

7 Liberty, Death, and Slavery in the Age of Atlantic Revolutions, 1770s–1790s

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7.1 Introduction

For republicans in the age of Atlantic revolutions, slavery posed a distinct set of rhetorical and conceptual challenges. Revolutionary republicans' passionate cries for political liberty incessantly invoked the spectre of slavery. It was 'a central concept in eighteenth-century political discourse', Bernard Bailyn has noted regarding the American Revolution. As the 'absolute political evil', it appeared 'in every discussion of constitutionalism or legal rights, in every exhortation to resistance'.¹ But the revolutionaries' revulsion against 'political' slavery existed side by side with the denial of liberty to enslaved people of African descent. This simultaneity of, on the one hand, the massive trans-Atlantic slave trade and the elaborate plantation slavery system on American soil and, on the other hand, the revolutionary rhetoric of political liberty, did not go unnoticed. On the contrary, it was in the revolutionary era that the spectre of political slavery, a concept inspired by classical-Roman legal and moral thought and the ultimate 'counter-concept' of liberty in the early modern republican tradition, was brought into full confrontation with the reality of the institutional enslavement of people of African descent.

Today few would fail to register the inconsistency between the widespread co-existence – and justification – of chattel slavery and the era's revolutionary ideals. Yet it is crucial to notice that at the time, too, the inconsistency was widely and increasingly brought to public attention, perhaps no more scathingly than by the English essayist, poet, and lexicographer Samuel Johnson (1709–84). In 1775, he asked how it is possible that 'we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?'² British publicists such as Johnson who detested the American rebellion undoubtedly took a sardonic pleasure in exposing the alleged hypocrisy of rebellious American colonists. But more was at stake. In the

¹ Bailyn 1992, p. 232. ² Johnson 1775, p. 89.

last quarter of the eighteenth century, the question of how to reconcile the call for liberty for some with the enslavement of others became a particularly vexed one for revolutionary republicans throughout the Atlantic world. Antislavery opinion and activism inspired by both religious convictions and secular philosophies pushed the advocates of slavery onto the defensive.³

Historians of the American Revolution and the early American Republic have intensely debated this issue, since it goes to the heart of American revolutionary ideology and American political traditions more broadly.⁴ The relationship between slavery and republicanism, however, was not only a North American but a transatlantic republican conundrum. The slave-holding republican empires of revolutionary France (which became a republic in September 1792) and the Dutch Republic (which was renamed the 'Batavian Republic' following the revolution of 1795), were confronted with a similar quandary. The metaphor of slavery – and in particular the transition from slavery to liberty – was a corner-stone in the symbolic and discursive universe of both French and Batavian revolutionary political culture. The red Phrygian cap or *bonnet rouge*, to mention just the most visible symbolic allusion, was a direct reference to the liberation of slaves in the classical world and became a symbol, especially popular among *sans-culottes*, of revolutionary patriotism. In both France and the revolutionary Dutch Republic, Phrygian caps were regularly used to adorn maypoles and liberty trees.⁵ The concept of slavery was furthermore employed in writing. 'A revolution', a French *Revolutionary Catechism* for 'republican youth' published in the second year of the revolutionary calendar (1793–94) stated, 'is a violent passage from a state of slavery to a state of liberty'.⁶ 'A Republican, a FREE MAN', the important revolutionary Dutch journal *De republikein* (*The Republican*) exhorted at the outbreak of the Batavian Revolution in early 1795, 'cannot endure a master above him, can never degrade himself to someone's slave'.⁷ Slavery, in short, was one of the principal metaphors in the rhetorical toolkit of republican revolutionaries throughout the Atlantic world.

Crucially, from the early 1790s onward, perceptions of the relationship between republican liberty and the enslavement of people of African descent developed against the backdrop of the greatest slave rebellion in modern history: the slave insurrection that broke out on the French-Caribbean island of Saint-Domingue in the Summer of 1791. Better

³ See Davis 1975. ⁴ See Hammond and Mason 2011.

⁵ Grijzenhout 1989; McPhee 2016. ⁶ As cited in Ghachem 2012, p. 1.

⁷ *De republikein* 1, no. 2, p. 18. On *De republikein*, see Koekkoek 2010.

known as the Haitian Revolution, this was a highly complex and multi-dimensional series of events. It had multiple repercussions, as has been amply demonstrated by historians.⁸ For our purposes, it is important to register the language of republican liberty that accompanied the spectacular abolition of slavery, first on Saint-Domingue in 1793, and then in Paris where it was ratified by the French National Convention in February 1794. But the nature of this major slave insurrection was deeply contested. In particular, many commentators denied that the slave uprising had anything to do with republican virtue and liberty, thereby excluding it from the larger revolutionary narrative.

How, then, did the term slavery as it was used to refer to a political condition come to be related to the status of enslaved people of African descent? How did republicans in the revolutionary age respond to the accusation of inconsistency? Did those who propounded republican conceptions of liberty see the two meanings of slavery as overlapping or informing each other? Or was the ‘metaphorical’ use of slavery distinguished from ‘real’ slavery? And finally, what do the answers to these questions tell us about the limits and exclusivist nature of eighteenth-century variants of the republican (or neo-Roman) theory of liberty?

