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The Enlightenment and Its Effects on the Haitian Revolution of 1789-1804

Rebekah Nicholson
McNair Scholar

Throughout history, revolutions have started because of new ideas that change thinking and disrupt the status quo. The Haitian Revolution of 1789-1804 is no exception. The Enlightenment ideas of equality for men and representative government were crucial to the insurrection. However, how did Enlightenment philosophy make its way to the Caribbean and influence the people to free themselves from their colonizer, France? One slave in particular was strongly influenced by Enlightenment ideas: Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the revolution. Ultimately, the Enlightenment inspired a successful slave revolt in Haiti. While traditional scholarship has depicted the slaves in the revolt as brutes blindly following their cynical leader, in fact L'Ouverture actively used the ideas of European philosophy, which empowered them to become agents.

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Several historians have analyzed the Haitian Revolution of 1789-1804. There are three authors, T. Lothrop Stoddard, Thomas Ott, and C.L.R. James, who wrote extensively on the subject. Stoddard's book gives an excellent in-depth overview of the revolution, but it has an obvious racist interpretation. Ott's book has a basic outline of the revolution, but gives a view concentrating primarily on the slaves. James's book is a great source of information on L'Ouverture and the revolution, but it has a racist interpretation as well.

Stoddard's 1914 book, *The French Revolution* in San Domingo, is an excellent source of information dealing directly with the revolution. It is a narrative about the events during the revolution. Stoddard's book gives a detailed account of the revolution that other books do not have. The book explains the beginning of the slave insurrection. Stoddard has an in-depth description of the August 22-23 uprising in the northern section of the country among the enslaved Africans. That is the date that most historians agree the Haitian Revolution began. Stoddard argues that the insurrection by the slaves caught the colonists unprepared.[1] After hearing about the slave uprising in the North Province, colonists elsewhere on the island began to take up arms at an astonishing speed.[2] The insurrection had two leaders, Boukman and Jeannot, both were killed near the beginning and were replaced by Jean-François and Biassou.[3] Toussaint L'Ouverture joined the army lead by Biassou. The slaves used guerilla warfare tactics; they never attacked the whites openly, unless their numbers overwhelmed the colony's militia.[4]

Stoddard also describes an uprising that began in the West Province of the island by the free mulattoes. In other

[1] T. Lothrop Stoddard, *The French Revolution in San Domingo* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2003, reprint), 128.
[2] Stoddard, 134.
[3] Stoddard, 137.
[4] Stoddard, 138.

books, this insurrection was mentioned only in passing. The mulattoes rose against whites for refusing to implement the Decree of May 15. This decree was made in response to the Decree of March 8, 1790 that stated all property owning men, who had paid taxes for two years, and had attained the age of twenty-one had the ability to vote. The Decree of May 15 revoked the right to vote to most of the second caste, mulattoes and free blacks. It allowed only a small number of the second caste the ability to vote. The cause for alarm among the whites rested with the Rewbell amendment. It stated, "…[T]hat the people of color born of free father and mother shall be admitted to all the future parish and Colonial Assemblies, if in other respects possessed of the required qualifications."[5] Once the Decree of May 15 became a law, the cause of mulattoes was won, at least morally.[6]

Stoddard's writing had obvious racist leanings. "The negro women made no resistance. They lacked the European ideal of chastity, and they had strong reasons for welcoming their master's favor."[7] This was a typical sentence found within Stoddard's book. It is obvious that he was influenced by the scientific data of his day, which was that there was a natural hierarchy between the different races with Anglo-Saxons being the most intelligent and Africans the least. Stoddard's book was an excellent source of information on the different key aspects of the revolution, but only offered the view of the white planters.

