorically, is that revolutionaries identified that the emancipation moment of 1794 was the direct advancement of the Revolution of 1789 and its promise of universal freedom; in so doing, they indirectly absorbed the plight of slaves into a wider narrative of a struggle for rights that had begun 5 years earlier. In turn, this acted as an extraordinary ideological commitment of a slave-owning state to the principle of abolition, and a conception of freedom that included slaves as entitled to it. This was historically unprecedented; in the words of Popkin, ‘for the first time in the 300-year history of colonial settlement in the Americas, the representatives of a European government set themselves on a path that would lead to the abolition of slavery’.¹³ Undoubtedly, it is important to realise the limits of this commitment. As I will demonstrate later, these announcements were, largely, a practical response, to the threatening revolution ongoing in Saint Domingue. In turn, crucially, the freedom that slaves were granted was not, in practice, as sweeping as it was presented in theory; the economic legislation of 1793-1794 passed by the French Civil Commissioners dictated that, although free, all former slaves were - in the short term - to renew the types of work they had completed as slaves - on the

¹¹ “Decree of the National Convention of 4 February 1794, Abolishing Slavery in All The Colonies”, in *ibid.*

¹² J. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, p. 67.

¹³ J. Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (2010), p. 1.

plantations, or in domestic contexts.¹⁴ Yet, despite this distance between rhetoric and reality, the proclamation still works as fascinating evidence of changing ideas regarding slavery and freedom - it highlights how, like the slaves of Saint Domingue, the French revolutionaries' reinterpreted existing conceptions of rights, and conceptualised slaves as active actors a wider struggle for rights and freedom.

In time, the former slaves who became political elites in the territory of Saint Domingue and Haiti also developed and articulated a commitment to the principle of freedom and liberty; in so doing, they defined the uprising of the slaves as underpinned by a demand for abolition and the wholesale end to chattel slavery. Toussaint Louverture, the military general who became the Governor-General of Saint Domingue, committed in the Saint Domingue Constitution of 1801 to abolition on these grounds in article 3: 'there cannot exists slaves on this territory, slavery is therein forever abolished. All men are born, live and die free and French'.¹⁵ This idea - of the innate entitlement of all slaves to freedom - persisted even in the wake of a new French administration, headed by Napoleon, that tried to reverse its decision and reinstate slavery. The Declaration of Independence, penned by Revolutionary leader Dessalines in 1804, was driven by this conception. To quote, 'we must take away any hope of re-enslaving us... independence or death'.¹⁶ In the 1805 first Constitution of Haiti, furthermore, the commitment to freedom from slavery was reinforced. The constitution by no means guaranteed the rights of what we would today see as free political citizen; it justified a dictatorship led by a military elite, with, for instance, no free press or rights of assembly.¹⁷ Yet, through its second article, 'slavery is forever abolished', it crucially did enshrine a basic, foundational freedom, and the principle that slavery is incompatible with the innate rights of every Haitian citizen to a basic liberty. Ultimately, then, what I have demonstrated through the Saint Domingue/Haitian example is the powerful emergence of an idea: that slaves were entitled to freedom, and the overthrow of slavery.

¹⁴ C. Fick, "The Haitian Revolution and The Limits of Freedom: Defining Citizenship in the Revolutionary Era", *Social History* (2007), pp. 400-401

¹⁵ "Toussaint Louverture, Constitution of the French Colony of Saint Domingue, 1801", in L. Dubois & J.D Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804*, p. 167.

¹⁶ The Haitian Declaration of Independence, 1804", in *ibid*, p. 188.

¹⁷ "The Haitian Constitution, 1805", in L. Dubois, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, p. 191

