UNIVERSITY OF Southampton

Re-sourcing History

France in revolution 1774-1799

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Source 1: Slavery in the French colonies

'Abandon the colonies, and these sources of prosperity will disappear or diminish… The National Assembly, deliberating on the addresses and petitions from the cities of commerce and manufacturing, on the items recently arrived from Saint Domingue and Martinique, addressed to it by the Minister of the Marine, and on the representations made by the deputies from the colonies, declares that, considering the colonies as part of the French empire, and desiring to enable them to enjoy the fruits of the happy regeneration that has been accomplished in the empire, it never intended to include them in the constitution that it has decreed for the kingdom or to subject them to laws which might be incompatible with their particular, local properties.
Moreover, the National Assembly declares that it never intended to introduce innovations into any of the branches of indirect or direct commerce between France and its colonies and hereby puts the colonists and their properties under the special protection of the nation and declares criminal, toward the nation, whoever works to excite uprisings against them.'

Source: http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/345

Commentary:

These words were spoken by the French revolutionary Antoine-Pierre Barnave, who was chair of the colonial committee set up to work out how the revolution would affect the French possessions in the Caribbean. The words form part of a speech to the National Assembly on 8 March 1790 in which Barnave delivered the committee's decision. It reminds us that however radical the plans of the revolutionaries, there were some aspects of old-regime France they did not intend to take apart. That included slavery. It is true that a small number of devoted abolitionists played important roles as revolutionary deputies, and that Maximilien Robespierre, who was not yet as powerful as he was to become in 1792, also denounced slavery. But given the immense wealth generated by the slave-based production of sugar in the French Caribbean colonies, especially on Saint Domingue, it was hard even for abolitionists to campaign openly for an end to slavery. Barnave's speech goes so far as to suggest that any act against the status quo in the colonies should be deemed criminal.

The colonial committee was created as a response to the sudden outpouring of demands by white planters on Saint Domingue, who now wanted greater self-rule in the colonies as well as guarantees that the revolution would not affect their wealth. It was these white planters who had sent in the 'items recently received' referred to in the text. But their demands for free trade clashed with the demands of French merchants, whose 'addresses and petitions' implored the state to continue its preferential treatment of them in the system known as mercantilism. It fell to Barnave to mediate these competing demands, and to quell any unrest in the colonies that might lead to a general rebellion there.

As it happens, the French revolutionaries had accidentally introduced a problem for themselves by promising in August 1789 that 'men were born and remain free and equal in rights'. The question remained – which ones, which rights, and did this

idea extend to the French empire? The white planters, and indeed the freed men of colour who also owned slaves in the Caribbean colonies, certainly thought so, even if they had distinct demands. The white planters wanted greater autonomy from France; the freed men of colour wanted the civil and political rights that had been granted to the white planters. Both groups wanted to preserve slavery. In speaking in March 1790, Barnave was thus trying to put the genie back in the bottle: the declaration of rights and the constitution that would follow was not, he said, to be applied to the colonies.

Barnave in fact hoped that in the future the revolutionaries would be able to address slavery and the slave trade. But like most others he did not feel that the time was right. The source confirms that, at least in spring 1790, the French revolutionaries were both committed imperialists and apologists for slavery. It was only a succession of open revolts by freed men of colour and then by slaves on Saint Domingue between 1791 and 1793 that forced them to abandon slavery in the French colonies.

Recommended reading: Lynn Hunt, ed. and trans., *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History,* (Boston/New York), 1996; Valerie Quinney, 'The Problem of civil rights for free men of color in the early French Revolution', *French Historical Studies,* 1972, pp. 544-557

Source 2: The transatlantic French Revolution

Source: Frontispiece from the book *Saint-Domingue, ou Histoire de Ses Révolutions*, from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Frontispiece_from_the_book_Saint-Domingue,_ou_Histoire_de_Ses_R%C3%A9volutions._ca._1815.jpg

Commentary:

The image relates to an episode in the French Revolution in the Caribbean: the revolt by enslaved people in the lucrative colony of Saint Domingue. More specifically, it depicts the burning of the port-town of Cap Français by black revolutionaries in June of 1793. Slaves made up the majority of the population of Saint Domingue, which was the richest colony in the world at the start of the French Revolution and a crucial part of the French economy.

