

The Road to 1848: Interpreting French Anti-Slavery

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French Anti-Slavery: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802-1848. Lawrence C. Jennings. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2000. x, 320pp. \$54.95. ISBN 0521772494.

The Politics of Slave Trade Suppression in Britain and France, 1814-48: Diplomacy, Morality, Economics. New York: St. Martin's Press. 2000. xiv, 388pp. \$45.00. ISBN 0333730267.

The history of French abolitionism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries presents a striking contrast to that of British abolitionism. The small French abolitionist movement of the 1780s, directly inspired by the British movement of the same period, had relatively little direct impact on the radical experiment in emancipation that took place in the Caribbean during the French revolution. Many of its leaders had in fact become the victims of revolutionary politics by the time the 1794 decree of emancipation granted immediate and universal emancipation to slaves in the French colonies. After Napoleon Bonaparte's re-establishment of slavery and the independence of Haiti, French abolitionism was a small and for the most part ineffectual force for several decades. The mass anti-slavery mobilisation so remarkable in Britain in the first decades of the nineteenth century had no real counterpart in France, with the exception of a few petition campaigns of the 1840s. Nineteenth-century French abolitionism, like its earlier manifestation, was in many ways indebted to the successes of British abolitionism. In the 1830s, emancipation in the British colonies of the Eastern Caribbean placed some pressure on the French Caribbean, as it provided new opportunities for slaves to escape to a land without slavery. Indeed, one French commentator worried in 1833 that 'provocateurs' from the British colonies might 'disrupt the peace of our slave establishments' (Jennings, 40) – a remarkable mirror-image of the period when French "provocateurs," often ex-slaves, in fact did help encourage revolts of striking violence and success in the British colonies during the mid-1790s.

The greatest difficulty in mapping out the historical impact of French abolitionism comes from the fact that the abolition of slavery in 1848 was one of those rare historical instances almost entirely shaped by the action of one person – Victor Schoelcher. It was the intervention of Schoelcher, recently returned from West Africa, which led directly to emancipation in 1848, at a moment when the Abolition Act was nearly deferred as it had been repeatedly during the previous decades. Schoelcher was able to convince his friend François Arago, who had just been named Minister of the Navy and the Colonies, that rather than fearing the dislocations that might be caused by emancipation, the French government should fear what would happen if emancipation was delayed. Schoelcher, who had written brilliantly and effectively about the history of the Caribbean and the situation of contemporary slaves, essentially single-handedly pushed the Republicans of 1848 into pursuing a policy of immediate emancipation. Given that the Republican regime was dismantled in 1851, his action had particular significance in the political history of the French Caribbean. Indeed, until recently Schoelcher remained the most celebrated historical figure in Martinique and Guadeloupe.

The curious history of French abolitionism in the nineteenth century is perhaps one reason why it has received much less attention than its British counterpart. Fortunately, the recent work by Lawrence Jennings, *French Anti-Slavery: The Movement for the Abolition of Slavery in France, 1802–1848*, helps to fill this enormous void by providing an excellently researched and carefully detailed account of the struggles of abolitionists from 1802 to 1848. As Jennings shows, French abolitionism during this period was primarily driven by a relatively small group of intellectuals and politicians who put most of their efforts into influencing policies regarding slavery by mobilizing the personal connections they had within the highest levels of government. As some of the chapter titles of the work – ‘Procrastinations, Consultations, Interpretations’, ‘Stalemate and Further Regressions’, ‘Crisis and Further Setbacks’ – suggest, much of this story is one of frustrated attempts to place abolition on the agenda of government action. But it is also the story of continuing, courageous attempts on the part of many individuals to press for emancipation, despite many defeats, and of the redefinition and ultimate radicalisation of abolitionist thought that moved from gradualism to immediatism by the 1840s.

