Teaching the French Revolution From the Inside Out: Views from Egypt and the Caribbean

Melissa K. Byrnes
Southwestern University

In the spring of 2009, I set out to teach a course on the "ins and outs" of modern French history, reincorporating France into global currents. As an historian of immigration and decolonization, I hoped to break out of "the Hexagon" and imbue my students with an understanding of history that reached across traditional national borders. Though my own focus in designing this course was to bring the world back into French history, I believe many of the examples I used to demonstrate global consequences and continuities can be fruitfully applied to bringing French and Francophone history back into the greater world history currents. My class was small and discussion-driven; students were assigned essays, but no exams. In a larger classroom setting, the sources we used would make equally engaging reading assignments, while elements of our discussions could be added into lectures and exam questions.

One of the most successful segments of the semester was the earliest: our study of the French Revolution. Even most global history courses tend to pull back completely within mainland France's borders at this point, possibly asking later how others were inspired by the iconic events of 1789. There was, however, a place in which revolt was not merely inspired by the French Revolution but part and parcel to it: the island colony of Saint-Domingue (renamed Haiti upon its independence in 1804). Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus' excellent documentary reader, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804*, provided the sources for this analysis.[1] Evaluating the Caribbean experience altered our understanding of the foundational ideas of the French Revolution and the evolution of the French Republic and Empire, as well as expanded the theatre of the Revolutionary wars, and revealed French variants on the institution of slavery. In addition to our study of the Haitian Revolution, we considered how the French Republic appeared to a foreigner confronting zealous revolutionary soldiers. Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, Ottoman Egypt's preeminent historian, penned a detailed account of Napoleon's Egyptian adventure.[2] This perspective from a region the French could not hold (the occupation lasted only three years, 1798-1801) offered both an alternative critique of the French Republic and a prime example of a failed attempt at colonization. The French Revolution thus took on deeper and more differentiated significance once we left the streets of Paris for those of Cairo and Le Cap.

Turning to the Caribbean required that we look to the development of France's North American Empire under the Old Regime. The 1685 *Code Noir* (Black Code), which regulated slavery in the French Empire, fascinated my students. They not only discovered significant contrasts with more familiar American slave decrees,[3] but they also contemplated the concrete effects of these differences on the lives of individual slaves, particularly those who found themselves subject to harsher laws after Napoleon Bonaparte sold the Louisiana territories to the United States in a bid to consolidate his empire (and enhance his finances).[4] Written under Louis XIV—and bearing above all his concern for the dominance of the Catholic faith—the *Code Noir* appears relatively lenient and included stronger protections for slaves than other statutes. All French slaves were to be baptized; unlike under later U.S. laws, slave marriages were legally recognized and slave families could not be separated by sale. Owners had specific obligations to feed and clothe slaves, and could be prosecuted if found to be negligent in these duties. Above all, upon being freed, all slaves immediately became subjects of the king, granted "the same rights, privileges, and liberties enjoyed by persons born free."[5] The *Code Noir* thus enshrined a notion of belonging and proto-citizenship for colonial subjects that would not be seen again for centuries—my students harkened back to these articles repeatedly in our discussions of the French Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We must accept, of course, that this code was not fully observed by French colonial slaveholders, whose practices could be at least as brutal and arbitrary as in other plantation economies; still, it set an important legal precedent. The *Code Noir*'s decrees on manumission and legal equality, moreover, permitted the growth of a relatively large class of wealthy and educated men of color, including Vincent Ogé, who would argue forcefully for a French Republic without racial barriers.

After our brief overview of the Old Regime, we studied some of the foundational documents of the Revolution itself.[6] As an introduction to the historiography of the French Revolution and a way to begin thinking through its broader significance, I assigned my students brief presentations based on articles in Ozouf and Furet's *Critical Dictionary*.[7] Not surprisingly, a large part of the ensuing discussion centered on the various treatments of the Terror; my students found themselves struggling, alongside the authors they had encountered, to understand how 1789 led to 1793. The next class issued in a new level of complexity when we had to grapple with the fact that the height of the Terror was also the moment of the abolition of slavery—proclaimed first by officials in Saint-Domingue and formally ratified by the National Convention on 4 February 1794. Here was the other side of Republican radicalization: dedication to liberty as an absolute and universal ideal not only inspired the revolutionary fervor that drove the bloody purges of the Terror, but it also forced the members of the Convention to confront the hypocrisy of asserting the freedom and equality of all men while maintaining the practice of slaveholding. Reestablishing the relationship between the reign of the guillotine and the abolition of slavery thus helped to bring the Terror—and its leading characters—back into a morally complex field of analysis. Furthermore, it raised the difficult question of just how far French officials had to be pushed in order to rethink their assumptions about race, labor, and citizenship.