Another historian, Thomas O. Ott argues that the groundwork for the revolution lay in the social structure of the island. There were three distinct social castes: whites; *gens de couleur*, which consisted of mulattoes and free blacks; and the slaves.[8] The whites and *gens de couleur* held slaves. The *gens de couleur* were sometimes harsher to their slaves than the whites were because they felt that they had something to prove.[9]

The question that many historians have raised, according to Ott, is why did the slaves join the Haitian Revolution? The author gives many plausible explanations regarding the reasons and causes. First, and perhaps the most obvious, is the French Revolution. The enslaved Africans were inspired by the ideology of the French Revolution.[10] The slaves heard about the ideas of equality of all men through the pamphlets the *Amis des Noirs* group passed out in Saint Domingue as well as the conversations of their masters regarding France.[11] The pamphlets written by Abbé Grégoire had wide circulation among the mulattoes and eventually filtered down to the slaves themselves; the basic theme was emancipation of all slaves in the French West Indies.[12] According to Ott, the slaves often construed the idea of emancipation to fit their own frame of reference, defining freedom from slavery as meaning freedom from work, a problem that continually plagued Toussaint Louverture.[13] Ott further states, "By 1789 Saint-Domingue was on the verge of a social upheaval. White disunity, exploitation of the *gens de couleur*, maltreatment of the slave, and the abolition movements all contributed to the explosive situation. Yet violence might never have erupted had it not been for the social shock waves of the French Revolution."[14] Second, slaves felt an intense hatred toward their slave masters. On one occasion, a planter bought nine slaves and before he could return home, all had committed suicide. Last, many slaves had a reverence for Louis XVI and viewed him as father figure and wanted to see him reinstated to the throne.[15] Ironically, the king represented the Old Regime, which approved slavery. Many revolutionary writers made the charge that the Royalists incited the slaves to revolt in the hope of frightening the colonists back to the Old Régime because among the enslaved Africans the cry of "God and the King" rose throughout the ranks.[16] In addition, the Royalist insignia was assumed by the slaves, and the clergy were often spared from the violence.[17]

For all of the useful information that Ott had on the Haitian Revolution, his analysis focuses primarily on the slaves and their condition. Although the Haitian Revolution was a successful slave revolt, the *gens de couleur* and the whites were important to the revolution. In a letter to the People of Verrettes in March 1795 he wrote, "The French are brothers; the English, the Spanish, and the royalists are ferocious beasts…"[18] It can be inferred from his argument that the Enlightenment philosophy from France affected the slaves. Ott argues that the slaves were mostly deeply

[5] Stoddard, 122.
[6] Stoddard, 143.
[7] Stoddard, 37.
[8] Thomas O. Ott, *The Haitian Revolution 1789-1804* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1973), 9.
[9] Ott, 13.
[10] Ott, 40.
[11] Ott, 41.
[12] Ott, 41.
[13] Ott, 41.
[14] Ott, 21.
[15] Ott, 41-42.
[16] Stoddard, 140.
[17] Stoddard, 140.
[18] Katharine J. Lualdi, Sources of *The Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures Volume II: Since 1560* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 59.

influenced by the French Revolution. He does not, however, discuss how the slaves and the *gens de couleur* heard of the ideas. Many of the slaves, including Toussaint L'Ouverture, approved of the Republican government, which existed because of the Enlightenment ideas from the *philosophes*.

An important article, *The International Repercussions of the Haitian Revolution* by John Baur demonstrates that the Haitian Revolution was influential in many ways. There were several international repercussions because of the revolution. "In the French lesser Antilles, a minor rebellion called the Brigands' War, led by Victor Hugues, a mulatto and former St. Domingue merchant, attempted to free the slaves of the smaller French and British islands á la St. Domingue."[19] In Columbia, Simón Bolívar was influenced by Haiti's rebellion. "The Liberator received from Pétion four thousand guns and fifteen thousand pounds of powder, some lead, and the promise of a printing press to diffuse patriotic propaganda."[20] That shows that other countries in Latin America were aided by the victorious Haitians. The Haitians were willing to help others who were in their former situation because they knew the evils of slavery first-hand.