The uprising by enslaved people in Saint Domingue in August of 1791 was an important moment in the spread and development of the Revolution. The attack on Cap Français was also an attack on the white planters who wanted to keep slavery in the colony and resist the radical demands of the slaves whose hopes of freedom had been raised by the French Revolution. The source is clearly sympathetic to the pro-slavery whites of Saint Domingue—it depicts them fleeing from the fire and massacre, emphasising in particular the plight of women, the very old, and of children. Many fled as refugees to the United States or to the British Caribbean.

The source reminds us that the French Revolution was a transatlantic phenomenon. Arguably the Revolution's most radical achievement was the abolition of slavery in the colonies. But slave emancipation was something that was only achieved by enslaved people, fighting for their own liberty, in 1793 and ratified by the French Convention in Paris the next year.

Recommended reading:

Laurent Dubois, ed. *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution,* (Harvard), 2005.

Source 3: British reactions to the transatlantic Revolution

Source: http://www.britishmuseum.org/

Commentary:

The white figure on the left represents Parisian Sans Culottes—the ordinary people of France who were in revolution against the aristocracy. The black figure on the right represents the enslaved rebels of the French sugar colony of Saint Domingue.

Probably the first reaction to this source is disgust. The right-hand portion is a luridly, deeply offensive, racist depiction of enslaved people in the Caribbean colonies. The image represents black people by comparing them to animals: the horned head, the cloven foot, the dragon-like tail. It also emphasises their

supposedly dangerous character: the right-hand figure holds a spear and breathes out snakes and smoke. The figure on the right is also shown to be dangerous. He is white, represented as being more recognisably human, but with a blood-dripping dagger in his hand. Both of the characters are revolutionaries.

This two part image tries to offer a warning about revolutionaries. It suggests that they are dangerous, whether found in Europe (the left-hand figure has a foot on France) or in the Americas (the right-hand figure has a foot on America and represents the slave rebels of the French Caribbean). Both are a threat to England (in the middle). It was published in London in 1792 and is a clear warning to British people about the radicalisation of the French Revolution, representing this as a threat to the systems of imperial power, white supremacism, and slavery that were so important in producing European wealth.

Recommended reading:

Christer Petley, *White Fury: A Jamaican Slaveholder and the Age of Revolution*, (Oxford), 2018, especially chapters 6 and 7.

Source 4: The revolutionaries remake time

Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=57888&partId=1

Commentary:

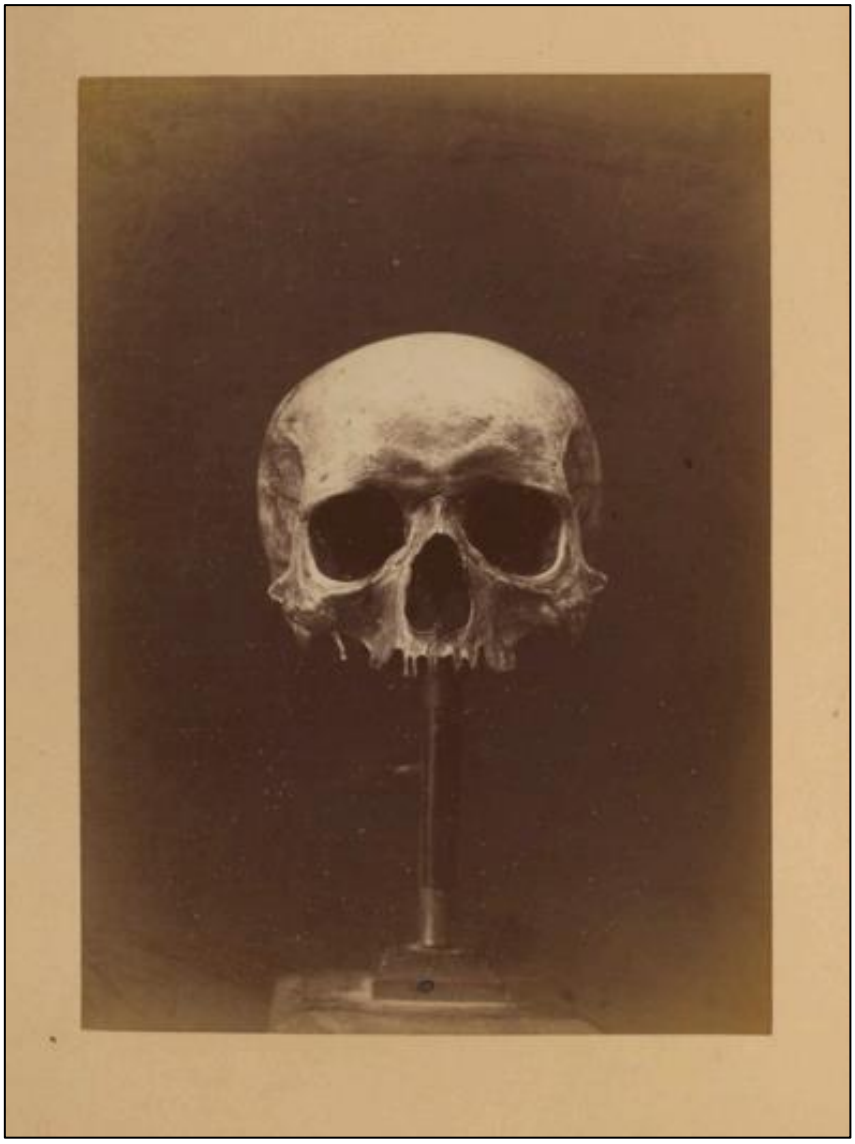
The object is a decimal watch manufactured in Paris in the closing years of the eighteenth century. Such decimal watches were rare, but from the point of view of watch-makers and their clients in the 1790s they probably represented faith in the revolutionary project. There was probably money in it, too. One of the first things that the radical deputies of the new republic set about doing in autumn 1792 was to invent a new calendar. It would track time not according to religious festivals and symbols, but according to the logic of the seasons and of science. Twelve months became ten, all with new names inspired by natural features like the weather. Seven-day weeks became '*décades*' of ten days each. 1792-3 – the first year of the republic – became in retrospect 'Year 1'. And seconds were replaced on decimal watches like this with a hand that ticked off each 1/100,000th of a day. This was a grand attempt

to announce a rational, secular and scientific world order, which would symbolise the profound rupture with the past intended by the revolutionaries. It was also a way of wiping away the authority of the Catholic Church to control the annual rituals by which religious practice had become embedded in daily life – not just Christmas and Easter, but the feast days of saints and the Virgin Mary, and the idea of Sunday as a day of rest. Instead, it would be the revolutionary authorities who would decide when and how the French population would work, reflect and recuperate. And they would be reminded of it every time they looked at their watch. For this reason, the revolutionary project to remake time has been described by historians as 'an instrument of de-Christianisation' (John McManners).

Recommended reading:

McManners, J., *The French Revolution and the Church*, (London, 1969); Shaw, M., 'Reactions to the French republican calendar', *French History,* 15, 1, 2001

Source 5: Collecting the Terror



Source: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84700927.r=crane%20de%20charlotte%20corday?rk=21459;2

Commentary:

This is the skull of a young woman from the town of Caen in northern France – Charlotte Corday. She was executed in summer 1793 for the murder of a notorious Jacobin revolutionary, Jean-Paul Marat, whom she stabbed in his bath. The fame of her victim explains why the skull was prized as a relic, but it was only able to be turned into a collectible and put on display like this because her executioner chose to sell it. Such practice was apparently common during the Terror of 1793-4, when around 17, 000 men and women went to their deaths at the guillotine as suspect enemies of the people. Thanks to the scholarship of cultural historians like Tom

Stammers, we are able to trace the afterlife of this object from collector to collector across the intervening centuries, during which it was used as a table decoration and was put on display in the anthropological section of the 1889 universal exhibition in Paris. We should see it alongside other relics and artefacts of the French Revolution. These include the bathtub of the man Charlotte Corday murdered, and pieces of the Bastille prison fortress, which were sold to collectors after it was demolished in 1790. The fact that there was a market for such objects during the Revolution itself tells us something about early consumer culture. It also shows us how the revolution wormed its way into the everyday lives of French people.

Recommended reading:

Tom Stammers, 'The bric-à-brac of the old regime: collecting and cultural history in post-revolutionary France', *French History,* 2008, pp. 295-315.