This same idea was, interestingly, increasingly held by those active in the American Revolutionary war (1775-1783). In this time of rhetorical commitment to freedom, many American slaves came to see the revolutionary principles of freedom that were championed by their white European masters as applying to themselves. For instance, in 1776, a slave called Prince was freed by his master, Captain William Whipple after he confronted him with the contradiction of the American Revolution, saying 'master, you are going to fight for your liberty, but I have none to fight for'.¹⁸ Similarly, a slave of James Madison's lamented that he desired the 'liberty for which we have paid the price of so much... and have proclaimed to be the... worthy pursuit of every human being', and found freedom after doing so.¹⁹ Throughout the Revolutionary period and after, moreover, slaves tried to use the words of their masters against them - to appeal for a freedom that they too were entitled to. Belinda, a slave from Massachusetts, for instance, petitioned the court in 1782, argued that her freedom could be justly seen as constituting part of the ongoing battles for liberty; she was fighting for 'the preservation of that freedom, which the Almighty Father intended for all the human race',²⁰ and that the colonies were striving for. An individual involved in Gabriel's slave rebellion of 1800 - an insurgency in Virginia against slavery - also justified his actions by placing it in accordance with the American Revolution, stating that 'I have nothing more to offer than what General Washington would have to offer... trying to obtain the liberty of my countrymen'.²¹ The ideas articulated here offer a close comparison to the concepts outlined by slaves in Saint Domingue/Haiti; as in that instance, we see the capacity of slaves to reinterpret and reimagine ongoing revolutionary struggles for freedom, and place themselves as active participants. By doing so, they crafted their own versions of what freedom meant, an interpretation which tied liberty more firmly to abolition and resistance to slavery.

¹⁸ Found in D. B. Davis, *The Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (2006), p. 145.

¹⁹ James Madison to James Madison, SR, 8 September 1783, available online at "Founders Online", <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-07-02-0170>

²⁰ "Petition of an African slave, to the legislature of Massachusetts, June 1787", available online at <https://oieahc-cf.wm.edu/wmq/Jan07/Finkbine.pdf>

²¹ R. Sutcliff, *Travels In Some Parts of North America in the Years 1804, 1805 & 1806* (1812). For this testimony, we rely on Robert Sutclif, an eyewitness in Virginia at the time.

Members of the American abolitionist movement who weren't slaves were also highly committed to the idea that the American Revolution led to a freedom for slaves, too. Individuals such as Benjamin Rush, a politician from Pennsylvania and signature of the Declaration of Independence, for instance, argued, as early as the 1760s, that 'it would be useless for us to denounce the servitude of Great Britain while we continue to keep our fellow creatures in slavery'.²² This represents an ideological willingness to argue that the principles of the American Revolution - of freedom and liberty - were applicable to slaves, too. This idea characterised the Abolitionist movement as a whole in this period. Key influences on this group were the political strands of Enlightenment thinking, and the growing conception of freedom and rights as something all human beings were innately entitled to.²³ Also highly influential on the thinking of the abolitionists was a specific form of Protestant Christianity that was popular in the North, which emphasised spiritual equality: the conception that all humans are equal under God and in the eyes of God, and so humans cannot justify enslaving other human beings. This combination of spiritual and secular reasoning and feeling can be seen in a wealth of documents from the period from abolitionists. It is evident, for instance, in a 1778 sermon from New Jersey, where Reverend Jacob Green forcefully queried: 'can it be believed that a people contending for liberty should, at the same time, be promoting and supporting slavery?' and decried the 'sin' of the institution.²⁴ An anonymous white man writing in 1773 also saw slavery as against the 'law of Christ' and 'our natural and Charter rights' alike.²⁵ Thus, many abolitionists, like slaves, were aware of the space that their revolutionary and spiritual ideals opened up for exploring questions of slavery and abolition.

Moreover, so were many key slaveholding, southern Revolutionary figures. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, was born on a plantation in Virginia, and owned slaves. Yet, as we

²² Found in D. B. Davis, *The Inhuman Bondage*, p. 274

²³ See J. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution and Human Rights, 1750-1790* (2013) for an extensive overview of this ideological tradition.

²⁴ "1778 sermon calling for Americans to honour ideals in the Declaration, excerpts", available online at "American in Class",

<https://americainclass.org/sources/makingrevolution/rebellion/text6/slaveryrights.pdf>, p. 4

²⁵ "1773 support for the slaves' petition from an anonymous white man, excerpts", available online at ibid, <https://americainclass.org/sources/makingrevolution/rebellion/text6/slaveryrights.pdf>

have seen, he also wrote a section in the American Declaration of Independence, of 1776, criticising slavery as incompatible with the freedom the Revolutionaries craved, decrying it as a ‘cruel war against human nature itself’, ‘depriving liberty’.²⁶ Here, then, Jefferson demonstrates his willingness to criticise slavery through utilising the concept of universal rights, indirectly applying rights to slaves, as humans with a ‘human nature’ and access to ‘liberty’. A contemporary of Jefferson’s and fellow Virginian slaveowner and politician George Mason, central author of the Virginian Declaration of Rights (1776), also asserted that slavery made ‘every gentleman... born a petty tyrant’.²⁷ By pairing it with ‘tyranny’, a concept associated with the British in American Revolutionary rhetoric, he describes his opposition to the trade - and implies it is a corrupt system, against revolutionary values. Like the slaves and abolitionists in America, he was compelled to view slavery as against freedom and inhuman.