Baur states that many of the mulattoes who left Saint Domingue for fear of their lives moved to the United States, specifically in the region of Louisiana. Their presence brought the question of slavery to the forefront when the United States purchased the territory from Napoleon, who had to sell the land because France was in debt due to the large-scale war that they had lost against their former slaves.[21] Many people in the United States feared that another Haiti was going to happen because of the influx of mulattoes and enslaved Africans from Saint Domingue. In South Carolina, during the revolution in Haiti, the state forbade free Blacks from the West Indies and Africa to enter the state until 1803; in 1794, North Carolina forbade the slave trade and imposed a fine on importing people from the rebellious region.[22]

Baur states that the Haitian Revolution inspired the slaves in the United States of America to rise against their masters. Due to its influence, there were two slave insurrections in the United States; both were unsuccessful. Gabriel Prosser led one in 1800, and the other was commanded by Denmark Vesey.[23] Vesey was literate and often quoted scripture stating that the slaves in the United States were like the Israelites of the book of Exodus.[24] In both cases, a slave betrayed the leader, Vesey and Prosser, and each leader was executed.[25]

C.L.R. James focuses on the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture. Toussaint L'Ouverture read Abbé Raynal and believed that he was the courageous chief. He also read *Caesar's Commentaries*, which gave him some idea of politics and the military art and the connection between them.[26] His policies helped to lay the foundation for the Haitian state today.[27] Toussaint, however, always remained loyal to the revolutionary ideas of France. He viewed France as his mother country. He would remain loyal to France as long as France remained loyal to blacks. After the British were defeated, Toussaint took control of the island. The French representative was a puppet for him and did not question him. L'Ouverture, however, always kept the governor informed of what he was doing. The ultimate guarantee of freedom was the success of agriculture. In Toussaint's new government, personal industry, social morality, public education, religious toleration, free trade, civic pride, and racial equality, were the foundation for the new state.[28] Toussaint received his power from the black laborers.[29] They remained loyal to him, even though he forced them to go back to their previous plantations.

James's account is an important contribution, as it was one of the first written by an African American author about the importance of Toussaint L'Ouverture. His analysis remedies the racism of scholars such as Stoddard, but he has racist overtones against the whites. It is obvious throughout the book that his tone is one of disdain for white planters. He praises the actions of the slaves when they returned torture with equal cruelty. His interpretation, like Ott's, was one-dimensional. His sympathy for the enslaved Africans detracts from the work as an objective view of the revolution.

A review of several of the important historians on the subject makes it clear that none specifically examined the importance of the European

[19] John E. Baur, "International Repercussions of the Haitian Revolution" *The Americas 26*, no. 4 (1970): 405.
[20] Baur, 410.
[21] Baur, 411.
[22] Baur, 412.
[23] Baur, 417.
[24] Baur, 417.
[25] Baur, 417.
[26] C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 91.
[27] James, 91.
[28] James, 247.
[29] James, 255.

Enlightenment in inspiring the slaves of Haiti to strive for the liberation of the Haitian people. This paper will first, briefly describe the Enlightenment then, demonstrate that the leaders of the Haitian Revolution—Toussaint L'Ouverture, Vincent Ogé, and Julien Raimond—were steeped in Enlightenment philosophy. Further, it will attempt to discuss the role of the Enlightenment among important figures in the uprising and show a new type of leadership that emerges from this insurrection.

The Enlightenment, which is also termed "The Age of Reason," began in the 1680s as a movement against religious intolerance and arbitrary rule, but nearly a century later, it was an agenda for reform, threatening courts, princes, lay and clerical oligarchies.[30] The movement consisted of many ideas, including the equality of all men and representative government, which are important to this paper. Several important writers emerged during this period including John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, the Abbé Grégoire, and the Abbé Raynal.

John Locke wrote at length regarding the education of men. Locke believed that a good education was the only way to gain influence and powerful men achieved their position due to the education they had received.[31] His writings were primarily for the upper and middle merchant classes, but some of the lower classes took his writings and applied them to their children's situation. That is important because in Saint Domingue, Haiti, the people allowed an education were the *grands* and *petits blancs*, rich and poor whites respectively, and those who had a mixed European and African ancestry; the enslaved Africans were not allowed to attend school.