Colin Jones, 'Bourgeois revolution revivified: 1789 and social change', in Gary Kates, ed. *The French Revolution: recent debates and new controversies,* (Routledge, 1998), pp. 157-191.

Source 6: Women, politics and violence

'Citoyenne Marie-Françoise Dorlet, wife of Citizen Pierre Sacriste, a brazier, living on rue du Bout du Monde in the house of the carriage maker, appeared before the Committee. She told the Committee that a quarter of an hour ago, as she stood in front of her door, she saw two women passing by with two *bonnets de police* on their heads. These two women insulted her as they passed by. Then she, the deponent, took it upon herself to remove their caps, saying 'Off with *les bonnets rouges* [red bonnets], because they are only for men to wear.' These two women answered this person, saying: 'Off with your cockade, because you've removed our bonnets', which led the deponent to tell them: 'If you have the right to wear *bonnets rouges*, we'll go to the Committee to see about it.' And they came with her to hear the ruling of the Committee concerning this matter which is within its jurisdiction. And she stated that she was unable to sign her name....'

Source: Report of the revolutionary surveillance committee, Section Guillaume Tell, Paris, from the French national archives, AN F7 4774, in Levy, D., et al, (eds.), *Women in revolutionary Paris, 1789-1795: selected documents,* 1979

Commentary:

This source is an extract from a police report written in Paris in late October 1793. It records the testimony of a woman who lived in a densely populated area of central Paris with her artisan husband. It testifies to the fact that the street had become a zone of conflict among working women. They seem to be taking on the role of policing each other's dress and demeanour in order to assert their commitment to the revolution. The red liberty bonnet had been worn by supporters from the beginning of the revolution, but after the declaration of the French Republic in September 1792 it was associated with the radical Jacobin faction, as was the red-white-and-blue cockade. By the time Marie-Françoise challenged these women for wearing the bonnet, the question of whether women should be permitted to arm themselves as 'patriots' and take an active role in revolutionary politics was much debated in popular radical circles. The source demonstrates how fractious the streets were during the Terror of 1793-4. It shows us how thoroughly questions of outward appearance were now bound up with expressions of loyalty to the revolution. Note that the women were ready to take their dispute to the local authorities, and that those on the police committee themselves were concerned enough with the incident to take several depositions. It is significant, too, that it was precisely public skirmishes like this that gave the authorities the pretext to close down revolutionary women's clubs. The police report goes on to express distaste for such ugly episodes of street conflict, signalling how far the servants of the regime shared the revolutionary deputies' own negative views about women's activism.

Recommended reading: Levy, D.G., and Applewhite, H.B., "Women and militant citizenship in revolutionary Paris", in S.E. Melzer, (ed.), *Rebel Daughters: women and the French Revolution,* (1992)

Source 7: Art and the reputation of Napoleon Bonaparte

Source: Thomas Piroli, 'General Bonaparte at the Bridge of Arcole', 1797, etching with aquatint: https://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/pluginfile.php/624891/mod_resource/content/1/plate8.pdf

Commentary:

This source is a print of a drawing that probably circulated widely in late eighteenth-century France. It was certainly intended to, which is why the figure who is represented on it – General Napoleon Bonaparte – paid for such etchings to be made in the first place. The etching is a copy of an oil painting produced by Napoleon's artistic advisor, Antoine-Jean Gros. This painter accompanied Napoleon on the Italian campaign, and on this occasion depicted the young general as the warrior hero of the Battle of Arcole, which French troops fought successfully against the Austrian Empire in November 1796. Napoleon's own role in this artistic production tells us much about his skill at self-promotion. In addition to art works,

Napoleon created army newspapers, whose first function was to invite the admiration of his own soldiers. But its articles were also published in French publications so that political leaders in Paris could read about his successes. Through sources like these Napoleon embarked upon the creation of a leadership cult long before he seized state power in November 1799. This harnessing of art and military bulletins to boost the idea of Napoleon's power was a theme that ran through his entire military and political career. The memoirs written by soldiers of the 'grand army' many decades later show that these tricks seem to have worked. Many (but not all) veterans of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars apparently continued to feel a love for Napoleon as a 'man of the people' and as the 'saviour of the republic'.