Overall, then, this section has shown that there are remarkable parallels between Saint Domingue/Haiti, France and America, during the late part of the 18th century. In both instances, what we see are the same ideological currents emerging - these incorporated the humanity of slaves into wider conceptions of those entitled to rights and freedom, and which called for abolition as part of the revolutionary movement seem to challenge the institution of slavery.

²⁶ “Where MEN should be bought & sold: the deleted slave-trade clause in Thomas Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration of Independence, 1776”, available online at *ibid*, <https://americanclass.org/sources/makingrevolution/rebellion/text6/jeffersondraftdecindep.pdf>

²⁷ See the interjections of Col. Mason in the “Madison Debates, August 22, 1787”, available online at “The Avalon Project”, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/debates_822.asp. Here, Mason, as a representative from Virginia, spoke in a debate on the Convention floor held by the United States Constitutional Assembly on the question of slavery.

Section Two – “Slavery is forever abolished” vs the 3/5ths clause

The significance of wider contexts in Saint Domingue/Haiti and the United States”

What is crucial in this story, though, is the difference between these territories. We are confronted with the fact that, although the ideas were the same, the story is highly different in the United States and Haiti; in the former case, abolition was partially passed, but slavery also remained legal, in part, despite the passing of this intense and potentially fertile revolutionary moment, whilst in the latter, abolition became central to the foundation of a nation. How can we explain this? The second part of this section deals with this question; the argument here is that the contrasting institutional and wider contexts in the territories explains these different trajectories of what were the same ideas.

Firstly, an analysis of the wider contexts in which the Haitian Revolution took place at various junctures emphasises that a range of contexts - demographic, political, institutional, military, environmental - were favourable, in many ways, for the enactment of abolition.

To start with, the initial sustained uprising of slaves between 1791 and 1793 was precipitated by the strength of the slave forces. Slaves made up 90% of the population of the island, and so had huge force in numbers.²⁸ Furthermore, they had a rich tradition of resistance and uprising on the island to draw upon - there had been various rebellions before 1791, and also a tradition of slaves fleeing the plantation and joining marronage or runaway groups.²⁹ In turn, there existed strong and interconnected networks of slaves, forged through slaves who were able to travel around, for instance as merchants who could

²⁸ Figure 6.2 “An expanding slave island: Saint Domingue 1700-1790” in T. Piketty, Capital and Ideology (2020), p. 216.

²⁹ J. Popkin, A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution, p. 18.

move through plantations.³⁰ Thus, there existed a strong and large body of slaves, with a subversive history and tradition.

The slave-owning class was also in disarray at the time of the initial rebellion - between 1791-1793. There was a plethora of divisions within the colony: divides on racial grounds - between white and free coloured slave owners; on political grounds - between republicans and royalists; and on geographical grounds - between local planters, the centre in Saint Domingue, and the metropole.³¹ The result of this weakness and division was that the state was not in a position of power to mobilise against the slaves for much of the 1791-1793 period; a great epitomisation for this is the fact that the government in Saint Domingue could not send much of its standing military to fight the slaves in August 1791, as much of it was being used to put down petty rebellions by small white republican planters called 'Patriots' who were rebelling against heavy-handed metropolitan rule.³² When viewing these factors together, we see the prevalence of two things: a strong and overwhelming slave force with a history and culture of rebellion, and a weak and divided colonial presence. These contexts explain the emergence and maintenance of the original uprising of 1791-1793.

Wider contexts were also key to the emancipation proclamation of 1794. It is important not to adopt a reductionist teleological or Whiggish approach to the emancipation proclamation, and believe that abolition was the inevitable ideological result of revolutionary idealism. Whilst it may seem obvious to us today that slavery is incompatible with freedom, the American and French examples show that contemporaries were capable of believing and acting in ways that were extraordinarily contradictory; the power of cognitive dissonance - of holding two ideas that are actually at odds with one another simultaneously, like 'that human beings are all free' and that 'people can enslave other people' - was immense. Thus, what happened in 1794 was a specific and highly contingent event. The revolutionary

³⁰ L. Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (2004), p. 51.

³¹ See the early chapters of J. Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution* (2011) for a clear explanation of these confusing divisions.