Rousseau wrote a significant amount on the idea of human rights. In his essay, *The Social Contract*, he wrote, "Man is born free…but everywhere he is in chains."[32] That statement is extremely important to the Haitian Revolution because those who rebelled against the common system were men and women held in bondage. In that essay, Rousseau also wrote at length about liberty. He stated liberty is twofold. First, there is natural liberty, which is the duty of man to provide for his own perseverance; and second civil liberty, which consists of the freedoms people relinquish and allows other people to govern and maintain order.

Kant, a German philosopher, answered the question, *What is Enlightenment?*, an article he wrote for a contest in Germany. In it Kant stated, that the motto of the Enlightenment was *Sapere Aude*, which is translated to Dare to Know. He also wrote that if freedom was attained, then enlightenment was inevitable. Kant's essay provides a critique of the slaves' thoughts. Kant wrote, "Perhaps a revolution can overthrow autocratic despotism and profiteering or power-grabbing oppression, but it can never truly reform a manner of thinking; instead, new prejudices just like the old ones they replace, will serve as a leash for the great unthinking mass."[33] In the case of the slaves, that happened. Once freedom was gained, the former slaves committed genocide on the island because they believed that they were superior to the whites who had run the island.

Grégoire wrote several pamphlets and essays relating to the Haitian Revolution of 1789-1804. His actions toward the revolution were in three parts.[34] Grégoire, at first, defended before the Constitutional Assembly the voting rights of mulattoes and free blacks. Second, he fought for the abolition of the slave trade and slavery. "For him and his abolitionist friends, the most important objective was not the immediate abolition of slavery, but of the slave trade. It was the commerce of human beings—the trafficking in human flesh—that seemed the most revolting to them."[35] Last, he tried to unite Saint Domingue with France's constitutional Church.[36]

Raynal had perhaps the greatest influence on L'Ouverture. His work, *Histoire des deux Indes*, had perhaps the greatest Enlightenment impact on abolition.[37] His book forced his exile in 1781 because of its radical tone.[38] Although Raynal wrote a significant portion of the book, some speculate Denis Diderot wrote a third of collection.[39] The work contained three main ideas: the invalidity of slavery, the freedom of will, and sympathy towards a violent revolution.

[30] Margaret Jacob, *The Enlightenment: A Brief History with Documents*, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 3.
[31] Jacob, 75.
[32] Jacob, 178.
[33] University of Pennsylvania, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?," University of Pennsylvania, http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/kant.html (accessed March 27, 2006).
[34] Jean-François Brière, "Abbé Grégoire and Haitian Independence," *Research in African Literatures* (35:2), 35.
[35] Brière, 36.
[36] Brière, 37.
[37] Ott, 20."
[38] "Guillaume Thomas François Raynal", www.freedictionary.com (accessed August 27, 2006).
[39] "Guillaume Thomas François Raynal".

L'Ouverture read it before the outbreak of violence in Saint Domingue.[40]

Having briefly discussed the Enlightenment, this paper will now explain how the ideas from the Age of Reason were disseminated, first in Europe, then in Haiti. Rousseau's ideas were often discussed among people. Three of the most significant ways were coffeehouses, education, and pamphlets.

One of the discussion of the revolutionary ideas lies in coffeehouses. In these gathering places, the latest essays were read by the literate and discussed amongst those who were educated as well as by people who received little formal education. In French Saint Domingue, people of the first caste, *les blancs*, the whites, discussed the French Revolution in the presences of their slaves.[41]

Many of the *grands blancs* had received their education in France and they were exposed to radical writings of the *philosophes*. Many *gens de couleur* received an education in France; however, in some cases the Creoles, people born of French parents in Saint Domingue, tried to deter them from going abroad.[42] Many of those who were enslaved and who worked in service positions listened carefully to the whites and began to form their own philosophy. Educated individuals, especially among the mulattoes, began writing pamphlets to the National Assembly shortly after the Fall of the Bastille. The writings focused primarily on the inequality between the social castes in Saint Domingue, specifically the disparagement between *les blancs*, the whites, and the *gens de couleur*, free mulattoes and blacks.[43]

The whites who were sympathetic to the Haitian's cause and the *gens de couleur* who were educated were able to read the pamphlets that were transported into Haiti. There was a man who lived in France who was particularly important to the publishing and writing of the pamphlets, which contained ideas of freedom, equality, and liberty, to Haiti. His name was Julien Raimond.