Recommended reading:

Michael J. Hughes, *Forging Napoleon's Grande Armée: motivation, military culture, and masculinity in the French army, 1800-1808* (New York UP, 2012).

Philip Dwyer, *Napoleon: the path to power, 1769-1799,* (Bloomsbury, 2007).

Source 8: Understanding peasant complaints

'7 Total destruction of all rabbits.
9: Total abolition of…the right to keep a dovecote.
14: Introduction of national weights and measures.
15: Grain to be sold by weight [as opposed to volume].
18: Suppression of the *aides*: wine is a product of the land…
19: Suppression of the *gabelle.'*

Source: Excerpts from 'The preliminary *cahier* of the parish of Vitry-sur-Seine', 1789 (Hardman, J., *The French Revolution: sourcebook*, Arnold, 1999,), p. 82

Commentary:

These are some of the demands recorded in the so-called 'grievance list' compiled on behalf of the 'third estate' of commoners living in a small town to the south-east of the French capital city. Although incorporated as a suburb of Paris today, in the 18th century it would have been a separate, and quite rural community. Over 20,000 lists of such grievances (or *cahiers des doléances*) were compiled all over the country early in 1789. Over a period of months, assemblies consisting of members of the three orders of clergy, nobility and commoners, met to discuss criticisms of old-regime politics and society, and to determine how such features might be changed. A local notary probably wrote them up, so there is likely to have been a process of selection or even censorship at work: it is difficult to tell exactly whose voices we are reading in the above extract. Such lists were summarized and collated so that each one of the deputies elected to the Estates General that opened in May 1789 could represent the views and complaints of the segment of the population that had voted for them. And collectively, the deputies armed with their grievance lists were supposed to work out how to solve the financial crisis that had paralyzed the royal state, presumably by persuading nobles to pay tax. William Doyle has described this process of elections and opinion-gathering as 'the most democratic spectacle ever seen in the history of Europe' thus far.

Historians have argued long and hard about what such grievance lists tell us about the political attitudes of the French in 1789. They have noticed that the word 'revolution' was absent from these demands. Yet that did not prevent people all over the country from asking for radical change. Another demand in the *cahier* you see here was for the complete abolition of privilege in all its forms. That included the exemption of nobles from tax, and the various other benefits that were attached to that group. Article 9 suggests that at least some of the commoners in Vitry-sur-Seine wanted to abolish the symbols of noble privilege as well: only nobles were theoretically allowed to attach a house for pigeons to their residence.

But what are we to make of the demand in Article 7 for the 'total destruction of all rabbits'? Some historians have used demands such as this to suggest that commoners, and especially peasants were not very politically aware in 1789. They did not want revolution, and were concerned only with local affairs. The assumption is that a focus

on local problems must necessarily be to the exclusion of an interest in 'national' politics. But historians like Peter McPhee and John Markoff have argued that the local and the national are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, it is likely that for peasants, as for anyone else for that matter the source of 'political' attitudes was rooted in everyday 'local' encounters and tensions. We might see the hostility to rabbits differently, for instance, when we appreciate how deeply the nobility's power over the other orders was exercised through its right to resources (including the fruits of the land via hunting) that were denied to members of the third estate. What might at first glance seem a trivial matter, in this light is transformed into a fundamental attack on the social hierarchies of the old regime. Similarly, the following articles in the text attack various taxes (the *aides* on wine, the *gabelle* on salt) that are deemed to make it more difficult for the lower orders to make a living and stave off the destitution that so afflicted the poor of eighteenth-century France. Even if they could not read and write, and even if they failed to ask for 'revolution' directly in these grievance lists, the third estate of Vitry seemingly understood how tax and privilege worked, and they also had a conception of a national market for goods (article 14). One might say that they had 'practical literacy', and in this instance, along with millions of others in France they were exercising it in an attempt to improve their lives.

Recommended reading:

Markoff, J., 'Peasants protest: the claims of lord, church and state in the *cahiers de doléances* of 1789', *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 32, 3, 1990, pp. 413-54.

Peter McPhee, 'Describing the Old Regime', in *Living the French Revolution, 1789-99,* (2006), Ch. 1, pp. 11-34; William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution,* (1989).