³² D. Fistein, "Theory and the Social Revolution in Haiti" (2009), p. 192.

idealism was, of course, central in allowing the Assembly to commit to an abolitionist stance; it provided them with a natural rhetorical language, and allowed them to conceptualise that abolition may be a just thing to pass in the interests of freedom. Yet, the wider political institutional contexts were also central to this event. At the time of emancipation, 1793, the city of Cap-Francais was in a chaotic and violent state. There had been huge conflicts, specifically, between various factions of the French colonial state government over various political issues that weren't related to slavery - over the question of rights for free coloureds, or those African-born individuals in Saint Domingue who were not slaves, a small elite demographic, and over the question of the French Revolution, news of which had been filtering into Saint Domingue slowly between 1791-1793.³³ On the one side was the radical revolutionary faction - led by commissioners Sonthonax and Polverol, who were sympathetic to free coloured rights. On the other side was a more reactionary and conservative side. Whilst partially the ideological outpourings of a revolutionary movement, it is also true that the emancipation proclamation, in the short term, was in large part a pragmatic outcome in this factional split. It was initially announced by the faction belonging to Sonthonax and Polverol throughout the city, and, in part, was used by the commissioners so as to gain the support of the armed black slaves for the French revolutionary cause, and their battles to come against reactionaries, and also against the encroaching British army.³⁴ It was in this chaotic and increasingly desperate context, furthermore, that the French passed emancipation in the colony. Thus, what we see here is a very contingent alignment between available views or ideas - that slavery should be ended and slaves granted freedom - and the institutional context. It was in this very specific moment, with revolutionary figures in Saint Domingue needing support, and judging that the military loyalty of black slaves would be ascertained, that emancipation was passed.

Institutional contexts were also key to the ability of revolutionary leaders to create a free nation. The key context here was the centralisation of power ushered in by the military period. During the fighting, there had been a huge centralisation of power, so that leaders like Dessalines or Toussaint combined political and military authority. On one level, this led,

³³ For an excellent and detailed explanation of these groupings, see Chapter Two, "A Colony in Revolution", in J. Popkin, You Are All Free

³⁴ J. Popkin, You Are All Free, p. 2-3.

in the long term, to dictatorial outcomes. In the Constitution of Saint Domingue in 1798 and the Constitution of Haiti in 1805, moreover, leaders announced that they were ruling forever, with no freedom of speech or judiciary protections.³⁵ All power was to be centralised in the hands of the governors, from defence, to appointing ministers; it was to be a tyranny. Yet, what this type of political control also allowed, crucially, was an efficiency in passing sweeping national measures. This meant, moreover, that abolition could be passed unilaterally, without any exceptions, as it was in 1801; this quickly and easily applied to all of the land.

It is also important to note that other contexts - environmental and military - also were integral in allowing the independence of Haiti, and thus the institutionalisation of abolition. Between 1802 and 1805, on the back of a conservative military coup, newly appointed Emperor of France, Napoleon Bonaparte, tried to reassert control over Saint Domingue, and reintroduce slavery in the colony.³⁶ Central in thwarting this was the military capability of leaders like Dessalines, whose excellence in the strategy and coordination of the war was vital in holding off the French.³⁷ Also central in halting French advances were environmental contexts, as has been increasingly recognised by historians as part of a wider shift towards recognising the environment as an active agent in influencing historical outcomes.³⁸ The impact of the natural world and of natural processes on the outcome of the Napoleonic War as a whole is gargantuan. European troops succumbed in extraordinary numbers to illness as they didn't have differential immunity to local diseases. Overall, France sent around 60-65,000 troops to Saint Domingue, and around 80-85% died not in combat, but as a result of yellow fever.³⁹ Clearly, then, the environment should be placed as paramount as a

³⁵ "Toussaint Louverture, Constitution of the French Colony of Saint Domingue, 1801" and "The Haitian Constitution, 1805", in L. Dubois, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, p. 167 & p. 191.

³⁶ As per the "Law For Re-establishing Slavery in the French Colonies, 20th May 1802", a piece of legislation which revoked the emancipation decree of 1793 and reassured chattel slavery in law. Available online, at "The Napoleon Series",

https://www.napoleon-series.org/research/government/legislation/c_slavery.html

³⁷ S. Sander (ed), *Ground Warfare: An International Encyclopedia*, Volume 1 (2002), p. 893.