One of the few abolitionist leaders of the revolutionary period who survived and continued in the struggle for slave rights was the famous Abbé Grégoire, who in 1989 took his place in the Panthéon in Paris as one of France’s heroes. Jennings begins his book by telling the story of the actions of isolated figures like Grégoire during the Napoleonic and Restoration periods in France. He discusses the activities of the *Société de la morale*

chrétienne starting in 1821, about one-third of whose members were Protestants, and which was influential, Jennings argues, not because of its size (which was quite small) but through the “importance of its members” among the liberal opposition who would play an important role after the 1830 revolution. In the second chapter, he turns to the brief period of colonial reform that developed in the wake of this revolution. The main achievements of this period – like the period from 1790 through 1792 during the French Revolution – were an expansion of the rights of free coloreds, who were given political and civil rights in 1833, though most were still excluded from exercising political rights by economic restrictions on voting. An uprising of free coloreds in Martinique later that year highlighted their continuing dissatisfaction with the situation. In the same year, a law abolishing the branding and mutilation of slaves and calling for a slave census was also passed.

Perhaps the most important achievement of the period after the 1830 revolution, however, was the long-delayed complete suppression of the French slave-trade. This was the culmination of years of political and diplomatic conflict that is explored in Paul Michael Kiestra’s *The Politics of Slave Trade Suppression in Britain and France, 1814-1848*, which provides a detailed study of the debates surrounding this issue in the two countries. As Kiestra shows effectively, the question of the abolition of the slave-trade was inextricably tied up in the often conflictual relationship between Britain and France during this period. Those in France who wished to defend the slave-trade consistently portrayed British pressure about the slave-trade, notably around the issue of the right to search vessels, as a cynical attempt to undermine the French empire. Accusations of Anglophilia were in fact consistent thorns in the side – sometimes deadly ones – of French abolitionists from the 1790s on. Nevertheless, over the course of several decades, various political leaders on both sides of the channel participated in elaborate negotiations that ultimately succeeded in a collaborative suppression of the slave-trade that had been carried out so profitably by both countries. They did this, Kiestra shows, by struggling to contain popular agitation surrounding the issue of the trade, and questions surrounding the British right to search French vessels. ‘Successive administrations therefore cooperated to make the image of reality acceptable in both states’, writes Kiestra, ‘even if it was sometimes at variance with the truth which they knew was impossible to change immediately. At the government level, abolition was neither a crusade nor an economic plot, but an exercise in political management’ (263). Despite some small errors (St. Domingue is consistently misspelled as St. Dominique), Kiestra’s well-researched book is an important contribution.

The British influence on France was also profound in the sphere of the abolition of slavery itself. As Jennings points out, in Britain anti-slavery

activity was revived in the early 1830s 'by the growing abolitionist belief in the ineffectiveness of any gradual approach to slave liberation' (38). Immediatism, in contrast, did not take root in France until much later. Still, though French abolitionism remained extremely weak in the early 1830s because of its 'undermanned, leaderless, disorganised, and unfocused state' (47) anti-slavery gathered steam in 1834. Newspapers celebrated the emancipation of British slaves, and various leaders interested in bringing about the same transformation in the French Caribbean formed the *Société française pour l'abolition de l'esclavage*.

During this period the Martinican free colored Cyrille Bissette emerged as an important abolitionist leader, founding 'the first French abolitionist periodical run by blacks, *La Revue des Colonies*' (49). Over the next years *La Revue* would publish important articles attacking slavery by such figures as the magistrate Xavier Tanc and two priests, all of whom had been kicked out of the French colonies because of their abolitionist activities. In the opening issue of the *Revue*, writes Jennings, Bissette proclaimed that its 'principles were those of the Enlightenment and the Declaration of Rights of 1789'. He further wrote that the planters were 'walking on a volcano!' and argued that it was vital to 'look into immediately the means by which abolition could be accomplished as gently as possible' because otherwise the slaves would eventually revolt (50). Bissette, however, was often at odds with other abolitionist leaders, most notably Victor Schoelcher, with whom he had a bitter political rivalry that stretched into the post-emancipation period. The vexed relationship between Bissette and other leaders in France is particularly well drawn by Jennings and constitutes one of the major contributions of his work. One of the central reasons for the split between Bissette and other abolitionists early on was that he was an immediatist who, as Jennings writes, had 'read correctly the lesson of the British emancipation process and come to realise that gradualism would not work, and that it was playing into the hands of a circumspect government and of a colonial establishment that was banking on postponing slave liberation as long as possible' (75).

