*Société de Liberté: Slavery, Enlightenment, and Revolution,*

1788-1802

Evan Monod

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*Figure 1: Picture credit: http://www.histoire-image.org/pleincadre/index.php?i=729*
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................................................iii

Introduction......................................................................................................................................................1

Chapter One: Slavery and the Culture of the French Enlightenment............................................................14

Chapter Two: Beginnings of the Société des Amis des Noirs.................................................................30

Chapter Three: The SAN During the Revolution.......................................................................................42

Chapter Four: The Legacy of the Société des Amis des Noirs.................................................................64

Conclusion.....................................................................................................................................................79

Bibliography..................................................................................................................................................85
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The picture on the cover of this thesis is the template for the seal of the Société des Amis des Noirs (Society of the Friends of Blacks, or SAN), the first abolitionist society in France, formally in existence from 1788 to 1791. The image was based on an English medallion made by the famous ceramist Josiah Wedgwood in 1787. The seal of the Société says “Ne suis-je pas ton frère?,” a near perfect translation of the English phrase, “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” Wedgwood was a good friend of the notable English abolitionist, Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846); Clarkson had a direct hand in the establishment of the SAN as a “spin-off” of his own abolitionist venture. The translation of Wedgwood’s medallion was adopted as the official seal of the group in 1788. Thus, it is a symbol not only of the SAN, but also of the broader abolitionist movement of the period. And while the SAN co-existed with other abolitionist groups in Britain and the United States, it is arguably less understood than its contemporaries, though no less important.

Founded by Jacques-Pierre Brissot (1754-1793), a journalist and legislator, the Société consisted mostly of a group of like-minded men and women from the French elite, with some exceptions. Notable members included the Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794), the Marquis de Lafayette, (1757-1834), and the financier Etienne Clavière (1735-1793). Looking back on its history, the SAN appears to have failed in its mission, as the group dissolved before the official abolition of slavery in

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1 A brief note on translation: All translations from the French have been done by me, unless where otherwise noted.
the French empire in 1794. Yet it was imbued with an ethos derived from Enlightenment philosophy, particularly the French *philosophes* (philosophers), and was the first attempt to turn their ideal of equality in a political platform. The story of the SAN and its leaders played out amidst the earliest phase of the French Revolution, when the egalitarian promise of 1789 was ended by the violence of 1792. Yet I will argue throughout this thesis that the SAN should be remembered as both a *société de pensée* (a society of thought), and what could be defined in French as a *société de politique* (political lobby). While the SAN failed in its political mission, this failure should be attributed to the changing circumstances of the French Revolution. The Société was more suited to the court of Louis XVI than partisan revolutionary politics.

This thesis attempts to explain this complex philosophical and political history, and how the Société des Amis des Noirs should be viewed in light of it. France has occasionally grappled-and continues to grapple- with its slave trading past. May 10\textsuperscript{th}, 2001 was a notable date in this regard. Not only was it my ninth birthday (the study of history is full of such coincidences), but the National Assembly of France passed a bill marking that day as National Day of Remembrance of the Slave Trade.\textsuperscript{2} Perhaps I was destined to encounter the SAN in light of this historical quirk. In any case, a study of the Société must begin with the social context of France in the 1780s, how that relates to the politics of its time, and most importantly, the relationship between France, its colonies, and slavery.

\textsuperscript{2} http://www.france.fr/en/institutions-and-values/remembrance-slave-trade.html
A. The Meaning of Société

The word société took on special significance during the eighteenth-century, particularly in the works of the philosophes. The Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason (la siècle des Lumières in French) is notoriously difficult to understand as a cohesive period. It encompassed a wide variety of philosophies, all with different goals and definitions of the term “enlightenment.” The time is best summarized by Dorinda Outram as a “series of interlocking, sometimes warring problems and debates.” She concedes that this interpretation is relatively new. However it helps to explain some of the period’s inherent contradictions, such as the anti-clerical French thinker Denis Diderot and the more theologically inclined German philosopher Christian Wolff both equally representing “Enlightenment” thought. The word société, and indeed the SAN itself have this same level of nuance and double meaning.

The man who helped to define much of the French Enlightenment lexicon was Diderot (1713-1784), co-editor of the sprawling Encyclopédie (Encyclopedia), published between 1751 and 1772. The Encyclopédie was the distillation of Enlightenment ideas on various subjects, from property to equality, all in a useful reference guide. Society to Diderot was the specific concept of civil society, which represents the “political ties that bind...one [person] to another.” This is the first common meaning of society, which mediates self-interest with the common good to

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establish a cohesive polity. While this is the Enlightenment ideal of society, Diderot and his collaborator Louis de Jaucourt (1704-1779) were not afraid to apply it to controversial subjects, including slavery. In his entry on the slave trade, Jaucourt flatly states that slavery is wrong, and crucially argues that abolition would not bring economic ruin to the European colonies. In his eyes, “their commerce would [only] temporarily suffer.” Furthermore, society and its “national laws” are partially to blame for the continued acceptance of slavery. These radical arguments were made a generation before the SAN, and Diderot’s definition of society as a political entity (that could theoretically be changed) would implicitly influence its later work.

The second definition of society, as an organized group of persons, is slightly more difficult to trace in the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, the société as an association of people does take on a specific meaning during the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. This is found in the work of the French historian, Augustin Cochin (1876-1916).

Cochin died young at the Battle of the Somme, but he left a lasting impact on the historiography of the French Revolution. He was one of the first historians to examine the effect of both the philosophes and so-called société de pensée (societies of thought) on the Revolution. These were groups who gathered in the salons of Paris to debate philosophy, and counted many philosophes among their members. According to William Church, Cochin believed that these sociétés were made of “a determined and unscrupulous minority of radical thinkers...who sought to impose

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their views on all of France.”⁶ The *philosophes* (and by extension those they influenced in the Société des Amis des Noirs) combined “enthusiasm and social elitism” to devastating effect. Thus the French Revolution was guided not by the spirit of ordinary people, but by the elites they so despised.⁷ There is a barely concealed scorn on the part of Cochin for the *philosophes*; he even blames them for the bloodiest part of the Revolution, the Reign of Terror, twenty years after most of their deaths! Cochin acknowledges that the *sociétés de pensée* lacked “leaders and principles” and a cohesive political platform.⁸ This falls in line with the consensus view that the *philosophes* never meant for their work to be applied politically. And while Cochin’s prose is fiery and compelling, it fails to account for what Outram might describe as the contradictions within the ambiguously defined group known as the *philosophes*. These conflicts included differing works on slavery, from which the SAN would clearly derive inspiration.

Still, it is easy to see how the Société des Amis des Noirs could fit Cochin’s more negative definition of a *société de pensée*. It was a mostly aristocratic group, inspired by French Enlightenment philosophy. Its members held what could be described as a minority position, the abolition of slavery, and tried to impose that vision legislatively on all of France’s colonies. Yet the SAN came into being in a turbulent period of French political history. Thus, it was equally a political lobby,

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⁷Augustin Cochin. “The Subversive Influence of the *Philosophes* and the *Sociétés de Pensée*.” As found in Church, *The Influence of the Enlightenment on the French Revolution*. Print, pg. 64
⁸Cochin, as found in Church, pg. 66.
and the transition from the courtly politics of monarchy to the partisan bickering of the Revolution helps to explain how the SAN struggled to succeed politically.

B. A Brief Introduction to French Political History, 1788-1791/1792

The years of the Société, from 1788 to 1791-2, encompasses the end of the Bourbon monarchy (known in French as the ancien régime) roughly to the formation of the First French Republic (République Française). Within that short time, the absolute monarchy of Louis XVI was ended. A meeting of the French parliament (known as the Estates-General, and after June 1789, the National Assembly) was called for the first time in centuries. And any hope for constitutional monarchy gave way to more radical republicanism, and the slaughter of the Reign of Terror. Thus, the SAN, which began as an association under the ancien régime, suddenly saw itself thrust into a legislative arena in the National Assembly. I will argue that this sudden shift in context partially accounts for its relative failure as a political entity. Yet the transformation of the Société from a society of thought into a political lobby coincided with a broader development during the Revolution: the rise of political clubs.

In his Oxford History of the French Revolution, William Doyle concisely pinpoints the development of these new political units. Clubs were not political parties in the traditional sense, but often a loose affiliation between the largely elite legislators. Doyle notes that the first of these clubs was the Société de Trente or the Society of Thirty, which was founded in the Estates-General in 1789. This was the cream of the legal, literary, and social scene, and included some members of the
SAN, such as the Condorcet and Lafayette. As the political consensus of the Revolution fractured after 1789, new affiliations were formed in the National Assembly. The most notable of these was the Jacobin Club, also known as La Société des Amis de la Constitution (Society of Friends of the Constitution). By July 1790, the Jacobins controlled a thousand deputies, out of a total number of 1,145. Led by the indefatigable Maximillien Robespierre (1758-1794), the Jacobins are today synonymous with left-wing radicalism, as they promulgated the mass murder by guillotine that was the Reign of Terror.

Conservatives did exist in the National Assembly, notably the royalist Jacques-Antoine de Cazalès (1758-1805), and the inflexible cardinal Jean-Sifrein Maury (1746-1817). However political battles were most often fought between two opposing factions of the Jacobin club: the Girondins and the Montagnards. The former (so named because many of their members were from the southern French city of Grenoble), also known as Brissotins, were moderates who supported the end of the monarchy but resisted the growing violence of the Revolution. Their second name was derived, unsurprisingly, from Jacques-Pierre Brissot of the SAN. Many members of the Société were also Girondins sympathizers, including Condorcet, who was a more radical republican. Their opponents, the Montagnards (named after the French word montagne or mountain) were the most extremist wing of the Jacobins, led by Robespierre. They suspected the Girondins of being traitors to the Revolution.

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10 Doyle, pg. 142
11 Doyle, pg. 301
12 Doyle, pg. 191
In June 1793, Brissot and twenty-eight others of his faction were arrested, and they were among the first to die by the guillotine in October of that year. Other members of the SAN, including Clavière, would follow them to the same fate. The Société des Amis des Noirs is a political minority both for its views on abolition and for its overlap with the Girondins. Ironically, it would be the Montagnards, near the end of the Terror, who would reluctantly abolish slavery in February 1794.

So far, this summary has only briefly sketched the main domestic political developments during the Revolution. Abroad, France dealt with myriad problems, not least of which was a slave revolt in its most prosperous colony Saint-Domingue, which would become the independent Republic of Haiti in 1804. Half a century before this, France’s American empire had included the vast territory of Louisiana, which stretched from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. Yet Louisiana was just a component of New France, which claimed dominion from the wilds of Canada and the citadels of Quebec down to the sugar plantations of the French Caribbean. The Treaty of Paris in 1763 that ended the Seven Years War ceded most of the eastern portion of New France to the British. Louisiana would be given to Spain, France’s ally. They would hold on to the territory until 1800, when Napoleon Bonaparte reclaimed it for France. Napoleon would soon after famously sell that to the United States in 1803. Yet even without Saint-Domingue and its continental territory, France remained a power in the Caribbean. D.K. Fieldhouse summarizes: “the most highly valued French colonies were those in the Caribbean.” These were the plantation colonies of St. Christopher, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Tobago, Grenada and

13 Doyle, pg. 252
Cayenne, which grew sugar and tobacco for use in France and re-exportation to Europe.\textsuperscript{14}

Perhaps as a result of their commercial output, France was able to keep these colonies (with the obvious exception of Saint-Domingue) long after their continental empire had ended. This was likely due to the political relationship between the European power (known as the \textit{métropole} in French) and its Caribbean islands. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, colonial administration had been successfully centralized under the \textit{Ministère de la Marine} (roughly the Department of the Navy). This autocratic system was befitting the absolute monarchy of the \textit{ancien régime}. Local administration, from the courts to the clergy, followed the French model closely.\textsuperscript{15} Yet Fieldhouse notes that by the middle of the century, local \textit{conseils} (councils) in the Caribbean started to bristle at this top-down system: "[This had] the result that colonial law became increasingly out of step with that of France."\textsuperscript{16} The colonies were beginning to make decisions independently of the \textit{métropole}; in 1759, Chambers of Agriculture and Commerce formed, elected by the councils, which had the right to represent their interests in Paris.\textsuperscript{17} Naturally, the coming of the Revolution further changed the bond between France and its colonies, as the monarchy was swept aside. The colonists themselves, represented in the National Assembly by the Committee on Colonies, would come to argue that, while the colonies remained dominions of France, they were not subject to all of its laws,

\textsuperscript{15}Fieldhouse, pg. 42
\textsuperscript{16}Fieldhouse, pg. 38
\textsuperscript{17}Fieldhouse, pg. 39
least of all the spirit of equality outlined in the foundational document of the Revolution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man. While this argument was motivated by the desire to maintain slavery in those colonies, the reasoning did have some basis in the peculiar administrative relationship between France and the Caribbean dating back to the ancien régime.

This was the political situation that the Société des Amis des Noirs had to grapple with. As members of a soon-to-be persecuted faction at home, they had to deal with changing circumstances abroad, in the colonies where they intended to abolish slavery. Of course, the abolition of slavery was the SAN's foremost concern. But given the large stake that France had in the global slave trade, such a goal was arguably improbable, if not entirely impossible.

C. The French Slave Trade and the Atlantic Triangle

For such a global and far-reaching system, the economics of the French slave trade were relatively uncomplicated, and chillingly efficient. French trade goods were sold in West Africa in exchange for slaves, with the cowrie shell serving as a primary currency. Slaves were then shipped across the Atlantic—the infamous Middle Passage to America—where they would work on the eminently profitable plantations of the French West Indies. The mortality rates during the trans-Atlantic voyage were staggering. Robert Stein estimates that the French slave trade in the eighteenth century “claimed the lives of at least 150,000 African captives and 20,000
French crewmembers.”