³⁸ See, for instance, A. Isenberg (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (2014)

³⁹ J. McNeill, "Mosquito Revolutions: Disease, War and Independence in the U.S South, Haiti and Venezuela, 1776-1825" (2014), p. 121.

wider context that allowed and facilitated the abolition of slavery in the Americas; in many real ways, the Haitian Revolution was also a ‘mosquito revolution’, as McNeill argues.⁴⁰

Overall, then, I have shown that the ideological will for abolition was only part of the picture in creating a free state in Haiti; from the first uprising to the eventual independence, the potential for abolition was facilitated through a plethora of highly contingent favourable wider contexts - political, demographic, institutional, military, environmental.

This marks a large contrast to the American Revolution, moreover. In America, as we have seen, there was a similar foundational commitment, amongst many diverse members of the population, to the idea or viewpoint that slavery was incompatible with freedom. Yet, the comparison with Haiti is on the outcomes that arose from this: in the United States, unlike in Haiti, the abolitionist potential of the Revolution did not lead to sustained, national change. This can be explained due to its unique institutional contexts - its demographic composition, and its federalist structure. To start with, it is apposite to explore the demographic contexts. Unlike Saint Domingue, where slaves made up almost all of the population, the United States was more racially diverse. In 1790, slaves comprised 18% of the total population in the United States.⁴¹ In certain states in the South, slaves consisted of a fairly high population. In Virginia, for instance, slaves were almost 30% of the population.⁴² Yet, overall, slaves were not the massive majority in the country, in the same way that they were in Saint Domingue; there is clearly a large difference between around 30% and 95%. Thus, in the United States, slaves did not have the same strength of numbers as they did in Saint Domingue; this did not allow the opportunities for a critical mass of slaves to get together, and create an overwhelming force of united slave revolt as was possible in Saint Domingue. This demographic difference is crucial in understanding the divergences of the two territories; slaves were outnumbered in the United States in a way that they weren't in Haiti,

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ “Slave, Free Black and White Population, 1780-1830”, available online at “Terry Bouton’s University System of Maryland User page”,

<https://userpages.umbc.edu/~bouton/History407/SlaveStats.htm>

⁴² Ibid.

which narrowed the availability of a mass and overwhelmingly strong revolutionary movement.

The second key context for the United States, that determined how abolitionist views led to change, was its federalised nature. Unlike Saint Domingue, and Haiti, which were both territories with clear centralised authority, and weak comparative federalist structures, the United States had a strong federalist division of power. Whereas the strong centralising impulses of Haiti allowed legislation to occur on the national level, in the United States, abolition was implemented on the state level. In the North, where, as we have seen, there was a strong ideological support of abolition, and also less of an economic reliance on the slave economy. This meant furthermore, that states passed a wide range of abolition laws, throughout the 1770s. Although the exact nature of these regulations differed between states - some states, such as Massachusetts, enforced immediate emancipation, whereas others, like Pennsylvania pledged to eradicate slavery within a generation, so that current slaves would remain in bondage, but their descendants would be free,⁴³ the overall commitment to some kind of abolition, of turning rhetoric into action, was consistent. Thus, the United States' federalised structure worked to allow certain states, in the North, to do what Saint Domingue had done: to institutionalise the viewpoint of abolition.

Yet, the other consequence of the United States' federalised structure was that, on the national level, abolition was difficult to introduce. Key here was the role of the Southern states. In contrast to the North, slavery was absolutely essential to the Southern economy.⁴⁴ Southern politicians, individuals who were often white planters themselves, consciously demanded continuity with the existing slave order; they believed, as had the British before them, that slavery was justifiable on racial terms. Such politicians strongly advocated that it

⁴³ For the statute passed in Pennsylvania, look at "Pennsylvania - An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 1780", available online at "The Avalon Project", https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/pennst01.asp. For Massachusetts, see a good introduction to the complex legal process of abolition, offered by the contemporary Massachusetts Court System and referenced thoroughly. It is available online at "Mass.gov", <https://www.mass.gov/guides/massachusetts-constitution-and-the-abolition-of-slavery>

