



Black presence in Enlightenment Europe

Erick Noël

The Black people presence in 18th-century Europe was by no means insignificant, fluctuating according to statistics between 4,000 and 5,000 individuals in France and 15,000 in England in the last quarter of the century. This presence first raises the question of the "black" color, which, in addition to designating a population of African origin, descendants of the slave trade and brought by the Atlantic route or via the Mediterranean, also suggests Afro-descendants, "Creoles" or mestizos. Historian Pierre H. Boulle even spoke of "non-whites" in an enveloping formula, sometimes criticized for its negative approach.

A quantitative approach

In **France**, the Police des "Noirs, mulâtres et autres gens de couleur" (Black persons, mulattoes and other people of color), as an institution created to watch over them, or even deport them to the Antilles, provides an introduction in itself. Its very name refers not only to Black persons from Africa or the Islands, but also to anyone born to a White parent and a Black parent, without however saying who these uncertain "others" were. Kingdom-wide registrations in 1777-1778 provided the first figures, revealing that "quarterons" (people with a quarter of "black" blood) and East Indians were included.

On this basis, 4,000 to 5,000 people would likely have lived in the kingdom. But if we measure the continuous inflows and outflows of these men and women over the course of the century, an estimated 20,000 actually came through France. The trading ports received most of these, with nearly 6,000 arrivals in Nantes and over 5,000 in Bordeaux, making Paris a focal point for three and a half quarters of France's Black persons by the eve of the French Revolution.

Far from those of **England**, where the figure of 15,000 at the time of the American War (1775-1783) is widely accepted. English estimates certainly appear approximate, given the absence of registration constraints comparable to those in France. They are essentially based on press data, such as the Boston Gazette's figure of 14,000 Black individuals during the Somerset affair in 1772, or on figures later amplified by philanthropists, or even planters, to suit their interests. The fact remains that London, with perhaps 10,000 Black people, appears to be more of a hotbed than Paris, where numbers fluctuated between 3,500 and 4,375. In this respect, the trading ports of Bristol and especially Liverpool played a key role, even beyond the Revolution.



This is also far below the figures for **Portugal**, where Lisbon is reported to have had a Black population of 10,000 as early as 1500. This figure is essentially due to the earliness of the colonial process, which brought as many as 500 or 600,000 Africans to the country between 1440 and 1760. Here again, the figure needs to be examined closely, since it includes North Africans and those from Subsaharan Africa. The involvement of Western countries and ports in the trade of enslaved people seems to have boosted the figures for the Atlantic coast.

A wide variety of legal situations

So what about the situation of these men and women, in an uncertain legal framework? Were they really free, despite the privilege of "emancipation from the French land" advocated as early as 1571 by the Bordeaux parliament, or adages such as "as soon as a negro comes in England he becomes free", accepted in England in 1691?

In **France**, a number of sensational trials highlighted the uncertainty of their fate. The case of Francisque, an Indian from Pondicherry, physically different from the Africans and declared free because he had not been formally registered by his master, paved the way in 1762 for a number of trials which generally ended in favor of the plaintiffs. This case, which resulted in a double penalization for the owners - the loss of their slaves but also compensation for damages - had a long-lasting impact on the law.

As a result, the government, namely through Minister Choiseul, revised the entire system and adopted the Loi de Police of 1777. This radical law blocked ongoing procedures and was intended to indiscriminately return both enslaved people and free people of color to Cap-Français in Saint-Domingue, even if they came from the East Indies.

French admiralty and court records from 1777 to 1791 reveal the sinuous routes and forced peregrinations of domestic enslaved persons or "apprentices" behind owners who sometimes came over from foreign countries and were merely passing through the kingdom. Furthermore, the Police Act forbade all the King's subjects from the colonies, and "even all foreigners", to introduce "Black persons, mulattoes and other colored people" into France, punishable by a 3000 pound fine.

Beyond the exemptions (servants accepted to serve their masters from the islands to the port of arrival) and the vagueness concerning those passing through or born in France (asked to register in order to be authorized or not), Article 1 reveals increasingly uncontrolled arrivals. The King's Edict of 1716, completed in 1738, did not take into account this new dimension of arrivals. The situation thus became more critical, with an unprecedented number of arrivals, due to the new



internationalization of conflicts, the decline of the Wars of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) and of the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), and the collateral repercussions of the American War.

Intra-European traffic

There were also a number of new arrivals from neighboring European countries. The journey of Francisque and his brother André is significant. After landing in Lisbon from the East Indies before 1758, they were baptized there. Afterwards, they arrived in Paris via Saint-Malo with a settler named Brignon. During their stay in Paris, they suffered so much mistreatment that the Admiralty finally heard of them and enjoined their master to pay 800 pounds in unpaid wages.

From 1747 onwards, a dozen cases of Black or mulatto immigrants from Portugal were recorded in Paris. The War of the Austrian Succession and its colonial extensions clearly triggered the trend, as shown by the case of Saint-Louis, Mme Mahé de La Bourdonnais's enslaved person. He reached the French capital via the Portuguese route in 1748. Registered in 1777, he died at his mistress's home in Boissy-Saint-Léger, near Paris, in 1784. The 1755 Lisbon earthquake also led to a number of displacements. This was the case for Marie-Josèphe Pedro, who followed Madame Jarry after the earthquake, having lost her entire family. Married to a white man by the name of Dieult, she entered the service of M. Rose, director of the French estates, who had retired to Paris, as a cook. The crossing of the Pyrenees is also reported, as early as 1762, when entries by sea were thwarted by the English blockade.