Interestingly, many of the crews died not at sea but along the coast, while their captives tended to die during the crossing. Stein also finds that deaths declined over the century, which he attributes to reduced sailing times between Africa and the West Indies. The product from the labor of those slaves that survived the journey would then be sold for purchasing goods in Europe, or as capital to acquire more slaves.

In Paris, the French government controlled the market, first through state monopolies and then through a system of tax breaks designed to encourage French dominance. A rising merchant class took great advantage of these policies. As Laurent Dubois writes, “many merchants in France’s major port towns….owned plantations [and therefore slaves] in Saint-Domingue.”

Such merchants would come to be known in French as les négriers. Following the loss of Quebec in 1763, the négriers shifted their focus to slaving almost exclusively. Perry Viles finds that “specialization in maritime trade after 1763 without diversified investment elsewhere in the economy was the rule.” The large ports of Bordeaux and La Rochelle “were almost completely devoid of manufacturing...the dozen [sugar] refineries in La Rochelle were largely in the hands of négriers.” These powerful commercial interests would form of the backbone of the pro-slavery lobby, which would viciously oppose the Société des Amis des Noirs in the National Assembly.

They firmly believed that abolition would not only leave them penniless, but would

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19Stein, pg. 39
bring economic ruin to both France and her colonies. The SAN’s response to this contention was curious, as we will see and arguably lacking in conviction.

The négriers’ economic argument reflected the growing importance of France’s possessions in the Caribbean for the French economy. Saint-Domingue and its sister islands in the Antilles provided a major cash crop in the form of sugar. In the early eighteenth century, sugar production quadrupled. According to Dubois, by mid-century Saint-Domingue was the largest sugar exporter in the world, easily dwarfing all of the British West Indies. The négriers in Bordeaux and La Rochelle would re-export seventy-five percent of this crop to the rest of Europe for a healthy profit. As the European demand for sugar rose, so did the demand for African slaves.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, the slave population grew steadily. Between 1701 and 1761, the number of slaves imported into Saint-Domingue alone more than doubled, from 70,000 to 158,000. The total number of slaves in all French American colonies over the same period almost doubled, from 166,000 to 297,000. In total, France controlled about twenty-two percent of the entire slave market, on par with the British Caribbean, but somewhat behind the substantial slave economy of Brazil. Thus the French sugar boom was co-dependent on an equally large boom in the slave trade. By 1790, the slave population in Saint-Domingue outnumbered French colonists by ten to one. In their greedy quest for more sugar, the French

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22 Miller, pg. 25
25 Dubois, 2006, pg. 13
colonists and the négriers that depended upon them had unwittingly caused their
own destruction by providing the manpower for the eventual slave revolution in
Saint-Domingue. This historical irony would be all too apparent with the beginning
of that revolution in August 1791.

Given the political turbulence of its age, both at home and abroad, and the
large French slave economy, it is almost a miracle that the Société des Amis des
Noirs existed at all. It was a société de pensée, or a société de politique that sought to
forever change the société de la France writ large. Abolition was not exactly a
pressing topic in the 1780s. Much of what historians know of French attitudes on
the eve of the Revolution comes from the cahiers de doléances. These were lists of
grievances drawn up by the Estates-General in 1789 from a survey of their
constituents, from the peasants to the clergy to the bourgeoisie. Doyle notes that a
demand for the abolition of slavery only appears in a select few of the cahiers.26
Nonetheless, the members of the SAN had to believe that their abolitionism would
be accepted as a legitimate political program. The culture of eighteenth-century
France, most notably in the form of the philosophes, provided them with ample
inspiration.

26Doyle, pg. 411.
Chapter One: Slavery and the Culture of the French Enlightenment

Evan Monod

HIST 408

This chapter will examine the cultural context from which the SAN emerged. No social movement exists in a vacuum, least of all during the intellectual ferment of the Enlightenment. While the French public in the late eighteenth century did not actively engage with the issue of slavery, cultural representations of slavery did exist in both commercial goods and literature. Yet the SAN owes a far greater debt to the *philosophes* of the previous generation.

A. Cultural History of the Slave Trade

Slaves and the goods they produced, particularly sugar, formed the foundation of a global trade in which France played an eminent role. While the Atlantic slave trade had a large commercial and material impact on the French economy, its influence on French culture was less pronounced. This is the thesis of Madeline Dobie, as she attempts to explain the apparent absence of slavery in the literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She stipulates that this silence “was not a direct cause of colonial slavery, it was certainly a condition of its possibility.”

Miller concurs, noting the “twisted link” between the two meanings of the French *culture*: the production of ideas and the production of commodities.

This dual meaning can perhaps answer Dobie’s thesis. However, this simplistic

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answer fails to take into account not only the popularity of some texts directly concerning slavery, but their effect on the larger popular culture of the period.

In the 1780s and 90s Dobie detects what she calls an “exoticization” of slavery in French material culture. This extended first to the decorative arts, where the most popular clocks were the *pendules au nègres*, clocks that included statues of black men or women as decorative elements (see Figure 2 below).

![Figure 2: A pendule au nègre, circa 1793. Picture credit: http://www.amis-musee-aquitaine.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20&Itemid=5&47923c92b697931fe13609b53f59e783=1046016b2ebf3431f2610e047376cc58](http://www.amis-musee-aquitaine.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20&Itemid=5&47923c92b697931fe13609b53f59e783=1046016b2ebf3431f2610e047376cc58)

This decade was also the first to have representations of colonial slavery in French literature. Dobie attributes this to the "rise of abolitionism in the 1780s...the representation of slavery...was made possible by the rise of a discourse that condemned colonial servitude."[29] The most famous and endurably popular example of this literature is Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (Paul and Virginia, 1787).

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[29] Dobie, pg. 87
Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1737-1814) was originally a botanist who took to writing novels. A student of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Saint-Pierre lived in the colony of Mauritius from 1768 to 1771. It was this experience that inspired him to write *Paul et Virginie*. The novel is set on Mauritius and concerns two childhood friends who become lovers, Paul and Virginia, as they revel in the natural beauty of the island. From the beginning of the novel Saint-Pierre waxes so lyrically about the scenery that Dobie drily notes that the novel “has as much to do with trees as with human beings.”\(^\text{30}\) Slavery appears in the form of the couple Domingo and Mary, who are each owned by the mothers of Paul and Virginia respectively. For the most part, the two seem perfectly content with their lot. For instance, Domingo is the ideal slave who “possessed good knowledge and a natural understanding.”\(^\text{31}\) Any direct criticism of slavery is absent, minus a throwaway line about the “insensibility which is the result of slavery.”\(^\text{32}\) However, one key episode does show the inherent brutality of the institution. While walking in the woods, Paul and Virginia encounter a runaway slave, who “showed her body marked with sears from the lashes she had received.”\(^\text{33}\) The two naively return the slave to her master, who promptly tortures her, as was his legal right under the *Code Noir*. Yet this episode loses some of its power when placed in the context of the majority of the novel. As Paul explains to the old island hermit (who narrates the tale), his vision of an ideal life with Virginia is one with “plenty of Negroes, and they shall work for

\(^{30}\) Dobie, pg. 87  
\(^{32}\) Ibid.  
\(^{33}\) Ibid.
you.”  
Taken on the surface, Paul et Virginie is hardly an abolitionist novel, as the slavery practiced by Paul and Virginia seems far more humane than the real thing. Anna Neill is troubled by this treatment of slavery, as themes of female sexuality and European dominance over the colony take precedence. Indeed, the main conflict of the novel is precipitated by Virginia’s burgeoning sexual attraction to Paul, which must be crushed by sending her to France. This in turn leads to her untimely death at sea at the end of the novel. This choice on the part of the author is particularly curious given his own personal politics. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre was a notable abolitionist who ran in many of the same circles as SAN leaders Brissot and Clavière. While he had seen the evils of slavery firsthand in his time in Mauritius and published a critique of the slave trade in 1784, he refused to join the Société des Amis des Noirs. The reason for the reduced importance of slavery in Paul et Virginie could have simply been an apolitical literary decision. The novel is clearly a Rousseauian critique of the corruption French society brings upon the natural state of Mauritius. Paul and Virginia are kept apart and ultimately die because of this corruption.

Yet reading the novel today, one wonders what greater societal evil was there in the eighteenth century than the perpetuation of slavery? Neill finds that the society that Paul and Virginia inhabit, including its slavery, is consigned to “pastoral memory.” Their world is nothing more than a quaint state of nature that is

34 Ibid.
36 Miller, pg. 106
37 Neill, pg. 38
threatened by the twin forces of sexuality and colonial oversight. In short, *Paul and Virginie* is a sentimental romanticization of nature, which includes its limited depiction of slavery. Yet some kernels of realism sprout through the novel’s sentimentalism. Instead of imagining a fantasy colony, Saint-Pierre chooses the setting of Mauritius, complete with its own real social and political context. Neill notes that the real island used slaves for mining and planting sugar, and that the novel “makes it clear that the tension between pastoral utopia and political event will not be resolved in allegory.”³⁸ Saint-Pierre could have used the examples of Domingo and Mary to highlight the very real plight of colonial slaves. Instead, it is left to an unnamed runaway slave to (briefly) demonstrate master on slave violence. Domingo and Mary suffer no such punishment, as stereotypically good slaves. This constitutes the “reduction of the slave community...to the proportion of the family it serves...[thus] slavery has to be put under sentimental erasure.”³⁹ Saint-Pierre’s sentimental depiction of these slaves reduces the seriousness of their condition. To put it more succinctly, “Saint-Pierre's representation of Paul and Virginia's faithful slaves....is perilously close to his depiction of their dog.”⁴⁰ This from a vaunted abolitionist!

Saint-Pierre’s illustration of slavery in *Paul et Virginie* should not be dismissed out of hand. The novel is extremely useful for understanding the circumstances under which the system of slavery could be presented to a wider audience at the time. Indeed, the novel was very popular, going through over sixty

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³⁸ Neill, pg. 38
³⁹ Neill, pg. 43
⁴⁰ Miller, pg. 106
editions by 1900 in France alone. A more explicitly abolitionist account of slavery would probably have not been as popular, which in turn pays tribute to the difficulty the Société des Amis des Noirs faced in finding an audience for its ideas. No wonder Saint-Pierre chose not to join the Société!

*Paul et Virginie* is also notable for its nuanced Rousseauian understanding of slavery. Judging by the novel, Saint-Pierre certainly found a philosophical home in the work of his former mentor, whom he first met upon his return from Mauritius in 1771. Rousseau’s complicated intellectual relationship with slavery echoed those of his fellow *philosophes*. Although the success of *Paul et Virginie* demonstrates that French popular culture was more receptive to a depiction of slavery, the earlier generation of *philosophes* would be a greater cultural influence on the SAN. Their combined work would come to greatly affect the rhetoric of the Société des Amis des Noirs, for good and for ill.

D. Slavery and the *Philosophes*

The SAN’s relationship to its philosophical forebears is not as simple as it initially appears to be. Marcel Dorigny divides French Enlightenment thought on slavery into two periods. The first period begins around 1740, what is generally considered to be the age of Voltaire. The second period begins at around 1770, and is defined by the more strident rhetoric of Abbé Raynal. Dorigny considers the SAN to be a “perfect representation of this [earlier Voltairean] heritage.”41 They had less in common with the writers of the second period, whose rhetoric was more radical.

The first generation had ridiculed the intellectual foundation of slavery, largely by attacking the evils of the slave trade and advancing a concept of natural rights. After 1770, the second generation of *philosophes* had to articulate “the consequences of persisting in the practice of slavery.” The most specific consequence was violent armed rebellion on the part of slaves, something that the SAN did not advocate. It shall be seen that the SAN in fact promoted their policies as a way to prevent such a rebellion. Yet the Société stood at these intellectual crossroads between these two periods of thought. A short study of these varying points of view can help elucidate the Société’s own philosophical and rhetorical dilemmas when it came to promoting abolition during the French Revolution.

To most students with even cursory knowledge of the Enlightenment, Voltaire (1694-1778) is probably the most famous of all the *philosophes*. Voltaire was a notable satirist and historian who articulated many Enlightenment ideals, including freedom of religion and freedom of expression. He pushed the limits of these freedoms in the *ancien régime* with his witty polemics. Among the most works famous is *Candide, or Optimism*, a novel published in 1759. Our hero Candide leads a sheltered life in an earthly paradise, yet soon comes to learn the ways of the world and its evils, including slavery. Like Saint-Pierre, Voltaire blends fantastical romantic elements with real events. Candide famously experiences the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which remains one of the deadliest earthquakes in history. As with any satirical novel, it can be difficult to separate the sincere ideas of its author

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42 Dorigny, Gainot, pg. 18
from its cynical tone. Thankfully, the portrayal of slavery is relatively clear-cut and easily understood.

Candide encounters a slave in Surinam, which was then a Dutch colony that bordered French Guyana. Voltaire can shrewdly critique the practice of slavery, but not in a French colony. To portray French colonization (and by extension French slavery) as anything but inherently good and just would have been a major faux pas, even for an author as famous as Voltaire. So instead, slavery is tactfully described in a Dutch colony, which can be more easily criticized. The slave describes the horrors of his life to Candide, as his master has cut off both his hand and his leg. He then famously proclaims, “this is the price at which you eat sugar in Europe.”43 This is a visceral and painful image of the human costs of slavery, which leads Candide to tearfully renounce his optimism, as the “madness of maintaining everything is right when all is wrong.”44

This criticism of slavery can also be seen in a purer form in Voltaire’s nonfiction works. David Brion Davis quotes from Voltaire’s *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764), in which he chastises how “those who call themselves whites and Christians proceed to purchase Negroes at a good market, in order to sell them dearly in America.”45 Yet a condemnation of slavery and the slave trade does not necessarily translate into support for abolition, or indeed, a lack of racism. Again in the *Philosophical Dictionary* Voltaire opines that if slavery is “as ancient as war, and war as human nature” then it could be justified as a natural law. This was the argument

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44 Voltaire, pg. 72
many conservative Enlightenment thinkers used to defend the practice of slavery.\textsuperscript{46} Furthermore, in his \textit{Essay on Universal History} (1759), Voltaire concludes that Africans are an inferior race. “Nature has annexed to this principle these differing degrees of genius...it is for this reason that Negroes are the slaves of other men.”\textsuperscript{47} Thus Voltaire displays the inherent tension of Enlightenment philosophy with regards to slavery; while he hates the inhumanity of the slave trade, he does not consider its victims to be equal to their white masters.