⁴⁴ For an excellent and thorough explanation of this, see S. Beckert, Empire of Cotton: A Global History (2015)

should be legalised, spread as an economic practice and protected through political institutions. Moreover, the Southern states made up 5 of the original 13 states. During discussions over the United States constitution (around 1783-1787), furthermore, it was decided that any article must require a 2/3rds majority; the crucial result of this was that nothing could be passed throughout the Constitutional discussions without some degree of consensus from the South.⁴⁵ This marks a big contrast from Haiti; in Saint Domingue, the centralisation of power meant that abolition found political expression on a national level quickly and totally. In the United States, though, abolitionists looking to introduce legislation on a national scale had clear limits on their power; they could only advocate for their state. The ramifications for the question of slavery were profound. No Southern state would agree to an eradication of the institution of slavery during the discussions,⁴⁶ and no abolitionist action could occur without them.⁴⁷ The result, in turn, was a series of torturous results and compromises, which to some degree legalised and institutionalised slavery. The political declaration in the Constitution that slavery was to be protected and legalised until the early nineteenth century, and that slaves were to constitute 3/5ths of a person,⁴⁸ testifies to this: slavery was nationally supported. Slaves were decided to be somewhere in between a full human and a full piece of property. Ultimately, the decision was largely deferred to a future generation through the clause that no legislative action could be undertaken until 1808.⁴⁹ Attempts to end slavery through the insurgency of slave action, moreover, as seen in the Virginia revolt of 1800, an uprising of slaves which drew influences, reportedly, from France and Haiti were treated harshly by states which saw insurgency as evidence of mutinous and seditious actions of violence; 26 slaves were executed.⁵⁰ The state, then, by not legislating

⁴⁵ J. Fruchtman, *American Constitutional History: A Brief Introduction* (2016), p. 18.

⁴⁶ A recently extensive and systematic investigation of voting patterns during the Constitutional debates emphasises that Southern delegates voted consistently in line with what they perceived to be their state's interests on slavery; on questions such as the regulation of the slave trade, the slaves per capita in their state was more of an indicating factor influencing their vote than their personal beliefs or whether they personally owned slaves. See K. Dougherty & J. Keckelman, "Voting on slavery at the Constitutional Convention", *Public Choice* (2008)

⁴⁷ P. Finkelman, "Slavery and the Constitutional Convention: Making a Covenant with Death", in R. Beeman, *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity* (1987), p. 197-199.

⁴⁸ "Article 1, Section 2, United States Constitution", ratified in 1788. Available online at "<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>

⁴⁹ "Article 5, Section 1, United States Constitution", ratified in 1788. Available online to see at *ibid*.

⁵⁰ D. Egerton, "Gabriel's Conspiracy and the Election of 1800" (1990), p. 214.

against slavery on a national level, effectively supported its continuation in federal states. The result, then, was that, as Davis states, a paradox 'of a revolution that seemed to challenge slavery but in fact entrenched and strengthened it'⁵¹

Conclusion

Overall, this essay has demonstrated two things. Firstly, that in both Haiti and the United States during the Revolutionary period, there was a similar process of viewpoint emergence. Specifically, revolutionaries started to contest that slaves were entitled to freedom, and that the institution was unjustifiably in opposition to the sacred value of liberty. Individuals ranging from slaves, to slave-owners, to abolitionists started to make this connection and insight. Yet, the second key contention of this essay is that, whilst the idea change was analogous in both territories, there was a huge difference concerning how these viewpoints were institutionalised and introduced - how calls for freedom were enacted, or not enacted. In Saint Domingue, there were clear contexts that allowed abolition to become a concrete reality on a widespread and wholesale scale- a weak state, a strong and large slave population, an increasingly sympathetic and radical metropole, environmental forces, a centralisation of power in a political and military slave elite. In the United States, however, wider demographic and political contexts dissuaded the possibilities for slave revolt or national abolition. The precarious compromises regarding slavery introduced in the Revolutionary Period would hold for almost a century; the fragility of this settlement, though, would eventually be a major contributing factor to the bloody internece Civil War of 1861-1865.

It is interesting to consider the wider implications of my conclusion. What we can see in this essay is that ideas work in dialogue with institutions to create concrete, historical change; ideas and viewpoint change are essential in articulating the change that society would like to create, and generating conceptual space for the possibility that things can be different - that slavery was wrong and can be outlawed, in this case. Yet, concrete outcomes - in this

⁵¹ D. B. Davis, *The Inhuman Bondage*, p. 146.

case the abolition of slavery - are shaped through the combination of both ideological foundations and institutional contexts. The example of Saint Domingue/Haiti shows the extraordinary potential of wholesale historical change on the national level, if the will and wider contexts are there. Contrastingly, the example of the United States shows that extraordinary things can be done to turn viewpoint change into action on a decentralised level. The example also highlights, though, the difficulties in creating national, widespread change within institutions which are to some degree hostile to the viewpoint being offered. Both examples give us plenty to think on, reflect and learn from when approaching and considering how to implement the ideological and institutional change we wish to see in the world.

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