Ideals alone did not, however, drive the abolition of slavery in Saint-Domingue. French officials were motivated by the diplomatic and military context in the Caribbean as much as by any rejection of colonial racism. Though the Revolutionary Wars typically bring to mind Napoleon's armies marching across Central Europe and down the Iberian peninsula, combat stretched across the Atlantic. The island colonies were major sites of diplomatic wrangling and military confrontation—both of which often paralleled the opposition of the Republic to royalty. The Spanish monarchy supported early slave insurrections in the French colonies as a means of destabilizing the French Republic; once war was declared in 1793, the Spanish army offered formal commissions and uniforms to those

leading the slave rebellions (even Toussaint Louverture, the ex-slave rebel leader who produced Haiti's first constitution, served as a Spanish officer). The French, therefore, embraced abolition as an important weapon for the Republic to gain the support of former slaves and foster identification between the winning of individual freedom and the defense of the French Republic. This decision resonated through the nineteenth-century debates to abolish slavery (following its reinstitution by Napoleon in 1802); Alexis de Tocqueville argued in 1843 that if the French failed to free their slaves as the British had, France would lose its power and influence along the crucial Caribbean commercial axis.[8]

The French Revolution had repercussions beyond Europe and the Americas, of course, and the Revolutionary Wars crossed the Mediterranean as well as the Atlantic. For an account of the French Revolution from completely outside the French sphere of influence, we turned to al-Jabarti and his chronicle of the French invasion of Egypt in 1798. In this engaging view of the French Republican project, the French forces figured as a distinctly alien force, with puzzling customs and still stranger ideas. Al-Jabarti's analysis of Napoleon's initial proclamation to the Egyptian people provided an intriguing translation of French Enlightenment ideals into Egyptian terms; that "liberty" was the basis of the French Republic, for example, was taken to mean that the French "are not slaves like the Mamluks."[9] Al-Jabarti's critique of Republican institutions shared many themes with more familiar European royalists and conservatives—concerns about extreme secularism, questions about the real meaning and implication of equality, and a belief that the new French system would engender immorality. His chronicle introduced a perspective on European civilization as vulgar, ill-educated, and backwards. The stark differences between French and Egyptian society, coupled with the population's clear distaste for the French invaders, indicated reasons for the failure of French colonization in Egypt. The Egyptian reaction to French occupation also offered an opportunity to compare Napoleon's reception in Central Europe with that across the Mediterranean.

Over the first few weeks of this course, my students found themselves continuously reevaluating the French Revolution and their previous ideas about this pivotal moment and its ramifications. The Revolutionary pantheon expanded to include Vincent Ogé and Toussaint Louverture—individuals who were not only key to establishing an emancipated and independent Haiti, but who also contributed significantly to the debates going on in the halls of Parisian assemblies. From the opposite side of the political spectrum, al-Jabarti emerged as a new counterpart for Edmund Burke and others who opposed French Republicanism and its universalist presumptions. Set in this wider frame, the repercussions of events in France were no longer understood simply as the spread of Western political progress across the globe, but as developments that were critiqued, questioned, and embraced to varying degrees and in widely differing contexts. For the purposes of my course, these discussions set the stage for further explorations of the relationship between the global context and French developments. Within a world history setting, the Egyptian invasion illustrates the reception of French ideas in the broader world and sets the stage for later confrontations between Europe and Africa. Likewise, teaching the Haitian Revolution as an integral part of the French Revolutionary tale transforms the late eighteenth century into an age of truly Atlantic revolutions; instead of a series of tangentially related revolts, these events signify a process of political evolution with multiple centers, in constant communication with each other.[10] This revolutionary era can then be better connected to themes with particular resonance in an American classroom: raising fundamental questions about the institution of slavery and its varied forms; delving into alternative understandings of republicanism, liberty, and equality; and calling attention to the history of an island nation we now associate more with crisis, poverty, and environmental catastrophe than with its legacy of freedom and abolition.