Raimond was born of an African mother and a French father in Martinique. He was a slave owner in Haiti and his income allowed him to spend his time in France. Raimond was an ardent supporter of equal rights among whites and mulattoes in Saint Domingue. After the fall of the Bastille, he moved to Paris and began writing pamphlets in which the influence of the Enlightenment is evident. Many of his writings stated that Africans needed to be taught what freedom and liberty meant before they could be enfranchised, but that mulattoes, because of the white blood, deserved the immediate granting of equal rights. The powerful whites feared the repercussions that the discussion of the Enlightenment ideas would have on their dominion.

On March 8, 1790, Raimond's dream of people of mixed heritage being able to vote was realized when the National Assembly declared that all property-owning white men, who were 25 and had been paying taxes for two years were able to vote. In 1791, there was increasing discrimination by the creoles of Saint Domingue towards free mulattoes and blacks. In response, Raimond wrote an essay titled, *Observations on the Origin and Progress of the Prejudice of the White Colonials against the Men of Color*, which attempted to answer two questions: first, whether the free colored people will have the rights of active citizens in the colonies; and second, whether these rights are to be accorded all free colored people, or restricted to certain members of this class.[44] On May 15, 1791, the decree for which Raimond had been campaigning was issued. It was the first legal expression in the Western world of the idea that persons of African descent were entitled to all the rights of citizenship.[45] In 1795, Raimond, along with other commissioners from France, was sent to Saint Domingue to obtain first-hand information and to help in the restoration of the island.[46] This was a victory for Raimond and all mulattoes, but the whites in Saint Domingue were outraged and refused to follow the decree. They enjoyed their power over the mulattoes and Africans.

Due to the whites' refusal to implement the decree, a young man of mixed race, Vincent Ogé, secretly left France to start a mulatto revolution in Saint Domingue. Ogé wrote to the president of the Provincial Assembly in Saint Domingue, shortly after the decree was passed, stating, "GENTLEMEN: A prejudice, too long maintained, is about to fall."[47] In a motion made by

[40] "Guillaume Thomas François Raynal".
[41] Ott, 41.
[42] Mercer Cook, "Julien Raimond" *The Journal of Negro History* 26, no. 2 (1941), 139.
[43] Cook, 142.
[44] Cook, 149.
[45] Cook, 151.
[46] Cook, 164.
[47] John R. Beard, *Toussaint L'Ouverture: Biography and Autobiography* (Boston: James Redpath, 1863), 46.

Ogé in 1789, his work clearly expresses Enlightenment philosophy that all men are created equal. In it, he states that freedom is made for all men. That clearly expresses Rousseau's idea of equality for all men.[48] Ogé led an insurrection against the whites, but his plan failed. He escaped to the Spanish side of the island, but he was betrayed and handed over to the French. He was tried, convicted, and executed. His death caused an outrage among those living in France at the time, especially among *La Société des Amis des Noirs*. The *Amis des Noirs* along with Raimond, wrote pamphlets encouraging the emancipation of slaves and the granting of equal rights among whites and people of mixed race.

One slave who was able to read about these ideas flooding the colony was Toussaint L'Ouverture, born Toussaint Breada. The earliest piece of scholarship discussed in this paper, the biography of Toussaint L'Ouverture (written by the Reverend John R. Beard, D.D., 1836) is an excellent resource of information regarding L'Ouverture's experience in the military, his ascension to power, and most interesting for the purposes of this paper, the Enlightenment philosophy and its impact on his thinking.