Other \textit{philosophes} also grappled with the question of slavery, even before Voltaire. Montesquieu dealt with slavery in his most famous work, \textit{The Spirit of the Laws} (1748). As a political philosopher, Montesquieu is credited with the idea of the modern separation of powers. According to Miller, Montesquieu also “opened the door to a debate about slavery in France.”\textsuperscript{48} In \textit{The Spirit of the Laws}, he defines slavery as an absolute power relationship by the master over the slave. “It is not good by its nature; it is useful neither to the master or the slave.”\textsuperscript{49} While such an attack on slavery was indeed radical in the 1740s, it should be noted that Montesquieu couches his rhetoric in a critique of civil (i.e. Roman) slavery. He does obliquely critique the French Atlantic slave trade in a manner similar to Voltaire. In book fifteen, chapter five of \textit{The Spirit of the Laws}, Montesquieu rightly claims, “sugar would be too expensive if the plant producing it were not cultivated by slaves.”\textsuperscript{50} Modern slavery is not the result of an inherent racial superiority of whites

\textsuperscript{47} Voltaire as quoted in Dobie, pg. 299
\textsuperscript{48} Miller, pg. 95
\textsuperscript{49} Montesquieu as quoted in Engerman, pg. 20
\textsuperscript{50} Montesquieu as quoted in Dobie, pg. 40
over blacks, but is instead caused by the greed of whites in their attempt to cultivate cheap sugar. This is arguably the first French Enlightenment critique of contemporary slavery, and it cut neatly to the core of the economic foundation of the institution.

Despite this insightful and progressive rhetoric, Montesquieu also falls into the same trap as Voltaire. His is a greater fall because of his starting premise: the blanket statement that slavery is naturally bad and not useful. Yet, like Voltaire, he is silent on the issue of French complicity in the slave trade in the Antilles, and indeed praises these colonies as “admirable, as they have objects of commerce that we do not and cannot have.”\(^51\) He further contradicts himself in a later discussion of slavery, in which he claims that “slavery is against nature, although in certain countries it may be founded on natural reasons.”\(^52\) Montesquieu condemns slavery as wrong, but allows it to exist in certain contexts. It would take a slightly younger cohort of philosophes to deem slavery categorically wrong in all its forms, something neither Montesquieu nor Voltaire could ever fully admit.

Such a philosophe would come in the form of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Rousseau is best known for his political philosophy, particularly his refinement of the Hobbesian concepts of the social contract and the state of nature. Rousseau’s criticism of slavery in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754) and *On the Social Contract* (1762) is both explicit and implicit. Indeed, Dobie makes an excellent case that the famed Rousseauian concept of the noble savage in the

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\(^{51}\) Dobie, pg. 42

\(^{52}\) Dobie, pg. 42
Discourse is subtly based on ethnographic details of the Carib slaves of the Antilles.\textsuperscript{53}

A more obvious takedown of modern slavery comes in On the Social Contract.

Rousseau famously proclaims that “the right of slavery is invalid...these words, slavery and right, are contradictory; they are mutually exclusive.”\textsuperscript{54} This is rooted in his concept of property rights under the social contract, which is controlled by the state, and thus would not allow the subjugation of one by another as property.\textsuperscript{55}

Rousseau also forcefully debunks the Voltairean claim that slavery is as natural to humanity as warfare. “If there are, therefore, slaves by nature, it is because there have been slaves against nature. Force created the first slaves.”\textsuperscript{56} Rousseau’s philosophical attack on the property rights of slaveholders would become a foundation for some of the abolitionist rhetoric of the 1780s, notably that of Condorcet in his Réflexions sur L’esclavage des Nègres (Reflections on Negro Slavery) of 1788. By attacking slavery more completely than either Montesquieu or Voltaire, it could be argued that Rousseau forms the intellectual bridge between Dorigny’s early and later periods of French Enlightenment thought on abolition, despite the fact that the Genevan chronologically belongs to the former period.

E. Raynal: A Counterpoint to the Philosophes

The abolitionism of the philosophes was somewhat oblique in nature. They were far more willing to attack slavery in the abstract, or as a historical

\textsuperscript{53} Dobie, pg. 176
\textsuperscript{55} Rousseau, pgs 96-98
\textsuperscript{56} Rousseau, pg. 87
The three thinkers profiled above, only Montesquieu came close to diagnosing the root cause of the slave trade, i.e. the greed of Europeans. Nearly half a century later, the SAN would attempt to transform this philosophy into concrete political action. Of course, none of this happened overnight. The decades between the philosophes and the SAN would see the publication of more popular abolitionist literature, particularly in the 1770s and 80s. Specifically the work of Abbé Raynal in 1770 set the tone for the growing abolitionist movement, which culminated in the pre-Revolution activities of the SAN in 1788-1789.

Abbé Guillaume Thomas Raynal (1713-1796) was ordained as a Jesuit in the commune of Pèzenas, in the Languedoc region of southern France. Perhaps his Jesuitical education can explain his later radicalism! The title abbé simply means priest, yet by the middle of his life Raynal was a clergyman in name only. In 1750 he quit the priesthood and began working as a journalist at the Mercure de France. Twenty years later, Raynal would self-publish his best-known work, The Philosophical and Political History…of the East And West Indies (1770). As Hugh Thomas notes, “[the book] again argued that slavery was contrary to nature, and so universally wrong….at the time of its first publication...its effect was electric.”

By the time of Raynal’s death in 1796, his work had gone through twenty legitimate editions and scores of pirated ones. In short, it was a bestseller about slavery in a time when such a thing was very rare.

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Reading it today, Raynal’s History comes across as an occasionally poetic, utterly jumbled mess of a volume. The good Abbé could have used an editor, and some passages are almost laughable. In early editions, he argued that slaves simply needed more music to ease the pain of their condition.\textsuperscript{59} Clearly this was the work of a moderate reformer who built upon the work that had come before him. His assertion that “political liberty is the state of a people who have not alienated their sovereignty” is reminiscent of Rousseau’s \textit{On the Social Contract}, published eight years earlier.\textsuperscript{60} His concession that “most nations are enslaved” echoes Montesquieu relativism with regards to slavery being suited to some nations over others.\textsuperscript{61} Marcel Dorigny associates Raynal with a “spectacular radicalization of abolitionist discourse.”\textsuperscript{62} Based on the majority of the evidence, this hardly seems to be the case.

Yet Raynal’s radicalism stems from the end of his History, in which he raises the specter of a so-called “black Spartacus” to cast a pall over every colonist’s heart. “[There are] so many indications of the impending storm, and the Negroes only want a chief, sufficiently courageous, to lead them on to vengeance and slaughter…he will undoubtedly appear…he will lift up the standard of liberty.”\textsuperscript{63} Unless gradual emancipation is enacted, then the slaves will rise up and take it by force. Needless to say, the idea of a black Spartacus was controversial. Raynal was

\textsuperscript{60} Raynal as quoted in Hunt, pg. 52.
\textsuperscript{61} Raynal, as quoted in Hunt, pg. 53
\textsuperscript{62} Dorigny, Gainot, pg. 18.
\textsuperscript{63} Raynal, as quoted in Hunt, pg. 54.
labeled a blasphemer of the highest order, and his work was publically burned in Paris.\textsuperscript{64}

Of course, history would prove Raynal correct, with Toussaint L’Ouverture cast in the role of this inevitable black hero. It has become almost a founding myth in Haiti that L’Ouverture read Raynal and answered his call.\textsuperscript{65} The actions of both men also connect indirectly to those of the Société des Amis des Noirs. The SAN probably suffered politically for not raising the threat of slave revolt à la Raynal, while L’Ouverture’s revolution would hasten the Société’s demise in 1793. Nevertheless, Raynal proved that more strident rhetoric in advancement of abolition could become popular. Clearly, abolitionism in France needed a proper political organ to channel this popularity.

Dorigny describes how the golden age of “les Lumières” affirmed “the unity of the human race, beyond differences of color...[and] the refusal of a hierarchy of races....”\textsuperscript{66} Yet the actual writings of these men paint a more complicated picture than that. Certainly Voltaire believed in some form of racial hierarchy, as evidenced by the \textit{Philosophical Dictionary}. Montesquieu understood slavery to be an evil, and even critiqued the economic rationale for the Atlantic slave trade. Yet slavery could still exist in those countries with a natural affinity for it (read: non-Western countries). Of these three titans of the Enlightenment, only Rousseau condemns slavery as philosophically contradictory and unequivocally wrong. Raynal would

\textsuperscript{65} Miller, pg. 79
\textsuperscript{66} Dorigny, Gainot, pg. 17
later carry this thought to its natural conclusion, in a more extreme abolitionism than that of his predecessors.

The contradictions seen in the examples of Voltaire and Montesquieu do not mean their work should be dismissed out of hand as fatally flawed or horribly conservative. Quite the contrary, they are perfect examples of the intellectual debate that fueled what would become the Société des Amis des Noirs. The same is true of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s *Paul et Virginie*. The fact that the slaves in the novel are poorly written stereotypes should not take away from the marvel of their mere existence. The fact that a popular novel could have sympathetic slave characters with names speaks volumes vis-à-vis the cultural context of the 1780s (and 90s). Finally, for all their triumphs and contradictions, it is important to remember what the *philosophes* were and what they were not. They were simply men of ideas. As Hugh Thomas correctly points out, “...Voltaire...Montesquieu...[and] Rousseau...all condemned, or mocked, or denounced slavery; but they assumed that all they had to do was launch their ideas in cafés and governments would follow their advice.” 67 Meanwhile, outside the intangible realm of philosophical debate, the atrocity of slavery persisted. It would take a worldlier political lobby to convert the ideals of the *philosophes* into real abolitionist progress. *Entrez* the Société des Amis des Noirs, with all the rhetorical strengths and weaknesses of the French Enlightenment as their scripts, and a violent revolution as their stage

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67 Thomas, pg. 464.
Chapter Two: Beginnings of the Société des Amis des Noirs: 1788-1789

Evan Monod
Hist 408

While the Société owed an intellectual debt to the *philosophes* and the culture of the French Enlightenment, this was not its only influence. The members of the Société also looked to the example of those abolitionist societies that had come before them in Britain and the United States. This chapter will examine that influence, and the founding of the SAN. The structure of the group will also be addressed, along with whether it had an impact on its political activities.


A. Transatlantic Abolitionism in the 1780s

The Société des Amis des Noirs (SAN) did not step out onto its stage alone. In many ways it was merely following the example of actors who had come before it. The 1780s saw the first flowering of political abolitionist groups in both the United States and Europe. The oldest known transatlantic abolitionist society, the Quaker Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) was first founded in 1775, disbanded during the American Revolution, and then restored in 1785. A similar abolitionist society,
the New York Manumission Society (NYMS) was also founded in 1785.68 By 1787, the Quakers’ abolitionist influence had extended to Britain.

That influence resulted in the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAST). A committee of twelve men founded it in May 1787, comprised of nine Quakers, and three Anglicans. Among the Quakers was Joseph Woods (1776-1864) an architect by trade. Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846), a failed priest, and Granville Sharp (1735-1813), a lawyer, comprised two-thirds of the Anglican contingent. All three men would be involved with the founding of the SAN less than a year later. Notably (and unlike the SAN) none of the original members of the SEAST were directly involved in politics. Political clout only came with the official induction in 1791 of William Wilberforce (1759-1833), a Member of Parliament from Yorkshire.69 He would be instrumental in the legislative campaign for abolition, which culminated in the Slave Trade Act of 1807 that ended Britain’s involvement in the slave trade. Although he was an evangelical, Wilberforce shared the same religious fervor for ending slavery as his Quaker compatriots.

Clearly the SEAST was born of a strong Quaker tradition, and the Society of Friends defined the abolitionism of the decade. In chronicling the perceived failures of the SAN, Daniel Resnick laments that there was no religious or political equivalent to the Quakers’ zeal and organization in revolutionary France.70 This belies the influence that these Quaker organizations had on the SAN, albeit from afar. The

69 Oldfield, pg. 17
SAN’s founder, Jacques-Pierre Brissot (1754-1793), and Etienne Clavière (1735-1793) met with the London committee of the SEAST in August 1787, a mere three months after its founding. The two Frenchmen begged their assistance to establish a similar society in France. The Englishmen politely declined, and Brissot was forced to look for aid in the United States. From August to September of 1788, Brissot travelled to America to meet with members of the PAS and the NYMS, and received the backing of both for the nascent Société des Amis des Noirs. Brissot would quit the United States in December 1788, and would return to Paris via London, where he attended a meeting of the SEAST in January 1789. By this time, the members of the SEAST were fully on board with the experiment of the SAN. Over the course of 1788, ninety abolitionist texts were provided for translation from English to French. As we shall see, the earliest SAN documents paid homage to both its British and American counterparts. Already the group had progressed from its rather humble beginnings in the winter of 1788.

B. Founding and Initial Work of the SAN

Etienne Clavière (1735-1793) called to order the first meeting of the Société on February 19, 1788. He was unanimously elected as the group’s first president. Clavière was a Swiss from Geneva, and a banker by trade. Later in life he would prove to be one of the few members of the SAN who was willing to employ economic arguments against slavery. But on that day in February, Clavière’s task was twofold:

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71 Oldfield, pgs 33-34
72 Oldfield, pg. 51
to set basic standards of membership for the organization, and to legitimize it in the eyes of both those in attendance and the wider public.