This evaluation on the part of Bissette was borne out during the mid to late 1830s and 1840s, when attempts at reform and arguments for gradual emancipation on the part of the best placed abolitionist leaders were consistently undermined or shelved, to a large extent because of the persistent and clever political activities of the planters. 'The essential tactic of the colons already at this time', writes Jennings, 'was to accept emancipation in principle but postpone it as long as possible and pose impossible conditions for its accomplishment.' They could not avoid 'the inescapable baggage of liberty inherent in the heritage of the Enlightenment and Revolutionary period' but successfully 'deflected the egalitarian

challenge of the abolitionists, and isolated the latter by aligning themselves with a government that also wished to proceed slowly on the emancipation question' (79-80).

Jennings describes in detail the various commissions and groups who worked towards abolition during this period, showing how the particular configurations of power, as well as the gradual nature of many of the proposals put forth, undermined progress towards emancipation. He effectively portrays the emergence of Victor Schoelcher, particularly with the publication of his *Des Colonies françaises: Abolition immédiate de l'esclavage* in 1841, as 'an important player on the anti-slavery' scene who stood out for his insistence on the necessity for immediate emancipation (161). He shows, however, how the de Broglie commission charged with analysing the question of emancipation, driven by a concern over the decrease in sugar production in the British colonies, ended up advocating a very gradual form of emancipation, and even overlooking the failure of apprenticeship and arguing for the need for a period of *engagement* after the end of slavery. 'Once again' writes Jennings, "the majority on the commission shared the beliefs of colonial defenders" (181). Even though some members of the de Broglie commission, notably Tocqueville, later presented more immediatist positions, the Mackau laws passed in 1845 were still extremely limited in scope, essentially reiterating provisions for the moralisation and preparation of slaves (notably through the encouragement of religious education) already present in 1840. The 1845 laws did initiate procedures to help slaves work towards self-purchase, but proposed amendments by Adénor de Gasparin forbidding the whipping of women and setting price limits for self-purchase were defeated.

The work continues with an excellent presentation of the accelerating abolitionist activity during the 1840s, including an exploration of the petition drives carried out in 1844, independently of the "established anti-slavery channels," which drew nearly 9,000 signatures, primarily from Parisian workers but also from intellectuals such as Jules Michelet and Schoelcher. Interestingly, Jennings notes, one of the petitions included the names of what one colonial spokesman referred to as 'around one hundred maidens', which, as Jennings writes, 'affords some rare evidence of female participation in the French anti-slavery campaign of the 1840s' although this participation was 'strikingly small' in comparison to that in Britain (199). This petition drive was, however, an exception to the broader fact that for the most part French abolitionism failed to mobilise public opinion, to a large extent because of the tensions between France and Britain during the early nineteenth century. As the book shows in an excellent final chapter, it was the remarkable intervention of Schoelcher, who 'encapsulated and implemented the achievements of radical French abolitionism' and 'took

advantage of the revolutionary situation to institutionalise them', which led to immediate emancipation in 1848 (289).

Jennings' book, like that of Kiestra, is relatively untouched (some might say unscathed) by approaches in Atlantic history and colonial studies which emphasise the need to integrate the actions and perspectives of subaltern groups, such as slaves, into broader narratives of political and social transformation. These are works about leading intellectuals and activists, acting primarily in the metropole, and not about the lives and struggles of slaves or even the system of slavery itself. As Jennings writes, his book 'provides the first detailed analysis in any language of the French anti-slavery lobby in the first half of the nineteenth century, but does not purport to be a study of French colonial slavery itself, something already extensively examined by scholars' (ix). Readers might, then, find it useful to supplement Jennings' work with a reading of Dale Tomich's study of Martinique in the same period, *Slavery and the Circuit of Sugar*, or Josette Fallope's *Esclaves et Citoyens*, which examines the nineteenth century in Guadeloupe and effectively explores the lives of slaves and ex-slaves during this period.