Suggested Discussion Questions

The French Caribbean

- How were slaves perceived under the Old Regime? What punishments and protections did the *Code Noir* outline?
- What ideas about race come through the various texts?
- How did the inhabitants of Saint-Domingue, both free and enslaved, view the French king?
- What claim did free men of color make to French citizenship? How was this received (supported and denied)?

Revolution in Saint-Domingue

- What arguments were made for the emancipation of France's slaves? How did proponents adopt the language and ideas of the French Revolution?
- In what ways did the Caribbean rebellions intersect with international conflicts at the time of the French Revolution?
- What concerns did leaders voice about the effects of abolition on social and political order? On economic prosperity? What measures were enacted to curb these fears?
- What events led to the declaration of Haitian independence?
- What rights and values did the final Haitian Declaration and Constitution enshrine?

Al-Jabarti's Chronicle

- How did the Egyptian population react to the arrival of French soldiers and the French occupation?
- What characteristics does al-Jabarti ascribe to the French in terms of appearance, customs, etc.?
- How does al-Jabarti interpret Napoleon's proclamation and the events of the French Revolution?

Essay Assignment (5-7 pages)

This essay asks you to address the relationship between domestic and imperial developments during the time of the French Revolution. The following questions suggest ways in which you may approach this topic. You should not, however, feel constrained by them; nor should you feel obliged to answer all of them. The strongest essays are limited to concrete and specific arguments that address one or two facets of the larger questions:

- How did the ideals at the heart of the French Revolutions translate into other territories under French control (the Caribbean colonies, Egypt)?
- In what way did the acts and laws passed by the French revolutionary governments address the inequalities of the Old Regime on the mainland and in the colonies?
- How did the revolutionary system evolve from 1789, through the radical stages, the conservative reaction, and

Napoleon's Empire? Be sure to include examples from the colonies as well as from mainland France.

ENDNOTES

[1] Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006).

[2] Shmuel Moreh, trans., *Napoleon in Egypt: Al-Jabarti's Chronicle of the French Occupation* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Weiner Publishing, 1993). Robert L. Tignor's Introduction provides a useful background narrative for the text.

[3] Slave codes that might be considered in a comparative discussion include the Spanish Black Code for Cuba from 1574, the British slave code for Barbados from 1661, and the Virginia slave laws of 1705.

[4] Dubois and Garrigus include a section on American reactions to the Haitian Revolution, particularly the widespread concern that a successful slave rebellion could act as a contagion.

[5] *Code Noir*, Article LIX, in Dubois and Garrigus, 54.

[6] There are two solid documentary readers for the French Revolution: Lynn Avery Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996) focuses on the notions of rights and citizenship, and the expansion (or failure to expand) these rights to segments of the population; John W. Boyer and Julius Kirshner, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, ed. Keith M. Baker, vol. 7 of *University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987) offers a closer look at daily life and social circumstances. The basic documents of the French Revolution are also widely available on-line; the Internet Modern History Sourcebook has a comprehensive and well-organized collection at http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook13.html.

[7] François Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., "Historians and Commentators," in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Boston, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989), 881-1034. There are sixteen ten-page entries on individual authors that may be assigned to students to present singly or discuss in small groups.

[8] Alexis de Tocqueville, "The Emancipation of the Slaves," in *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, ed. and trans. Jennifer Pitts (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 199-226.

[9] Moreh, 28. The full text and analysis of the proclamation may be found on pp. 24-33. The Mamluks, Egypt's ruling class, were elite slave soldiers.

[10] The most recent plea to reconsider the French Revolution within the Atlantic frame may be found in Laurent Dubois, "An Atlantic Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2009), 655-661. The article includes a brief, comprehensive historiographical overview.

Istanbul Symposium, October 2010

A Symposium sponsored by Istanbul Sehir University and the World History Association, 21-24 October 2010, Istanbul, Turkey. The theme of the symposium will be "Byzantine and Ottoman Civilizations in World History," and will focus on the world-historical significance of Byzantine and Ottoman civilizations, 330-1922. The symposium will consist of approximately 50 papers by Turkish and international participants, plus several plenary sessions. The official languages of the symposium are English and Turkish. Persons not presenting a paper may also register for the conference, attend at no fee, and will be eligible for discounted lodging at 4- and 5-star conference hotels in the Old City. You may register for the symposium on the WHA website. In order to participate in any capacity, you must register online no later than 15 September 2010. All registrants are responsible for their own travel and accommodation expenses and schedules. See you in Istanbul for an excellent time! While there is no registration fee, registration is required.