Both the new president and his friend Brissot provided the latter in the form of two letters from the London branch of the SEAST. The first, signed by president pro tempore Philip Sampson, officially inducted both Frenchmen as members of the organization. The second was cosigned by Joseph Woods and a John Philips, and was addressed to Brissot. It expressed their “sincere wishes...that your success will match the alacrity and zeal that you wish for ours” and approved the translation into French of an abolitionist work by Clarkson.73 As for the membership rules of the Société, these would not be officially written until around November of 1789. For now Clavière would content himself with three basic points on membership: the naming of himself and Brissot as president and secretary, the establishment of a committee to write a list of formal membership rules, and the requirement of paid dues of at least two louis annually.74

The proceedings of February 19th, 1788 would set the tone for the SAN in two important ways. First, it directly appealed to the SEAST (and by extension the similar American abolitionist groups) in order to give it some legitimacy. The SAN did not exist in a political vacuum, either domestically or abroad, and was actively a part of this transatlantic network of like-minded groups. As seen above, the Quakers were instrumental in this effort. Yet Oldfield also argues that this network came about as a result of the American Revolution, particularly the Declaration of

74 Dorigny, Gainot, pg. 61-62
Independence, which was a powerful defense of universal liberty.\textsuperscript{75} The SAN acknowledged these two influences in its first published work, \textit{A Discourse on the Necessity of Establishing an Abolitionist Society} (1788). In it, the Société praises the Quakers as the first “to open their eyes to the light [of abolitionism].”\textsuperscript{76} Similarly it acknowledges the role of the American Revolution in getting people to think about liberty. It “imprinted in most men a truly religious respect for liberty...and an aversion to all things tyrannical.”\textsuperscript{77} The American example had a profound impact on many members of the SAN, chief among them the Marquis de Lafayette. This is despite the fact that the Revolution freed only a few slaves, and more on the side of the vanquished British. Nonetheless, it proved to be an inspiration both for the SAN and the subsequent revolution that would consume it.

The second notable feature of the first meeting of the SAN was its insistence on the payment of dues so early in its infancy. How much was two \textit{louis} in 1788? Dorigny provides some perspective: “[This amount] was equivalent to two month’s salary for a simple worker.” The high price of joining the SAN did have an impact on the membership of the group. Dorigny continues, “the SAN, from its birth, circumscribed themselves within the boundaries of a narrow circle of the high society of the period.”\textsuperscript{78} Modern historians interpret these high membership costs as a negative feature of the Société. Yet the high cost of dues did not prevent diversity

\textsuperscript{75} Oldfield, pg. 14
\textsuperscript{76} La Société des Amis des Noirs, \textit{Discours sur la nécessité d’établir à Paris une Société pour concourir, avec celle de Londres, a l’abolition de la traite & de l’esclavage des Nègres} Prononcé le 19 Février 1788, dans une Société de quelques amis, rassemblés a Paris, à la priere du Comité de Londres. – (Paris), s.d. (1788) (Discourse on the necessity of establishing a society, with that of London, dedicated to the abolition of the trade and slavery of Negroes) Print, pg. 2
\textsuperscript{77} La Société des Amis des Noirs, \textit{Discours sur la Nécessité}, pg. 12
\textsuperscript{78} Dorigny, Gainot, note four, pg. 62
within the group per se. As Oldfield points out, the SAN was unique among its fellow abolitionist societies for its inclusion of both free men of color and even some women.\textsuperscript{79} The \textit{Regemens} (rules) of the Société reveals what it took to become a member, and how the SAN could achieve this level of diversity.

C. Membership rules and composition of the SAN

Divining a precise date for the Société’s membership rules is difficult, as no date is provided on the document itself. Using the \textit{registre} (register) of the Société, along with Dorigny’s annotations, one can understand the general happenings of each meeting of the SAN, despite the lack of more detailed minutes. The register includes the meetings in which the rules were debated and approved, but not a note on when they were actually published. On May 27\textsuperscript{th}, 1788, a committee of members (which included Brissot and Condorcet, along with many other nobles) wrote the first draft of the rules of the Société. They were first brought to the attention of the larger membership on August 5\textsuperscript{th}, and were unanimously approved for publication.\textsuperscript{80} A week later, a Monsieur Cuchet, a member of the rules committee, was given the task of obtaining permission for publication. The only salient detail about Cuchet provided by the SAN was that he was a printer in Paris.\textsuperscript{81} Dorigny sees this as an example of the SAN’s legalism. “Having the ambition to become a legitimate pressure group, it was unthinkable for them to place their seal on an

\textsuperscript{79} Oldfield, pg. 18
\textsuperscript{80} Dorigny, Gainot, pg. 167-168, 170-171
\textsuperscript{81} La Société des Amis des Noirs, \textit{Tableau de Membres} (Tableau of Members), pg. 4
illegal document.”82 Indeed, what little is known of their proceedings through the registre reads like a very dry eighteenth-century legal document. The SAN wanted to be respectable so that its audience, both commoner and noble, would not dismiss it out of fear of its belief in abolition. In a period of great social unrest, particularly towards the nobility, this desire to appear noble may have backfired. Yet the SAN could not have predicted that they would be entering such a period, particularly in the summer of 1788.

The first article of the membership rules of the SAN reads as follows: “The Société des Amis des Noirs will be composed of an indeterminate number of members, male or female, either regnicolés [Subjects of the King] or foreigners.”83 The inclusion of both women and the word regnicolé is extremely important. The SAN would be open not only to women, but to any subject of the King, which at this point included free blacks living in France. Slavery within France had been outlawed since 1315, by an edict passed down by King Louis X. The population of free blacks, or gens de couleur libres, in eighteenth-century France was not large. Samuel Chatman estimates that in the course of the entire century, between 4,000 and 5,000 of them lived in France, constituting a mere .025 percent of the total population.84 Nonetheless, prominent free blacks such as Julien Raimond and Vincent Ogé (to whom we shall return in a later section) could thus join the Société and add their

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82 Dorigny, Gainot, note 255, pg. 173
84 Chatman, Samuel L. “There are no Slaves in France A Re-Examination of Slave Laws in Eighteenth-century France.” The Journal of Negro History 85.3 (2000): Print, pg. 144
perspective to debates. They could become members, provided they obtained the written support of four current members of the SAN.\footnote{SAN, \textit{Reglemens}, pg. 19}

It should be noted, however, that most of the gender and racial diversity of the Société came from the wealthier classes. Both Raimond and Ogé were rich men of color who were planters, and owned slaves in their own right. Most of the female members of the SAN were simply wives of the male members, including Madame la Marquise de Lafayette and Madame la Duchesse de Rochefoucauld.\footnote{La Société des Amis des Noirs, \textit{Tableau de Membres} (Tableau of Members), pg. 6} While their inclusion does make the SAN a much more progressive society than its foreign counterparts, it was still aiming to be the abolitionist society of the respectable elite. Again, the payment of two \textit{louis} as dues makes it clear that membership in the SAN was expensive. As stated in the \textit{reglemens}, members from Paris had to pay two \textit{louis}, while members from the countryside paid only twenty-four \textit{livres} (or 1 \textit{louis}).\footnote{SAN, \textit{Reglemens}, pg. 20.} Given its lack of an organization outside of Paris however (per Resnick’s estimation), it is unlikely this rule was enforced, and the wealthy elite of the capital continued to dominate the membership of the Société.\footnote{Resnick, pg. 561-562}

D. Condorcet’s \textit{Preamble}: A Debt to the \textit{Philosophes}

A mere list of members does little to explain the mission of the SAN. The \textit{Discourse} of 1788 did explain some of its influences, but not its main goals. This task would be left to the writer of the preamble to the \textit{Reglemens}, also written in 1788. The authorship of this document is somewhat in question. Dorigny’s analysis of the
Registre reveals that a lesser noble, the Marquis de Montcloux, may have written it. However he concedes that the preamble more likely came from the hand of Marie-Jean Antoine Nicolas Caritat, the Marquis de Condorcet. Condorcet (1743-1794) will feature more prominently in the next chapter, once he assumes the presidency of the Société. Briefly put, he was one of the most radical thinkers of his day, whose work best represents the SAN's Enlightenment heritage. The philosophes’ influence is on full display as Condorcet lays out the Société’s mission statement in this preamble.

From the outset, Condorcet attempts to explain not only the SAN’s raison d’être, but some of its inherent disadvantages. While similar Enlightenment societies simply needed to “be publicized in order to invoke compassion....the [SAN] does not have the same advantages.” This is because "the unfortunate victims we have befriended are being sacrificed far away...[those] who could become their true protectors are themselves blinded by cruel prejudice.” In these opening lines, Condorcet sums up the challenge that the SAN membership faces, both logistically and racially. They are not just combating the slave trade, but the inherent racism that makes such an economic system possible. Amidst a brutal description of the horrors of the Middle Passage, Condorcet states that the “goal which the SAN has set itself [is] the need to stamp out the source of so much evil [the slave trade].” The SAN were not alone in this fight, as the Preamble pays tribute to its sister societies in

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89 Dorigny, Gainot, note 252, pg. 171
91 Condorcet, Preamble, pg. 150
both England and the United States. Much like the *Discourse*, it specifically mentions the role of the Quakers in preaching abolitionism as a matter of doctrine.\textsuperscript{92}

On the rules of membership, Condorcet reverts to more cautious (some may say more inaccurate) language. While colonists themselves might be too dependent on the slave economy to become outright abolitionists, they are not necessarily barred from the ranks of the Société. As long as they could pay dues and obtain the recommendation of four members, anyone could join the SAN. It is on the former point that Condorcet’s rhetoric becomes specious. After all the dues were fixed at “just” two *louis* or twenty-four *livres*, “so that no one who might be of assistance would be deterred from joining.”\textsuperscript{93} Obviously those without the means to pay, i.e. a majority of the French populace, are not considered to be of assistance. To be fair, this was a new group that needed to raise a large amount of revenue quite quickly. Dues would go a long way to funding the Société’s large printing operation. But this fact somewhat undercuts Condorcet’s grand assertion that “the slave trade must be abolished by a general agreement...with this permanently in mind, the Société will attempt to discover, balance, and accommodate the interests of all concerned.”\textsuperscript{94} As a political statement, the *Preamble* walks the line between the radical progressivism of abolition with the more conservative acknowledgement of the colonists’ needs. In short, it tries to be all things to all people.

In doing so, the document is vague on the specifics of how the SAN will achieve its goals. In her criticism of the *Discourse*, Lynn Hunt notes that the Société

\textsuperscript{92} Condorcet, *Preamble*, pg. 152
\textsuperscript{93} Condorcet, *Preamble*, pg. 153
\textsuperscript{94} Condorcet, *Preamble*, pg. 152
“couched its demands in vague terms, hoping for a positive response of a reform-minded monarchy.” It is important to remember that the Société is a product of the ancien régime, not of the Revolution that followed. Indeed, the Discourse directly appeals to Louis XVI (who had already abolished serfdom in 1778) to extend that order to include his black colonial subjects. As noted previously, the Société desired above all else to appear respectable, and the indistinct rhetoric of both the Discourse and the Preamble reflects this.

Philosophically, the content of the two works roughly matches that of the earlier generation of philosophes. The point in the Discourse that slavery “is an infallible means of corrupting two men at the same time, the master and the slave” is a clear allusion to Montesquieu and his similar assertion in the Spirit of the Laws. That slavery corrupts whites is a more expansive moral argument, as it more explicitly blames whites for the damage caused by slavery. Condorcet more fully attacks its racist roots, noting “we deprive the Negro of all his moral faculties and then declare him inferior to us, and consequently destined to carry our chains.” This mirrors Rousseau’s rejection of slavery as merely the consequence of natural law in On the Social Contract. A slave is not born, but made at the hand of another person’s prejudice.

In just these first two documents written by the leaders of the SAN, one can already see the debt owed to the transatlantic abolitionism of the 1780s, as well as

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96 As quoted in Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, pg. 59
97 As quoted in Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, pg. 59
98 Condorcet, *Preamble*, pg. 149
to the previous generation of *philosophes*. This early rhetoric is important, because it will influence the case the Société will make during the Revolution itself. By January 1789, Condorcet had been elected president, in the previous session in December 1788. A few months earlier, the French crown had reluctantly agreed to convene the Estates-General for the first time since 1614. With this announcement came the relaxation of printing restrictions, which had a profound effect on the work of the SAN. Dorigny comments that with this policy shift, “it became possible for the SAN to publish...without further delay...a written authorization was a moderation that suddenly became unnecessary.”99 As a result, Condorcet charged Monsieur Cuchet to begin printing the SAN’s literature without delay, and the printer dutifully accepted his charge.100 As the cause of abolition advanced into this momentous year, nobody could predict the direction that the journey would take. Soon it would become clear that the script that the Société had written for itself would have to be tossed aside, and a new one would be hastily written. While the Société kept its core principles intact, these newer lines arguably would have played better to the king’s court than to a new audience of revolutionaries.

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99 Dorigny, Gainot, note 290, pg. 190
100 Dorigny, Gainot, pg. 190
Chapter Three: The SAN During the Revolution

A. The Constituent Assembly and the Declaration of the Rights of Man

Six months after the Marquis de Condorcet gave his instructions to Cuchet to ramp up the Société’s printing campaign, France underwent significant political change. The meeting of the Estates-General in May of 1789 had failed to produce any kind of economic relief for the masses (known as the Third Estate), and by July they were in open revolt. On 9th July 1789, Louis XVI agreed to a reformation of the Estates-General as the new National Constituent Assembly at the behest of the Third Estate. Five days later, a Paris mob would storm the Bastille prison, an event that is considered the true beginning of the French Revolution.