L'Ouverture received limited scholastic training from his godfather, Pierre Baptiste.[49] Beard states, "A scholar, in the higher sense of the word, he never became."[50] Although never attending formal school, he gained a great amount of knowledge through speaking with free and white men.[51]

Beard recounts that L'Ouverture read works from the Abbé Raynal. From his "first dim conception of the misery of servitude"[52] as a young man, Toussaint was profoundly struck, and felt personally called, by Raynal's statement that a liberator was needed to release his fellow citizens from the yoke of slavery.[53] L'Ouverture stated, "A secret voice said to me, 'Since the blacks are free, they need a chief, and it is I who must be that chief, foretold by the Abbé Raynal'."[54] L'Ouverture read Raynal to see what he and others, specifically those in France, had to say about slavery.[55] He heard about passages from Raynal and, eventually, demonstrated his knowledge on the subject.[56]

Beard stated several times that L'Ouverture was more humane than the other commanders of the army because of his Enlightenment ideas of human rights. L'Ouverture from the time he joined the insurgency, one month after the initial wave in 1791, joined the forces of Jean-François and Biassou.[57] The leaders did not trust him; therefore, when they learned of his knowledge of herbs and medicines, Jean-François and Biassou forced him to work on the wounded.[58] As the rebellion continued, he was made an aide-de-camp of Biassou because of the many deaths that occurred within the ranks.[59]

His skills as a leader, that he learned while in the Spanish Army, were instrumental in the success of the revolution. In 1796, upon his appointment as Lieutenant Governor of the island, he began to establish Saint Domingue as a prosperous colony for France. Under L'Ouverture's direction, the former slaves began to view themselves as a community. A nationalistic view of their situation began to enter their minds. Although the former slaves were from different parts of the continent of Africa, their enslavement bonded them together forming a community. The sense of community helped to keep the colony prosperous until Napoleon invaded it again in 1801.

In 1801, after losing to the British in Africa and India, Napoleon focused on Haiti. He sent his brother-in-law, Leclerc, to the island and stated that Toussaint was to give command to the Frenchman.[60] L'Ouverture and the blacks saw through the façade of peace and were ready to take up arms against the French. Leclerc, under order from Napoleon,

[48] Lynn Hunt ed., *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996), 104.
[49] Beard, 36.
[50] Bearc, 37.
[51] Beard, 40.
[52] Beard, 38.
[53] Beard, 38.
[54] Beard, 119.
[55] Beard, 41.
[56] Beard, 41.
[57] Beard, 49-50.
[58] Beard, 54.
[59] Beard, 54.
[60] Beard, 158.

forcibly took control of the island, but he ultimately failed. The Africans maintained their freedom and on January 1, 1804, Haiti became an independent nation establishing the second republic in the Western Hemisphere.[61]

Toussaint L'Ouverture was an enlightened leader. His leadership enabled him to take approximately 400,000 people and have them rise up against three of the most powerful militaries at the time, France, Spain, and Britain, and win. He gave the former enslaved Africans a sense of community. This was not his only contribution, though. He also was able to unite the people of the island, regardless of skin color. He formed a coalition among the three castes. In his cabinet, he had Africans, mulattoes, and whites. In his army, he had generals of the three castes as well, who worked together. Toussaint realized that in order for the colony to maintain relatively peaceful, it was imperative to work with everyone. The Enlightenment idea of equality amongst men was at the forefront of his thinking. The *gens de couleur* and slaves believed that the doctrine of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" should be extended to them.[62]

L'Ouverture was successful not only because of his ability to form coalitions and because of his strong character, but also because of his background. The limited education that he received from his godfather, Pierre Baptiste, allowed him to read the works of the Abbé Raynal, who was an important Enlightenment writer. Toussaint's education, background, and leadership skills were efficient in establishing a successful colony, for a period, and having that nation maintain its sovereignty until the present day.

[61] Ott, 182.
[62] Cook, 141.

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