The American War, most of all, revealed the scale of cross-border smuggling. The Ministry of the Navy's "remarks" of March 8, 1782 underline the number of "Black people smuggled in from Spain or Holland", a fraud "which had not been foreseen" and which the declaration of 1777 had "not provided for". In this respect, it should be pointed out that Article 1 of the Loi de Police imposes the same obligations on foreign owners as on French colonists upon their arrival in the kingdom, without any specific reference to overland passage, particularly through the Pyrenean mountain passes. Articles 3 and 4 specified "retransfers" in ports and the creation of depots, 8 in total by 1778, all on the Atlantic coast except for Marseille. End-of-century registrations reveal cases from across the Channel and, for the first time, from the young United States.

These "Anglo-Saxon" entries are primarily war concessions in keeping with a long-standing tradition. For example, as early as 1693, during the War of the League of Augsburg and the assault on the English ship the Merchant from China by the frigate La Ville de Saint-Malo, a Guinea



enslaved man was taken and brought back to be baptized in Le Havre under the name of Louis Nicolas. The American War introduced a still to-be-measured contingent of Black persons from the 13 colonies. Among them were James and Sally Hemings, brother and sister, who had followed Jefferson to Paris as enslaved people, but do not appear to have been declared despite the new law.

The specific situation of freemen of color

The end of the Ancien Régime has been characterized by a surge in the number of freemen who, despite the obstacle of the 1777 law, travelled on both sides of the Channel and across the Atlantic. First, there were the exceptional figures, protected by a white relative: the Chevalier de Saint-Georges, son of planter Bologne, registered when he arrived in Bordeaux from Guadeloupe with his mother in 1749.

Alone in Paris in 1777, he then travelled freely to London, where he stayed in 1784 and crossed swords with the Chevalier d'Éon in 1787. George Bridgewater, also a mulatto and violin virtuoso, arrived the other way round (from London to Paris) with his father, a native of Jamaica, to play at the Pantheon in 1789, before pursuing a European career, ending up in Vienna in 1803. The freedmen's elite, when they didn't have the support of a white relative or property in the Islands, found the means of their freedom in high domesticity. In 1763, Antoine Malehalé, an enslaved man from Mozambique, contracted before Robineau, a notary in Paris, to serve the Prince of Beloselsky, a colonel attached to Catherine II, for 150 pounds wages, and to follow him to Russia, with the possibility of returning if he died, at the expense of his co-heirs.

Although the affair turned out badly, prompting Malehalé to withdraw from the contract that same year, another similar case was reported in 1775: Yake, known as Lamour, an enslaved man from Surinam, sued his owner, the Prince of Belochsky, to recover his freedom and wages of 120 pounds per year of service. In another case, the "mulattress" Anne de Bour, free and baptized in Bonn [?] arrived in Paris from Denmark, where in 1777 she was attached to Sieur Douy, living in the Madeleine district. In all cases, these were isolated individuals, who appear to have served wealthy masters.

Did the French Revolution intensify these flows? The emigration of the white elite may well have brought colored servants along with it. Ziméo, an enslaved boy from Senegal, was sent to Paris in 1786 by the governor Chevalier de Boufflers to serve Madame de Blot, and in 1789 was placed by the Countess de Sabran with a prince of the House of Prussia. However, these cases seemed relatively limited, and the privileged left behind most of their enslaved and domestic servants. From



1792 onwards, men of color were more likely to be found in the enlistments and troop movements, like the "Black Legion", to defend the borders of the French Republic, and called upon to intervene in the Empire and Italy.

Dumas, promoted to brigadier general, found himself at the head of the Alps army in 1794 and in Tyrol in 1796, before being called upon by Bonaparte in Egypt in 1798. Joseph Domingue was sent to the same battlefronts, but was demoted in 1801 after refusing to follow General Leclerc to Cap-Français. So, while men of color were rare in military commands, troop controls offered an interesting opportunity, as shown by the service records of those who joined the Pionniers Noirs corps, which became Royal African, from Mantua to Naples and Russia.



About the author

Erick Noël, Agrégé and Doctor in History, is a university professor and teaches modern history at the Université des Antilles, Martinique. Author of a thesis on the Beauharnais, an Antillean fortune (1756-1796), he defended an HDR entitled "Être Noir en France au XVIIIe siècle" ("Being Black in 18th-century France"). Director, alongside 35 teacher-researchers, (2011-2017) of the Dictionnaire des gens de couleur dans la France moderne (3 vol.), he recently published *Le Goût des Iles sur les tables des Lumières* (Puna, 2020) and *La Sculpture du Noir au temps de la traite* (Hémisphères, 2023).

Bibliography

Antonio de Almeida Mendes, « Esclavage et race au Portugal : une expérience de longue durée », dans Myriam Cottias et Hébé Mattos (dir.), *Esclavage et subjectivités dans l'Atlantique luso-brésilien et français (XVIIe-XXe siècle)*, Marseille, OpenEdition Press, 2016.

Stephen J. Braidwood, *Poor Black and White Philanthropists*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1994, 324 p.

Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, Londres, Pluto Press, 2018 [1984], 656 p.

Erick Noël (dir.), *Dictionnaire des gens de couleur dans la France moderne*, Genève, Droz, coll. « Bibliothèque des Lumières », 3 t., « Paris et son bassin », « Le Bretagne », « Le Midi », 2011-2017.

Sue Peabody, *"There Are No Slaves in France". The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1996, 220 p.

Illustrations



Représentation caricaturale d'un visage, Paris, Maison Boutin, 23 rue Danielle Casanova, ci-devant rue Neuve des Petits-Champs (1713).



Représentation de deux hommes africains aux traits caricaturaux, Bruxelles, Maison de Wage, ou de la Balance, 24 rue de la Colline (1704).



Buste vénitien, première moitié du 18e siècle), © Victoria and Albert Museum.