The formation of the National Assembly was important to the SAN for both practical and political reasons. Firstly, it gave its members a public platform to communicate their views beyond that of printing pamphlets, which in turn assured more press coverage, and a much wider audience. According to Laurent Dubois, slaves in Martinique were already reading SAN literature by the summer of 1789, and would hear news of the debates in Paris with great interest.101 Secondly, the National Assembly was founded on the very principle of equality that the SAN claimed was the right of French slaves. The Assembly’s most noteworthy act was its approval of the Declaration of the Rights of Man on August 27, 1789 (a document

that was notably shaped by a member of the SAN, the Marquis de Lafayette). It proudly proclaims that “all men are born and remain free and equal in rights...these rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.” Slavery existed at the crossroads of liberty and property. If all men are born free, then slavery destroys that freedom. Yet if slaves are property, then those property rights cannot be infringed upon. This was the tension behind any Enlightenment discussion on slavery, and it was on full display in the debates between the SAN and its opponents on the stage of the National Constituent Assembly.

This section will primarily focus on two addresses by the Société des Amis des Noirs, given in February of 1790 and March of 1791. The first, attributed to Brissot, attempts to counter arguments made by colonists against the SAN and its mission. The second, written by Clavière, is a broader attack on the institution of slavery, and includes a notable section on economic arguments against it. These documents are once again steeped in the values of the French Enlightenment, and while the SAN made a good moral argument against slavery, they failed to advance an economic rationale for abolition. For this, its colonial opponents gleefully admonished it, as shall be seen in two pro-slavery speeches from the same period.

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B. The Rhetoric of the SAN and its Opponents, 1789-1791

Despite their own rhetorical shortcomings, the members of the Société des Amis des Noirs could legitimately claim that the political deck was stacked against them from the start. After dancing around the issue for almost a year, the National Assembly agreed to form a Committee on Colonies on March 2nd, 1790, a month after the aforementioned address by Brissot. These twelve men would study colonial policy and recommend further action to the Assembly as a whole. Of the twelve, half either owned land in the colonies or were sent as deputies to the Assembly by the colonists themselves. While some supported domestic over colonial manufacturing interests, the makeup of the Committee on Colonies meant the status quo on slavery would remain intact. One member of the Committee, Pierre-Antoine Barnave (1761-1793) would prove to be a major opponent of the Société des Amis des Noirs. These were the men the SAN had to convince, and as Quinney wryly notes, the only segment of the French public that it managed to motivate was its colonial opposition.

By the time of the Second Address to the National Assembly on February 5th, 1790, one can see a shift in mood from the previous work of the SAN. Both the Discourse of 1788 and the Preamble of the same year present the merits of abolition with a resolute certainty. Slavery is undeniably wrong, thus it must be abolished. Clearly, Brissot, Clavière and the other members believed that this moral argument would help them win the day in the National Assembly. Less than two years later,

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104 Quinney, pg. 121
however, that sunny optimism had all but vanished. By 1790 the colonists had their own lobby group akin to the SAN, the Club Massaic. That organization had begun to spread rumors about the abolitionists, including that they were in the pay of the British, or that they were aiming to promote armed rebellion by sending a shipment of 12,000 muskets to Saint-Domingue.\textsuperscript{105} The connection between the Société and its British counterpart may have fuelled these accusations.

The \textit{Second Address} must then be seen within the context of the claims by pro-slavery lobbyists. Lynn Hunt argues that this informs the "defensive tone about their position" which seeks to counter the "slander" peddled by the opposition.\textsuperscript{106} The actual case for abolition in this document is a familiar moralistic one. The SAN had always couched its rhetoric in an appeal to universal human rights, and now they had the Declaration of the Rights of Man to turn to. "You have declared them, these rights; you have engraven them on an immortal monument [the Declaration of the Rights of Man]."\textsuperscript{107} In a similar fashion to the \textit{Discourse}, the SAN attacks the barbarous nature of slavery with visceral language. "If [the colonists] need to recruit blacks in Africa to sustain the population of the colonies….it is because they wear out the blacks with work, whippings and starvation."\textsuperscript{108} Interestingly, the SAN is no longer attacking the idea of slavery in the abstract, but the specific brand of slavery practiced by the French colonists. It is worth remembering that just thirty years before, Voltaire refused to criticize French colonial slavery in \textit{Candide}. Anti-slavery

\begin{footnotes}
\item[105] Quinney, pg. 122
\item[106] Hunt, \textit{French Revolution and Human Rights}, pg. 106
\item[107] Société des Amis des Noirs, \textit{Second Address to the National Assembly, February 5\textsuperscript{th}, 1790}, as quoted in Hunt, \textit{French Revolution and Human Rights}, pg. 106
\item[108] Société des Amis des Noirs, as quoted in Hunt, \textit{French Revolution and Human Rights}, pg. 107
\end{footnotes}
rhetoric had certainly moved in a more confrontational direction, both since then and even in the SAN’s brief existence.

Just as the members of the Société are more explicit in what they stand for in the Second Address, they also articulate what they are against in a much clearer fashion. Throughout its short life, the SAN never advocated anything close to immediate abolition. Not only would this destroy the colonies, but it would also end any nascent hope of the black population becoming civilized. “...Immediate emancipation...would not only be a fatal operation for the colonies; it would even be a deadly gift to the blacks, in the state of abjection and incompetence to which cupidity has reduced them.”109 This was a theme seen not only in the work of the SAN, but also in several of the ideas of its members, including Condorcet and Lafayette. To a French Enlightenment abolitionist, gradual emancipation seemed like a natural solution. Even more strident voices such as Abbé Raynal advocated for it. Ideally, this policy would make abolition a reality, while defending its proponents from the charge of attempting to destroy the social order. What the Société des Amis des Noirs perhaps failed to understand was that to their opponents, any kind of abolition was tantamount to that wholesale destruction, and had to be resisted by any means necessary.

Nevertheless, the Société still had the Declaration of the Rights of Man as concrete proof of the French belief in equality. Yet it was to be the right to property, also enumerated in the Declaration, which would greatly bolster the colonial argument for slavery. In December 1789, a spokesman for the Chamber of

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109 Société des Amis des Noirs, as quoted in Hunt, French Revolution and Human Rights, pg. 108
Commerce of Nantes, Monseron de L’Aunay, appealed directly to Condorcet on behalf of his négrier constituency. “Consider the sixty million [francs] profit from their exports each year...consider that their capital of three billion [francs] is the sacred property of their owners.”110 The eye-catching figure of three billion includes not just the value of the sugar and the land it was grown on, but also the slaves themselves. The government cannot forcibly take slaves in the same way they could not take one’s land. In a deft political maneuver, it is the slavers and not the slaves who became the victims of a government bent on taking their rights away. And those who would try to do this are not merely anti-French, but pro-British, a charge which de L’Aunay repeats with gusto. “Our eternal rival [Britain]...smiles at our misfortunes [calls for abolitionism] and...forsee the scepter of their worldwide domination.”111 According to de L’Aunay, the only way to prevent this dark future is to, “beg the National Assembly to protect the life and property of the French.”112 There ends what amounts to a cease and desist letter to the president of the SAN on behalf of the beleaguered slavers of the French colonies. The National Assembly would be left with the choice of living up to a promise of equality or protecting the right to property.

Apart from this supposed violation of property rights, supporters of slavery claimed abolition would be an economic disaster. The sugar boom of the French West Indies was dependent on the slave trade, and led to the French domination of

111 Monseron de L’Aunay, as quoted in Censer, Hunt. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, pg. 130
112 Monseron de L’Aunay, as quoted in Censer, Hunt. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, pg. 130
the global sugar market. Antoine-Pierre Barnave knew this, and was eager to mention it in public. In a speech given on March 8th, 1790, Barnave expresses what he believes to be the Committee on Colonies’ consensus on slavery. He warns: “abandon the colonies, and these sources of prosperity will disappear or diminish...abandon the colonies, and you will import, at great price, from foreigners what they buy today from you.”113 This was a simple and effective argument that entwined France’s economic fate with that of its colonies. Nevertheless, Barnave argues that while they may be economically linked, France could not impose its political will on the colonies. Although the colonies are a part of the empire, the National Assembly, “never intended to include them in the constitution that it decreed for the kingdom or to subject them to laws which might be incompatible with their particular local properties [i.e. slavery].” This includes the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and as Lynn Hunt notes, the Assembly adopted Barnave’s proposals without debate.114 Not only was the colonial lobby strong enough to tar the SAN with rumors, but they also proved initially immune to the political changes of the early French Revolution. Such was the power of their economic argument.

For their part, the Société would not mount a focused attack on the economics of slavery until March 1791, near the end of its existence, in a speech by Clavière entitled *An Address on the Political and Economic Relations between France and her Colonies*. A month earlier, a member of the SAN, Vincent Ogé (1755-1791) had been executed. A free man of color and plantation owner, Ogé had attempted to

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114 Barnave, as quoted in Censer, Hunt. *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, pg. 132
lead an insurrection in Saint-Domingue to gain equal rights, and instead received the hangman’s noose. Ironically, the National Assembly would grant full rights to men like Ogé in May 1791, under pressure from the SAN.\(^\text{115}\) Even this was a qualified success; the decree would be rescinded in September of that year.

Unfortunately, the *Registre* of the Société is only extant until June 1790, so the mood of the meetings of the SAN for this period remains unrecorded. Marcel Dorigny estimates that meetings of the SAN became rare after 1790, probably as a result of pro-slavery pressure.\(^\text{116}\)

In spite of this, the Société continued to publish and present their case before the National Assembly. Etienne Clavière’s speech, published on March 28\(^\text{th}\), 1791 is possibly the best example of how the Société’s moral and economic argument against slavery merged. He begins, as most abolitionist texts do, in the realm of the hypothetical. “We believe...that the people who are the most free are also the best commercially.”\(^\text{117}\) Thus abolition is what free markets depend on, whereby the economic potential of every person can be unleashed for the good of the nation. Clavière also effectively demolishes the pro-slavery point that human bondage is merely just another economic activity. “[In] what work, what industry we hope to see thrive, is one constantly exposed to the horrors of famine!”\(^\text{118}\) Because it involves such human suffering, slavery and the goods it produces cannot be treated

\(^{115}\) Censer, Hunt. *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, pg. 123


\(^{118}\) Clavière, pg. 91
like any other industry, which again represents a synthesis between morality and economics.

It is somewhat telling that while making this syncretic argument, Clavière consistently refers to free blacks, including those born in the French Caribbean. Perhaps the death of Ogé served as inspiration. More likely this simply represents a shift in tactics, as pro-slavery forces had already burned the SAN on the subject of abolition. A focus on free blacks also fit conveniently with a central belief of the SAN: while the slaves could not be trusted with immediate emancipation on account of their unfortunate lack of competence, the free blacks were smarter, rising to become new captains of industry. Ogé was already an example of this. “The free black, educated and acclimatized [to society] would give his hand to his European brother, to found new economic institutions.”\(^\text{119}\) There is an appeal throughout the text to a new kind of colonial economy, one founded on the principle of liberty for all, enshrinined in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Clavière directly responds to Barnave’s claim of colonial autonomy. Just as “a citizen is not free to renounce constitutional principles”, the colonies are unable to proclaim themselves above the constitution, as they too are citizens of the French empire.\(^\text{120}\) Thus Clavière attempts to counter both the colonists’ political and economic arguments.

Near the end of his Address, Clavière waxes lyrically (as many members of the SAN are wont to do), as he repeats the platform of the Société. “Abolition of the slave trade, well-prepared liberty for the slave, equality of rights among all free men...liberty of commerce.... these are the points which we are prepared to defend

\(^{119}\) Clavière, pg. 98 
\(^{120}\) Clavière, pg. 105
with the arms of reason.”121 With that, the economic section of the speech comes to a close. The Address on the Political and Economic Relations Between France and her Colonies can be seen as an attempt to marry the moral argument against slavery with an economic critique. While he does address the points made by Barnave, and argues passionately for economic liberty, Clavière fails to either attack the claim of property rights or paint a compelling picture of what an abolitionist economy would look like. The Société’s case for abolition suffered as a result.

Yet this did not preclude some of its membership from speaking out on these very issues. Arguably its two most famous members, the Marquis de Condorcet and the Marquis de Lafayette would do just that. The two men were quite different in occupation and rhetorical style. Condorcet was an intellectual radical, while Lafayette was a more moderate man of action. The story of how they came to be abolitionists shows that what the Société lacked in economic diversity of membership, they made up for in a diversity of views and experiences.

121 Clavière, pg. 106, emphasis his.
C. The Radicalism of Condorcet

Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794), can be best described as the archetypal Enlightenment man. He came from a wealthy family in Piedmont, and first made a public name for himself as a gifted mathematician. From there his interests expanded to include philosophy and political science, subjects he became passionate about after meeting Voltaire in 1770. David Williams describes Condorcet's intellectual life as a transition between a “second generation philosophe... and outspoken defender of human rights...to a public servant and advocate for a ground-breaking scientific model of civil government and the social order.”122 This transition included a late career turn as a politician. Condorcet was elected to the National Assembly in 1789, and primarily allied himself with the republican wing of the Girondins, which may have indirectly caused his mysterious death during the Terror. In March of 1794, Condorcet was

captured and thrown in jail. Two days after his imprisonment, he was found dead in his cell. It is unclear whether Condorcet poisoned himself, or was simply murdered. In any case, while his contributions to political science are notable, Condorcet’s philosophy of equality has proved to be the most enduring aspect of his legacy.

Many first-generation philosophers were perfectly willing to discuss the natural rights and equality of man in the abstract, yet largely failed to use that rhetoric to challenge unequal institutions. Condorcet’s radicalism lies in his expanded definition of equality, and his willingness to turn that idea into political action. As Williams summarizes, “[according to Condorcet], all individuals shared in a common genetic and physiological equality an equality from nature…which authenticated society’s moral, political and legal structures.”

Thus rights were not created by society; society only became meaningful through the application of these primordial rights. Notably, these rights belonged to all persons, including all races and women. Condorcet would argue for women’s suffrage in On the Admission to the Rights of Citizenship for Women (1790), more than a century before the suffragettes. This work also displayed Condorcet’s “Voltairean style laced with irony and a faux-naïf candor.” Williams rightly notes that such a style had already been employed effectively in Condorcet’s most famous work on slavery, Réflexions sur l’Esclavage des Negres (1788).