In criticising the existing literature on French anti-slavery, notably the volley of materials that emerged in the context of the 1998 commemoration on the subject, Jennings sets his work in opposition to 'the politically correct hypothesis that blacks were agents of their own liberation in 1848 as in 1794 by sparking colonial unrest and revolts' (viii). He argues that there was no large-scale slave resistance during the early nineteenth century, and though he admits the existence of passive resistance and acts of poisoning, arson, confrontations with planters, and *marronage*, he argues that 'there is little evidence that this interfered with production on a measurable scale or undermined the viability of the French slave system'. Although there were some 'troubles' in 1830, he finds them 'minor events' when compared to the Jamaican slave revolts of 1831-32. It was, he points out, essentially after the news of impending slave liberation arrived in 1848 that there were large-scale uprisings in Martinique and Guadeloupe, which forced local administrators to apply the emancipation law earlier than was intended by the French government. 'Until the initiative for slave liberation came from Paris in early 1848, French slaves did not carry out actions ... that could have forced the hand of the government', he concludes (123). In addressing the question of the impact of the Saint-Domingue revolution on nineteenth century anti-slavery, he emphasises that, although colonial spokesmen who were 'prepared to muster every possible demonic vision in their campaign against slave liberation' commonly made reference to the revolution of Saint Domingue, such references were not 'one of the leading reasons causing France to lag behind Britain in anti-slavery activity' during the

period, especially after the British case showed that it was possible to end slavery peacefully. He further argues that it was the British case, rather than memories of Saint-Domingue, that 'led French officials to fear troubles in French slave establishments' (122).

While it is true that there has been a sometimes misleading emphasis on the 1848 slave uprisings in the French Caribbean as a way of highlighting the place of slaves in their own liberation – an emphasis linked to a broader effort to re-write the history of the French Caribbean in the midst of struggles over the political future of the French *Départements d'Outre-Mer* and over issues of cultural and educational policy surrounding Antilleans on both sides of the Atlantic – Jennings' polemical statement of the case against the significance of slave activity goes too far. He downplays the extent of the slave revolt of 1831 in Martinique, explored in detail in Georges Mauvois' 1998 book *Un Complot d'Esclaves: Martinique, 1831* which involved significant battles between slave insurgents and local troops, and during which the cane fields of many plantations were burned. He overlooks the connections that could be made between such revolts – and a variety of other mobilisations on the part of slaves and *gens de couleur* in the wake of the 1830 revolution – and the political advances regarding the rights of *gens de couleur* in the early 1830s. Although the importance of events in the Caribbean on the anti-slavery movement and the significance of slave resistance have perhaps been exaggerated or asserted without sufficient proof, the fact is that more sustained research into this topic – perhaps following the model of Michèle Duchet's excellent 1971 work on the eighteenth century, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières* – needs to be done before the strong conclusions of Jennings on this issue can be accepted.

In interpreting the key moment when Schoelcher intervened with Arago in 1848, Jennings reiterates the point made by other scholars that Schoelcher's victory was to convince 'the navy-colonial minister that postponing even briefly the final decision on emancipation would cause impatient slaves to rise up in revolt.' At the particular turning point that led to the end of the years of stalled and defeated attempts at reform, the danger of slave revolt – a danger already noted in his *Des Colonies françaises* in 1842 – was powerfully evoked by Schoelcher. As Jennings powerfully shows, Schoelcher, and Bissette before him, stood out for immediatism among a French abolitionism dominated by gradualist approaches that often found a common ground with defenders of the colonies and of slavery. What made Schoelcher unique? What tradition did he inherit? His sustained investigation of slavery and emancipation in Martinique and elsewhere in the Caribbean certainly played a role. It was, I would argue, his knowledge of the current situation in the French Caribbean, as well as the region's

history, that enabled him to understand that slaves would make a connection between the Republic and emancipation – a connection rooted in the history of the 1790s – and that deferring abolition in this context was a danger. In other words, Schoelcher's intervention of 1848 was made possible both by the tradition of anti-slavery Jennings describes effectively in his work, and by lessons learned in the Caribbean itself about slavery and slave resistance. Future research on the topic will hopefully more fully integrate the history of slave resistance and anti-slavery activism, and the struggles on both sides of the Atlantic, to tell a more complete story of the path to 1848. Any such work, however, will be deeply indebted to the major contributions made by Kiestra and Jennings in these impressive works.

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