Condorcet’s Réflexions sur L’Esclavage des Nègres (or Reflections on Negro Slavery) was first published in 1781, under the pseudonym of “Pastor Schwartz” (a joke on the German word for black). Williams hypothesizes that this may have been

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123 Williams, Condorcet and Modernity, pg. 46
124 Williams, Condorcet and Modernity, pgs 164-65
a nod to the Protestant evangelical roots of abolition, seen both in Wilberforce and the Quakers. Its second edition in 1788 proved to be more popular and happily coincided with the foundation of the Société des Amis des Noirs. Condorcet lays out a broad-based plan for gradual abolition of both slavery and the slave trade, largely in line with that of the SAN. Of more specific note are the ways in which Condorcet tackles the questions of colonial prosperity and property, and how they relate to slavery.

As in Rousseau, slavery is incompatible with Condorcet’s right to property, though the two arrive at this conclusion in a different way. Rousseau grounds his logic in a concept of the state, whereas Condorcet sees it in his idea of society as an expression of natural rights. “[If] the general welfare required the violation of the rights of citizens or non-citizens, society would be but a band of thieves.” Thus individual, natural rights take precedence over commercial and property rights. Pro-slavery advocates like Barnave would claim that abolition is essentially a theft of property, yet Condorcet disagrees. Slavery is not “an enjoyment of property, but a crime [in abolishing slavery] the law does not attack the right to property, but ceases to tolerate an action that should be punished by capital punishment.” Vivid imagery aside, Condorcet rhetorically and philosophically demolishes one of the

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125 Williams, “Condorcet and the Abolition of Slavery”, found in Susan Manning, Peter France. Enlightenment and Emancipation. Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 2006, print, pg. 20
126 Williams, “Condorcet and the Abolition of Slavery”, found in Manning, France, Enlightenment and Emancipation, print, pg. 22
128 Condorcet, pg. 15
129 Condorcet, pg. 22
main arguments in favor of slavery. The crime of taking away one’s freedom far outweighs the taking of one’s supposed property.

Condorcet also does not see slavery as an economic necessity for the French colonies. This was Barnave’s main contention, that the destruction of slavery would bring with it the end of colonial prosperity. Once again, Condorcet disagrees. Abolition of slavery would not ruin the colonies but instead make them “florissantes” (prosperous). Condorcet also uses the examples both of sugar cultivation in Asia, and the work of free blacks in the United States. Slave labor was not needed there to make the sugar not only viable, but profitable. Thus slavery is not grounded in economic theory but in prejudice, which Condorcet believes the French colonies would be better without. Thus Condorcet outlines the economic argument for abolition that the Société (an organization that he led for a time) would belatedly make. He eloquently made the case that slavery was hardly needed for a colonial economy to be prosperous. By the time the SAN began making a similar argument in 1791, it was perhaps a case of too little, too late.

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130 Condorcet, pg. 19
131 Condorcet, pgs 17-19
D. Lafayette and *La Belle Gabrielle*

To prove his point about the economics of slavery, Condorcet turned to the rather far-flung examples of Asia and the (small) population of free blacks in the United States. Yet he could have just used the example of his fellow SAN member Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834). Known to most today as a hero of the American Revolution, Lafayette lived a long and varied life on both sides of the Atlantic. Upon his return to France in the 1780s he took a place in government, first as a member of the Assembly of Notables (an advisory committee to Louis XVI) and later as commander-in-chief of the National Guard of France, under the control of the National Assembly. Politically, Lafayette was something of a conservative, and was certainly a royalist, having personally saved the lives of the royal family when a mob attacked Versailles in October 1789. As Peter Buckman notes, “Lafayette’s view was that it was essential to maintain confidence in the king, the very cornerstone of government...the king appeared
willing [in 1791] to cooperate in becoming a constitutional monarch.”\textsuperscript{132} Thus Lafayette was not a radical republican à la Condorcet, nor was he as big a dreamer. He perhaps always played the part of the pragmatic soldier.

Nevertheless, Lafayette’s philosophy, such as it was, still bore the hallmarks of the Enlightenment. He had a great passion for the universal liberty enshrined in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which he helped to author. Even though he would disagree with the composition of the Constitution of 1791, Lafayette would fiercely defend the aims of the Declaration, even if he were “alone in the universe.”\textsuperscript{133} This interest naturally led to the cause of abolition, and Buckman speculates that the work of Abbé Raynal may have influenced Lafayette to some degree.\textsuperscript{134}

Naturally his deep ties to the newly established United States were also a factor. Indeed, in a letter praising the foundation of the SAN in February 1788, Lafayette alluded to American abolitionist societies, including the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society. “It is with great pleasure that I see an abolitionist society beginning in Paris...of which the first examples were in America.” Lafayette goes on to express his hope that in a French colony “after some time...the Negroes will be brought gradually to a state of liberty”\textsuperscript{135} Like Condorcet and his other SAN brethren, Lafayette believed in gradual abolition, and had been advocating for the idea even before the Société. In a letter to George Washington from February 1783, Lafayette tried to entice his mentor into a special joint venture. “Let us unite in

\textsuperscript{132}Peter Buckman. \textit{Lafayette: A Biography.} London: Paddington Press 1977, print, pg. 197
\textsuperscript{133} Buckman, pg. 233
\textsuperscript{134} Buckman, pg. 112
\textsuperscript{135} Letter from Lafayette to the SAN, 11 February 1788, as quoted in Dorigny, Gainot pg. 66
purchasing a small estate where we may try to experiment to free the Negroes, and use them only as tenants...if we succeed in America...I will...[try] the method in the West Indies.”  

Washington politely declined, yet Lafayette continued with his experiment.

The result would be La Belle Gabrielle, a plantation bought for 120,000 livres in the colony of Cayenne, French Guiana. This was to be Lafayette’s model for gradual emancipation. He would turn the plantation over to his wife, Adrienne (also a member of the SAN), and it was as much her project as his. They forbade the selling of any slaves, and paid them all according to their work. Literacy teaching and schooling for children were introduced under the tutelage of seminarians hand-picked by Adrienne. Rules and punishments applied to both whites and blacks. Despite his earlier refusal, La Belle Gabrielle had the enthusiastic support of Washington. “Your acquisition of a plantation in Cayenne, with a view to emancipating the slaves, is a generous and noble proof of your humanity. God grant that a similar spirit will animate the people of this country!”

Upon Lafayette’s imprisonment by the Austrians in 1792, La Belle Gabrielle was confiscated, and its tenants were sold along with the property. As with the Société des Amis des Noirs, a noble project suffered an ignoble end.

Yet Lafayette was forever an abolitionist, even in his advancing years. During his famed tour of the United States in 1824-25, Lafayette again spoke for abolition to an audience of proud black soldiers in New Orleans. And as Buckman notes,

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137 Unger, pg. 216
138 Washington to Lafayette, June 1786, as quoted in Unger, pg. 216
Lafayette always advocated for gradual abolition, for a slave "should not rejoice in liberty before being gradually enlightened to the rights it confers."\textsuperscript{139} \textit{La Belle Gabrielle} was an example of this. Not only that, but it proved the economic point of both Clavière and Condorcet. French colonies did not need slavery to thrive commercially. They could pay each person according to their work and still maintain a profit. However this argument again failed to gain traction in the National Assembly, particularly when pitted against Barnave and the colonial political machine.

E. Collapse of the Société, and the Abolition of 1794

Based on the political strength of its opponents, the SAN may have been already doomed to collapse by the time of the \textit{Second Address} in 1790, and surely was on the decline by Clavière’s speech a year later. Yet the group still retained support, particularly in some sections of the left-wing press, including Brissot’s own paper, \textit{Le Patriot Français} (The French Patriot). The easing of printing restrictions in 1788, which gave the SAN an opportunity to publish their material, also led to an explosion of revolutionary newspaper outlets. One such paper, \textit{Les Révolutions de Paris} (The Revolutions of Paris), was still publishing anti-slavery articles in the fall of 1790. They used many of the same terms as the Société, appealing to “the cries of philosophy and universal liberty that germinate and spread throughout the nations.”\textsuperscript{140} Such cries did little to help the SAN, whose last known activity is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{139} Buckman, pg. 123
\item \textsuperscript{140} \textit{Les Révolutions de Paris}, 5 September 1790, pgs. 523-24, as quoted in Censer, Hunt, pg. 132
\end{itemize}
recorded by Dorigny in September of 1791. After this date, the Société des Amis des Noirs may be considered dead. Abolition of slavery, their one goal for so many years, would arrive in February of 1794, long after the group’s metaphorical (and in the case of some members, literal) demise.

The SAN and the abolition of 1794 are however linked, if only obliquely. A single event ended the former, and began the latter. This seminal historical moment was the start of the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue in August 1791. Unrest in Saint-Domingue had been growing since late 1790, with radical whites taking control of a Colonial Assembly, and the failed uprising led by Vincent Ogé. This initial phase of violence in 1790 did lead to some political success for the SAN, when the National Assembly extended full civil rights to free men of color in May 1791. Although the decree would be rescinded in September of that year, the National Assembly reversed course in April of 1792, once again extending citizenship rights to free men of color. Yet this policy did not stem from a spirit of enlightened equality. Laurent Dubois notes that the law’s supporters (mostly followers of ex-SAN founder Brissot) “[wanted] to present Saint-Domingue’s free men of color as the best defense against the growing slave revolt.”

Five months later, Brissot’s good friend, Léger-Felicité Sonthonax (1763-1813) would lead some 7,000 French soldiers to Saint-Domingue, becoming the de facto ruler of its white population. Sonthonax himself was an abolitionist who would play a starring role in the drama of the fate of colonial slavery in 1793-94, after the end of the SAN. Fittingly, the last recorded political act

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141 Dorigny, Gainot pg. 295
of the Société des Amis des Noirs was to nominate Sonthonax for membership in 1792.\textsuperscript{143}

The pace of change in the history of the Revolution quickens dramatically after the informal end of the Société in 1791, both at home and abroad. It truly was a revolution on two fronts. In the midst of the colonial chaos, the French Revolution entered its most brutal phase, with the execution of the monarch in January 1793, France’s transition to the First Republic, and the bloody Terror that came with it. The studied, rational legalism of the Société des Amis des Noirs simply had no place in this chaotic world. The relative stability of the 1780s seemed like a distant memory. As to how the SAN collapsed, Dorigny sees it as a result of interrelated external and internal factors. The SAN of 1788-89 was not the same organization in 1790-91, largely due to the Revolution. In the wake of colonial opposition, the SAN was forced to scale back its political ambitions, focusing less on abolition and more on the rights of already free blacks. Whereas the SAN membership was politically broad, their colonial opponents had a tightly controlled, relentless message. As Dorigny understands, “Barnave...[had] a party of those who saw peril in the radicalization of the Revolution for the entire social order, including the colonies.”\textsuperscript{144}

Despite their undoubted moderation, the Société was effectively branded as an example of that peril. What would be called the Haitian Revolution of 1791 played perfectly into that political narrative. The SAN had already been accused of fomenting slave revolt in Saint-Domingue, and now the pro-slavery lobby had the proof. It is telling that the formal meetings of the SAN ended in September 1791,
roughly a month after the beginning of the slave revolt. And although Dorigny credits the SAN with the extension of citizenship to free blacks in April 1792, it is telling that Dubois merely credits nameless supporters of Brissot, and does not invoke the name of the Société des Amis des Noirs.\textsuperscript{145}

Two years too late to save the organization, slavery was officially abolished in the French colonies on February 4\textsuperscript{th}, 1794, in a short one-paragraph document, which reads as follows. “The National Convention declares that slavery of the blacks is abolished in all the colonies....all men living in the colonies, without distinction of color, are French citizens and enjoy all the rights guaranteed by the constitution.”\textsuperscript{146}

The action taken by the National Convention (the successor to the National Assembly during the First Republic) was to legitimize a previous decree laid down by Sonthonax in August 1793. This \textit{Decree of General Liberty} is steeped in the language of the Revolution and the new French republic. “The French Republic wants all men to be free and equal with no color distinctions...The republic adopts you amongst its children, these kings wanted only to load you down with chains.”\textsuperscript{147}

Thus, the abolition of 1794 can be viewed in two simultaneous contexts. Clearly, abolition was a political tool used to ameliorate the situation in Saint-Domingue, first by Sonthonax and then by the National Convention. Secondly, it could be said that the fears of Barnave largely came true. Abolition did come about as a result of the radicalization of the Revolution, with the ending of the monarchy and the beginning of the Republic.

\textsuperscript{145} Dorigny, Gainot, pg. 49
\textsuperscript{146} National Convention, \textit{Abolition of Slavery, February 1794}, as found in Dubois, \textit{Slave Revolution}, pg. 132
\textsuperscript{147} Léger-Felicité Sonthonax. \textit{Decree of General Liberty}, as found in Dubois, \textit{Slave Revolutions}, pg. 122
The Société des Amis des Noirs did not adjust well to these changing circumstances, at home or abroad. It was a scion of the ancien régime, despite the presence of more radical members like Condorcet. Abolition did not come as a result of their advocacy, but as a product of political forces well beyond their control. Given this outcome, the actions of the Société can be seen as at best irrelevant. At worst their example can be used (as Sala-Molins did with Condorcet) to attack the efficacy of the entire French Enlightenment, the philosophes and their ideals, which were so important to the rhetoric of the SAN. Yet this position leads to a Catch-22. The Société des Amis des Noirs, indeed the French abolitionist project, could never have existed outside the intellectual ferment of the French Enlightenment. Yet the mixture of those ideas, together with the unique historical moment of the French Revolution, might have doomed the Société to its failure. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, it is easy to blame this entirely on the SAN. Those historians who do this not only forget the history of the Société, but the fate of French abolitionists after 1794.
Chapter Four: The Legacy of the Société des Amis des Noirs

A. The Culling of the SAN

However one interprets the collapse of the Société des Amis des Noirs, abolition did not lack popular support in February 1794. This represented a rapid change from the absence of abolitionism in the *cahiers* of 1789. Thousands of Parisians gathered at Notre Dame to celebrate abolition, and the sentiment extended far beyond the capital. In Bordeaux, one of the hubs of the slave trade, four hundred newly freed blacks danced in the streets. Even in rural areas, people gathered to cheer for progress. Interestingly, they saw this as an important milestone in the “Republican flight against the ‘slavery’ of political repression and tyranny, even in areas distant from Paris.”

The abolition of 1794 was a natural extension of the Revolutionary ideals that the SAN tried to co-opt to its own ends.

Yet many of the leaders of the former Société did not live to see the celebrations in 1794. As Daniel Resnick reminds his readers, most of the SAN leadership (Brisso, Condorcet, Clavière) were allies of the moderate *Girondin* faction in the National Assembly. This led to “most of its founding leadership...[being]...killed, forced into hiding, imprisoned, or driven to suicide.”

This was under the Reign of Terror, during which tens of thousands died either by the guillotine, or other forms of summary execution. Brissot, Condorcet, and

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Clavière were among those claimed by the Terror, while other prominent members like Lafayette were imprisoned.

Although the SAN had died quietly by 1792 the Terror represented a final insult to the group beyond the loss of intellectual leaders like Condorcet and Brissot. In one of history’s many ironies, the architect of this government program of murder was Maximilien de Robespierre (1758-1794) and his Committee of Public Safety. In 1791 he had stood with the SAN to attack slavery in support of the rights of free blacks and was known for his abolitionist views.150 Two years later, Robespierre pursued the destruction of all the Girondins, including his former colleagues, for being traitors to the Revolution. The abolition of colonial slavery came about as domestic tyranny increased. Four months after abolition, in June 1794, the right to legal counsel was ended, and ordinary people faced the guillotine if they dared to speak out.151

Although the Terror officially ended with the execution of Robespierre in July 1794, it has left an indelible mark on the historiography of the Revolution. The progressive promise of 1789 and the bloodshed that followed are two sides of the same coin. As William Doyle notes, “Already by 1802 a million French citizens lay dead...inspiring and ennobling...the French Revolution is also moving and appalling: in every sense a tragedy.”152 In this way, the culling of the SAN was not only an actual killing, but also a historiographical extermination of the ideals it stood for.

151 Censer, Hunt, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, pgs. 101-2
This chapter will focus on some of that historiography, in particular the criticisms of this political expression of Enlightenment philosophy. Many aspects of the SAN are ripe for critique, from its elitist membership policies to lack of an economic argument against slavery. And because of the untimely demise of the group, many historians have a difficult time situating them in the narrative of abolition in France specifically and transatlantic abolition more broadly. Nonetheless, the Société deserves a place in that history, both of its own time and the decade after, because of its status as the first attempt at a movement to abolish slavery in France. This demands a short postscript on their immediate successors, the Société des Amis des Noirs et des Colonies (SANC), and the ways in which this group differed from the original society.

B. Criticism of the Société

The SAN has not proven to be a popular topic among historians of transatlantic abolitionism. Before Marcel Dorigny’s landmark work in 1998, much of the secondary literature on the Société (in English) was found in journals from the 1970s and 1980s. As Daniel Resnick points out, this came down to a lack of adequate primary documentation, a problem that he grappled with himself. Before Dorigny’s annotation of the partial minutes of the SAN, nothing was known about their meetings. In the absence of these sources, Resnick and other historians chose to reconstruct what they could, and their incomplete picture of the Société is not a flattering one.

153Resnick, pg. 559
While Resnick’s specific subject is the failure of the SAN, other contemporary historians damn the movement in passing. David Geggus idly remarks that the group’s failure to move legislation in the National Assembly, “with hindsight looks to be a foregone conclusion.” Yet he gives little evidence for why this would be, other than what he sees as the SAN’s mixed messaging on abolition versus the rights of free blacks, which Geggus acknowledges was a safer issue politically. He concludes that the French antislavery movement conceded the morality versus prosperity argument, which ultimately doomed its cause.

Based on the SAN’s economic arguments (or lack thereof), it is hard to refute this conclusion. Resnick refers to this critique directly, noting the “poverty” of an economic justification for abolition in the Société’s literature. While this ignores some of the finer details, such as the works of Condorcet and Lafayette, the point still stands. It is in service of Resnick’s main thesis, which amounts to a comparative study of the SAN and its British allies, the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAST). Resnick begins with a discussion of membership policies, during which he criticizes both the Société’s small size and lack of a network outside of Paris. The SEAST had a comparatively large network and did not suffer from lack of participation. Resnick admits this was due in no small part to the Quaker presence in Britain, a religious group that had a profound impact on transatlantic abolitionism as a whole.

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155 Geggus, pgs. 1299-1300.
156 Geggus, pg. 1305
157 Resnick, pgs. 563-64
158 Resnick, pg. 562
On the issue of networking, Resnick clearly favors the SEAST over the SAN. The British group also had the upper hand when it came to a clear economic argument against slavery. The SEAST trumpeted the example of Sierra Leone (founded in 1787) as an alternative to the West Indian colonial economy. Thomas Clarkson made a personal investigation into the deadly nature of the slave trade for British seamen, which the historian Robert Stein would expand upon. Had the members of the Société done something similar, they could have crafted a better argument on the dangers of the slave trade, particularly given the higher mortality rates for French sailors. Resnick saves his most damning words for his conclusion. He is “struck...by the weakness...in commitment, strategy, and organization, of the first carriers of the abolitionist program in France.” This is particularly true in light of their British contemporaries.

In his work, the SAN appears to be impotent and utterly incapable of effecting the change it sought. And Resnick is not alone in this interpretation. Valerie Quinney shares it, describing the SAN as “reluctant to take decisive action in the National Assembly.” She then quotes an account of a meeting between the SAN and Clarkson, in which the Frenchmen acknowledge that the business of the Revolution must come before any kind of abolition. Given this lack of political will on the part of the Société, its influence on the eventual abolition of slavery in the

159 Resnick, pg. 565
160 Resnick, pg. 569
French colonies is negligible. Instead, Quinney simply states that, "the slaves freed themselves, both from the white colonists and from France as well."\textsuperscript{162}

C. A Measured Response

Many of the criticisms above are valid points. Yet the history of abolition in France is steeped in contradiction. For instance, Quinney is right in suggesting that the French slaves freed themselves, but this would seem to invalidate both the need for an abolitionist society, and indeed the abolition of 1794. Some slaves freed themselves in Saint-Domingue, but their revolution did little to help those in Guyana or Guadeloupe. They were only freed in 1794. (Martinique was unaffected by the decree, as it was under British control in 1794). This distinction may seem pedantic, but it is important nonetheless. Thus the following response is framed in the knowledge that although these criticisms of the Société are broadly accurate, they fail to capture some of the particulars of its history that helped to cause its failure.

Resnick’s particular focus on the SAN’s membership casts them as an ineffectual group of well-meaning rich men, content with the idea of abolition and not its application. This echoes Augustin Cochin’s sociological description of such a “société de pensée” (an intellectual, or philosophical society) versus what I termed a société de politique (political society, or lobby). This is Resnick’s firmest conclusion, particularly in light of the SAN’s exorbitant membership fees. Dorigny would also address it in his 1998 work, posing the question of whether the SAN was a political movement or just a philanthropic club. Resnick would probably favor the latter.

\textsuperscript{162}Quinney, pg. 128
description, given its distinct lack of political victories, but Dorigny resists this. Certainly there was an aura of philanthropy surrounding the 1780s, as guilty nobles tried to turn their wealth to the betterment of society, and many of these men were members of the SAN. But while a philanthropic desire may lead one to pity the conditions of slaves, it would not necessarily lead one to the abolitionist conclusions advanced by the SAN.¹⁶³ A mere philanthropist would not take such a political action. The registre of the Société bears out this point of view: almost all of its meetings focused on how to move its agenda through the National Assembly. To be fair, Resnick, et al. did not have access to this level of documentation. Yet Dorigny concludes that the SAN was wholly unique, at the “crossroads of two worlds” between a société de pensée and a lobby.¹⁶⁴ Put another way, the Société des Amis des Noirs was the first attempt to take the French Enlightenment philosophy of equality and opposition to slavery and turn that into a political platform.

And while the results were less than anyone could have hoped, they were not failures as David Geggus describes. The SAN did play a prominent role in the decree of May 1791 that granted full citizenship rights to free blacks.¹⁶⁵ Ironically, Geggus acknowledges this decree as a “triumph of bourgeois liberalism” for the period.¹⁶⁶ Geggus, and certainly Resnick, would not describe the SAN as a similar triumph, whatever its accomplishments!

¹⁶⁴ Dorigny, Gainot, pgs 31-32.
¹⁶⁶ Geggus, pg. 1305
Clearly the latter sees the SEAST as more deserving of praise, both in terms of organization and results. The SAN’s lack of infrastructure outside of Paris is an absolutely valid critique, one borne out by later scholars such as J.R. Oldfield.\textsuperscript{167} It was a comparatively shallow group who operated only as an abolitionist vehicle within the narrow confines of the National Assembly. Yet as Resnick admits, the SEAST only obtained its vaunted infrastructure through Quaker involvement, something that had no analog in France.

While Resnick’s criticisms are valid, his direct comparison between the SAN and SEAST is not as solid as it initially appears. The two groups were contemporaries and did have established ties, but the similarities end there. The external circumstances if each were decidedly dissimilar. To make a somewhat obvious point, Clarkson and Wilberforce did not have to contend with a full-scale revolution and major political instability. The collapse of the ancien régime and the beginning of the Haitian Revolution demonstrated that the ground shifted under the feet of the SAN, whatever its well-documented faults. In this context, its muddled messaging makes sense, as it struggled to adapt to a new political environment in the midst of virulent opposition from the colonial lobby. They were not alone in a kind of rebranding: Oldfield notes that British abolitionists like the SEAST had to recast its message in the language of nationalism and imperialism in the 1790s.\textsuperscript{168} And in all of this, it is worth remembering another obvious point: it took the SEAST (and Britain) two decades to abolish the slave trade, and a further twenty years to

\textsuperscript{168} Oldfield, pg. 161.
abolish slavery. The French, with all of their turmoil, still managed to do this before their hated rivals. Sadly, the abolition of 1794 did not last long, but for those short eight years France was a pioneer in the ending of slavery.

Again, the Société cannot be credited with that abolition, as it collapsed before 1794. Nor are any of the criticisms of Resnick, Geggus or Quinney completely wrong. Indeed, they are broadly right. But their focus on the ultimate failure of the SAN belies the importance of the organization. At the very least, the Société des Amis des Noirs deserves some positive recognition as the first abolitionist group to use the rhetoric of the French Enlightenment to attempt political action against slavery in France. Nor would it be the last. But if the Terror was a physical culling of the leadership of the Société, then the dismissive tone on the part of historians represents a different kind of removal from the annals of French history.

![Abbé Grégoire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gregoire.jpg)

**Figure 6: An engraved portrait of the Abbé Grégoire, president of the Société des Amis des Noirs et des Colonies. Picture credit: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gregoire.jpg**

D. The SAN’s Direct Legacy
Despite its relatively thin legacy, the name of the SAN would continue to be invoked, briefly, by another abolitionist society. This was the Société des Amis des Noirs et des Colonies (SANC), founded in 1796 at the urging of Abbé Henri Grégoire (1750-1831), who was also a member of the original SAN. Léger-Felicité Sonthonax (1763-1813) and the economist Jean-Baptiste Say (1767-1832) were the other most notable members of the SANC. Like its predecessors, it adopted a set of Reglemens (rules) in 1798 that outlined its mission statement. Since the question of abolition had already been resolved for France, the SANC could “subscribe to a purely philanthropic zeal.”¹⁶⁹ Unlike the original Société, which attempted to be a political lobby, the SANC would be a philanthropic group, as the fight over abolition had already been won.

Oldfield also finds meaning in its slight name change, as the SANC wanted to help ease the transition from slavery to emancipation within the existing framework of French colonial rule.¹⁷⁰ Evidence for this can be again found in the Reglemens of the SANC. The SANC would devote itself to the “moral and physical perfection of the colonists...agricultural, industrial, and commercial progress...and the establishment of new colonies.”¹⁷¹ This distinction seems curious, given the original SAN’s political platform. As Dorigny describes, the Société des Amis des Noirs was never anti-colonial. On the contrary, they believed that its plan of gradual abolition would save the colonies from an “inevitable shipwreck”, and would notably open up new

¹⁶⁹ Société des Amis des Noirs et des Colonies. Reglements de la Société des Amis des Noirs et des Colonies, adopté dans sa séance le 30 Frimaire, An VII (Rules of the SANC, adopted at their meeting on the 30th of November, 1798), Print, pg. 3.
¹⁷⁰ Oldfield, pg. 118
¹⁷¹ Société des Amis des Noirs et des Colonies, pg. 5
colonial opportunities in Africa. Yet the SANC explicitly endorsed colonialism in a way its predecessor did not.

Dorigny’s landmark study of the SAN also includes the history of the SANC, written by Bernard Gainot. Gainot describes the period from 1795-1802 as a forgotten time in both abolitionist and revolutionary history. This was the era of the Directoire, or Directory, sandwiched in-between the First Republic and the Empire of Napoleon Bonaparte. The new government had the unenviable task of picking up the pieces following the Terror. Its failure to do so effectively brought about the rise of Napoleon to power in November 1799. Not coincidentally, that month marked the definitive end for the SANC.

Looking at Gainot’s compilation of attendance at meetings, it is hard to argue with Lawrence Jennings’s assertion that the SANC was “a mere shadow of its former self.” Of the thirty-one known meetings that took place between November 1797 and March 1799, only four were comprised of twenty or more attendees. Ten meetings had either fewer than six attendees, which was the required number according to the Reglements. To put it bluntly, the SANC makes the original Société des Amis des Noirs look positively successful! Some of this can be explained as a difference in mission between the two societies. The SANC was different from its namesake, being more concerned with philanthropic ideas than political action. As

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173 Dorigny, Gainot , pg. 301
175 Jennings, pg. 3
176 Dorigny, Gainot , pg. 328
Gainot notes, the active members like Grégoire and Say thought of the group as a “société de pensée close to the circles of power.”

Yet in a similar fashion to the Société des Amis des Noirs, the SANC would ultimately be at the mercy of events in the colonies. The situation in Saint-Domingue had stabilized, as Toussaint L’Ouverture essentially ran the island like an independent state (and had gotten rid of Sonthonax in the process!) until his death in 1802. By 1799 however, the Directory had already begun debating the reconquest of Saint-Domingue and the return of slavery in all French colonies. Daniel Resnick concludes that the SANC’s “political crime” was “its provocation to the established interests within the Directory”, namely the return of slavery. Clearly the Directory saw them as a threat, as Sonthonax was arrested in October 1799. With the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte a month later, both the SANC and French abolitionism were effectively dead.

Despite notable differences, it is telling that both the Société des Amis des Noirs and its successor suffered the same fate. The SAN tried to affect political change, and it fell short. The SANC tried to preserve the progress of 1794, and it faltered as well. How much of the relative failure is a result of its actions or outside influences is up to debate, as is its place in the study of French history more broadly. Many, like Louis Sala-Molins, would see both societies as the personification of the intellectual shortcomings of the French Enlightenment, which hated slavery and the slave in equal measure. Yet just as the philosophes represented progress for their

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177 Dorigny, Gainot, pg. 326
time, so too did the Société des Amis des Noirs. Daniel Resnick argues that French abolitionists were not as successful as their British counterparts, and while some of the blame for this relative lack of success does lie with the SAN, it was destroyed as much by the Revolution (in both France and Saint-Domingue) as it was by its own incompetence. Resnick has a similar conclusion with regards to the SANC. That group failed because “Napoleon’s decision to restore slavery turned their centrist goals...into the fires of subversion.”¹⁷⁹ Likewise, the colonial political lobby, the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue, and to some extent the Terror all contributed to the destruction of both the SAN and its goals. The Revolution, founded on the Enlightenment principles of equality had given French abolitionists like Brissot, Condorcet, Clavière, Grégoire and Lafayette hope. A decade after 1789 that hope had been extinguished, and had been replaced by the tyranny of an empire.

E. A Napoleonic Postscript

Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) would not officially be crowned as emperor until December 1804, in a ceremony at Notre Dame in which he famously (and apocryphally) wrested his crown from the hands of the Pope, so as not to appear to submit to his will. Napoleon, like Julius Caesar before him, had won this prize on the back of impressive military feats, and his own coup d’état in 1799 that ended the Directory. In that year Napoleon had the Roman title of Consul, and in August 1802 he was acclaimed as First Consul for life, having disposed of his two rivals in what was once a triumvirate of Consuls. On May 20th, 1802, Napoleon

¹⁷⁹ Resnick, “Political Economy”, pg. 183
formally restored slavery to the French colonies. Historians such as Thomas Pronier have studied Napoleon’s political calculus in this decision. In a 2002 symposium to celebrate its bicentennial, Pronier declared himself puzzled as to why Napoleon did not touch the question of slavery between 1799 and 1802 (besides the obvious repression of the SANC).\textsuperscript{180} As if in answer, another historian, Philippe Girard, declares that the decision was solely a military one, and not based on the influence of former planters. This makes sense, as Napoleon had made the re-conquest of Saint-Domingue a top priority.\textsuperscript{181}

Napoleon’s expedition to retake Saint-Domingue, under the command of his brother-in-law, Charles Leclerc (1772-1802) was five months old by May 1802. In his instructions to Leclerc, Napoleon emphasized that “The French nation will never place chains on men it has recognized as free...all the blacks will live in Saint-Domingue as they live in Guadalupe [with their freedom intact]”\textsuperscript{182} The law of May 20\textsuperscript{th} does represent a departure from this noble sentiment, as Napoleon clearly had designs for re-enslavement following a victory in Saint-Domingue. Such a victory never came to pass, however. The rebels, under the command of L’Ouverture and later Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1758-1806) successfully repelled the French troops, with Leclerc dying of yellow fever in the process. On January 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1804, Saint-Domingue would officially rename itself Haiti under the auspices of a new

\textsuperscript{182}Napoleon Bonaparte. Notes to Serve as Instructions to Give to Captain General Leclerc, 1802. As found in Laurent Dubois, John D. Garrigus. Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2006. Print, pg. 177.
constitution. In an instant, Napoleon lost any hope of regaining the economic engine of France’s colonial empire. At the same time he resurrected slavery, the institution that had caused the initial loss of Saint-Domingue.

Yet as Philippe Girard points out, this restoration of slavery is something of a misnomer. Napoleon’s law maintained slavery in places that had never abolished it (like Martinique, which the 1802 Treaty of Amiens had restored to France), while restoring the slave trade to those colonies. In colonies where a policy of abolition did exist, like Guadaloupe and most notably Saint-Domingue, the Consulate promised only to revisit the slavery decision within ten years. Nonetheless, the law of May 20th was a watershed moment in the history of French abolitionism, and how that history would be interpreted.

Girard’s conclusion that Napoleon’s decision on slavery was based solely in military concerns is largely correct, and is an example of the future emperor’s ruthless, pragmatic streak. But as Thomas Pronier points out, such a conclusion does not take into account what he sees as Napoleon’s “ideology of restoration.” In returning to the colonial norms from the ancien régime, Napoleon hoped to attain a level of centralized power not seen since before the Revolution. The First Napoleonic Empire was largely a return to monarchy under the guise of acclamation by the people. Indeed, Napoleon styled himself as Empereur des Français, emperor of the French people, not as emperor of France. He saw his role as an imperial leader that represented the revolutionary will of the masses. To Napoleon, this was different from the Bourbons who represented the nation of France at the expense of

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183 Girard, pg. 611
184 Pronier, found in Benot, Dorigny Re-establishment of Slavery, pg. 67
its citizens. Whatever name he put to it, Napoleon reclaimed the mantle of autocracy from the deposed monarchy. And as Yves Benot and Marcel Dorigny conclude, 1802 represented a break from the principles of the Revolution. “This logic of the universality of human rights, proclaimed in 1789 [was] savagely denied in 1802”\textsuperscript{185} Napoleon’s imperial ambition and his policy on slavery were not only the death knell for early French abolitionists, but also for the progressive spirit that had inspired both them and the broader French Revolution. Regardless of how he came to his decision, or the limits and nuances of it, the fact remains that Napoleon Bonaparte’s re-establishment of slavery set the cause of abolition back almost half a century.

\textsuperscript{185} Yves Benot, Marcel Dorigny. “1802: A Rupture with the Principles of the Revolution.” Found in Benot, Dorigny, Re-Establishment of Slavery, pg. 10
Conclusion

France’s journey to abolish slavery was a long one, from the false dawn of 1794, to slavery’s renewal in 1802, and to its eventual end under the Second Republic in 1848. This tortured history has resonated all the way to the twenty-first century, such as with the aforementioned declaration of the remembrance of the slave trade in the French Senate on May 10th, 2001. As recently as March 2014, several Caribbean nations have sued France and other European countries in the United Nations International Court of Justice, demanding reparations for the evils of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade.\(^{186}\) It is extremely unlikely that any reparations will be granted.

Nevertheless, the scope of France’s history with colonial slavery is astounding. The original Société des Amis des Noirs seems to be a bit player in a much larger drama, given that they only formally existed for the better part of three years, and informally for only a short time after that. But what a three years! 1788 to 1791 encompasses the beginnings of a revolution that would irreversibly alter France and the world. The events of 1789 in particular have had a profound impact on the French national psyche. According to François Furet, it is impossible for French historians to be objective about the Revolution, as it represents a “quest for identity.” Because of its multifaceted nature, Revolutionary historiography allows

\(^{186}\) http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/9/27/14-caribbean-nationissueuropean-countriesforreparationsoverslavery.html
each historian to identify “with his heroes or ‘his’ events.”

Consider the noted Marxist historian, Georges Lefebvre, who wrote his classic *The Coming of the French Revolution* in 1939, during the sesquicentennial of the Revolution. His French Revolution is that of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. “Youth of 1939!” he passionately writes, “The Declaration is also a tradition, a glorious tradition...it is you who will soon be the Nation. Long live the Nation!”

Given the coming capitulation of France to Nazi Germany, Lefebvre’s ideal nation, alas, was short-lived.

Yet both Furet’s and Lefebvre’s words are notable in light of the history of the SAN. Politically, the latter represented the losers of the Revolution, a motley crew of moderate to liberal republicans and constitutional monarchists. Yet it is the Revolution of the Société that Lefebvre most wants to remember: the philosophical, progressive ethos embodied in a document that Brissot and his compatriots cited as the basis of their cause. To be fair to Lefebvre, the goal of *The Coming of the French Revolution* (simply titled *Quatre-Vingt Neuf* or ’89 in French) is to assess the events of that year and to go no further. Nor is his account without violence; he famously ends with the chaotic March on Versailles of October 1789, during which Lafayette personally saved the royal family. It was then that “at least the Revolution of 1789 was over.”

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189 Lefebvre, pg. 203
The Société des Amis des Noirs clearly belongs, in spirit if not in structure, to this Revolution of 1789, before the dual madness of the Terror and Napoleon. Philosophically, the members were clear products of the siècle des Lumières, the French Enlightenment and its philosophes. In their appeals to an abstract equality, and their desire for a gradual abolition, Brissot, Clavière, Condorcet, Lafayette and others fit the mold given to them by Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Raynal. They were the intellectual heirs of that legacy, with all the contradictions therein. As Dorinda Outram broadly concludes, “[the philosophes] also illustrate the ways in which Enlightenment thought....[while dealing] in powerful abstraction, also often failed to offer a clear basis for action.”

This is the major difference between the SAN and its intellectual forebears, in that its members tried, however imperfectly, to be men and women of action.

Of course, this attempt at action came in the midst of an increasingly violent revolution. Even at a time when abolitionists were gaining steam in Britain and even the United States, their French counterparts lagged behind. Some of this was indisputably the fault of the Société itself, from its lack of infrastructure, to its membership fees, and its muddled messaging. Most glaringly, it failed to make an economic case for abolition, albeit at a time when the colonial slave economy was vitally important to French national interests. The SAN’s pro-slavery opponents seized on this weakness with glee, and the SAN never countered this rhetoric effectively.

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Based on its many shortcomings, many historians have constructed a narrative of failure for the Société des Amis des Noirs, a characterization made doubly true by the Société des Amis des Noirs et des Colonies. While this reading of history is by no means incorrect, both the SAN and the SANC were partial victims of circumstance. Perhaps the SAN could have continued had there been no slave revolt in Saint-Domingue. Perhaps the SANC would have survived had there been no Napoleon. Such what-ifs are fanciful, and more than a tad foolish. But no historical group exists in a vacuum, least of all one that attempted to affect political change during the French Revolution.

In order to reconcile the existing literature with my more nuanced narrative I offer here that the SAN was a société of the ancien régime, one that tried to adapt its rhetoric to the changes of the Revolution, and ultimately did not succeed in doing so. It could be effectively argued that if the Société embodied the progressive Revolution of 1789, then its failure is an indictment of both that event and the broader Enlightenment project. Of course, this depends on the meaning of the word progressive. For the eighteenth century, men like Condorcet were undoubtedly “enlightened” when it came to race. They were also, by today’s standards, horrible racists. But if the arc of history bends towards progressivism, should not every inch gained in that direction be celebrated, or at least acknowledged? Some would say no, and that those who would praise the failures of white aristocrats to abolish slavery neglect the stories of the slaves who freed themselves. But those two histories need not be mutually exclusive, and if it is wrong to neglect those who fought against slavery in Saint-Domingue, surely it is also wrong to dismiss those
who fought for the same goal in Paris, no matter what their respective outcomes were.

Marcel Dorigny understands this concept by using the metaphor of a chain. This is somewhat unfortunate given the history of slavery and chains! Nonetheless, the SAN was “the first link in the chain of French abolitionism.” And although they failed, they at least “opened a large debate, and were the first to announce a political program dedicated to the necessary destruction of slavery.”191 That chain extended from 1788, to 1794, to 1802 and 1848, and beyond. It would prove to be stronger than any slave's chain, with the weight of righteousness behind it. In time, the contribution of both the SAN and some of its members would be recognized. In the Latin Quarter of Paris, stands the Panthéon, a neoclassical temple dedicated as a secular shrine to only the greatest French citizens. Naturally, the remains of Voltaire and Rousseau reside there. Yet among this august company also rest the bodies of Henri Grégoire, and the Marquis de Condorcet, both fathers of French abolitionist societies. The President of France, François Mitterrand, symbolically had them interred in the Pantheon in December 1989, to commemorate the Revolution's bicentennial. It was a fitting tribute, both to the spirit of 1789, and the men who sought to harness it for their abolitionist ends.

The Société des Amis des Noirs, by its very nature, existed in two worlds. They were a société de pensée, a group of thinkers and dreamers. They were equally a société de politique, a political lobby with a specific policy agenda. Perhaps a new designation is needed. At the risk of sounding grandiose, I would call the Société des

Amis des Noirs a société de liberté. It was dedicated to the abstract liberty of the French national motto, and the very real liberty of the tens of thousands then in bondage. Beyond ceremonial tombs or the abolitions of 1794 and 1848, this name can be a lasting tribute to the Société des Amis des Noirs, and its final vindication.
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192Please note that some primary documents and secondary sources have been found in secondary anthologies, such as Lynn Hunt’s The French Revolution and Human Rights. Full citations have been provided in the text, and only the secondary work will be listed here, with a note indicating that it is an anthology.
Secondary Sources