The main argument of this essay is that in the Age of Atlantic Revolutions (c. 1770s–90s) there were several ways in which authors related republican conceptions of liberty to the enslavement of black Africans. Republican conceptions of liberty were put into service of both antislavery and proslavery discourses. More specifically, I distinguish three lines of republican reasoning that informed arguments against slavery. According to the first line of reasoning, the rejection of chattel slavery rested on an ‘extension’ of the principled rejection of political slavery. A second line of reasoning held that the withholding of freedom from an enslaved population leads to corruption and ultimately to the loss of one’s own freedom. A third and long-neglected set of arguments were put forth by black publicists themselves. They claimed their freedom in both writing and action. Black soldiers who fought on the side of the American patriots claimed they *deserved* their liberty because of their military and civic courage and sacrifice. Their demands hence differ from the ‘extension argument’ (made by white revolutionaries) because of the radically different position from which they made these claims to liberty, as well as the emphasis they placed on the reward for civic virtue and military sacrifice.

⁸ Geggus 2001; White 2010; Dun 2016; Koekkoek 2019, pp. 57–131.

At the same time, however, republican conceptions of liberty were widely reconciled with the existence of chattel slavery. The first argumentative strategy was the idea that republican liberty could only be fully and responsibly exercised by a certain delineated group in society – and not by others. Such a way of reasoning, it should be noted, was perfectly consistent with the republican tradition at large. To be *sui iuris* or at liberty was never considered to be a status that could be attained by *all* groups in society. Of course, what groups in particular were excluded from (republican) liberty, and on what basis, has been historically variable. In the revolutionary era, two main justifications were offered to exclude enslaved Africans. First, slaves were not considered to be members of society; instead, they were seen as *property* of members of society. Secondly, pro-slavery authors and slavery apologists argued that enslaved (and free) people of African descent lacked certain characteristics to qualify for republican liberty. These characteristics were related to their alleged limited mental capacities, their lack of civic virtue, their backward stage of civilization, and increasingly, their inferior ‘race’. Finally, slavery was justified on a more explicit republican basis: political liberty results from virtue – from the act of resistance and a willingness to risk one’s life for liberty. One chooses either liberty (and risks one’s death) or one consents to slavery. According to this line of reasoning, slaves, by not resisting their slavery, basically acquiesced in their unfree status.

For reasons of analytical clarity, I discuss these lines of reasoning more neatly than they were expressed at the time. In reality, politicians and publicists could – and did – combine several lines of reasoning. Moreover, advocates of a *gradual* abolition of slavery and the gradual emancipation of formerly enslaved people into republican citizens both drew upon the logic of extension *and* upon a language of temporary exclusion premised on the mental, moral, and cognitive status of enslaved and free blacks.

In addition, both antislavery and proslavery public opinions were mixtures drawing on religious, political, economic, and sentimental registers of persuasion. These other intellectual resources that were employed to both fight and justify slavery were tremendously important.⁹ Yet my particular interest in this chapter is to examine republican arguments about liberty in relation to slavery. Because republican arguments could be used both for and against slavery, their impact was in the end not decisive in the long road to abolition. This chapter, then,

⁹ On the Quaker contribution and Benezet, in particular, see Jackson 2009; more generally, see Davis 1975, pp. 213–84.

demonstrates not so much the limits but the versatile employability of republican discourse.

By focusing on how republican ideas related to slavery, I do not suggest that the authors I am considering always put forth consistent and coherent affirmations of an early modern republican theory of liberty. In many cases, we are dealing with a fragmented vocabulary rather than with elaborate theoretical statements. Yet differentiating between the above-mentioned arguments demonstrates the variety of uses of republican conceptions of liberty. Given this variety of ways of dealing with the ‘problem’ of slavery, and the variety in which the republican theory of liberty could be put to use, it makes little sense to maintain that republicanism is essentially exclusivist. Rather, as I point out in Section 7.7, late eighteenth-century manifestations of the republican theory of liberty were as such insufficiently equipped to rule out gravely unjust and inegalitarian social and political orders.

7.2 Extension of Liberty

One of Skinner’s principal contentions in *Liberty before Liberalism* is that seventeenth-century theorists of republican liberty held that a political body’s loss of liberty must be analyzed in terms of what it means for an individual person to lose one’s liberty. Drawing on Roman moral and legal sources, theorists such as Marchamont Nedham and Algernon Sidney held that losing one’s liberty amounts to becoming a ‘slave’. The key distinction on which they drew was made in the *Digest of Justinian*, that vast repository of Roman law: ‘[T]he great divide in the law of persons is this: all men are either free men or slaves.’¹⁰ Departing from this distinction, republican authors held that states or nations could be ‘enslaved’ too.

Such an understanding of ‘slavery’ was central to late eighteenth-century revolutionary conceptions of political liberty and a commonplace in revolutionary rhetoric. It expressed the supreme antithesis of political liberty. The early modern republican conception of liberty was widely articulated in the build-up to the American Revolution, perhaps no more clearly than by Stephen Hopkins, several-time governor of the Colony of Rhode Island, chief justice of its Supreme Court, and signer of the Declaration of Independence. After the passage of the detested Stamp Act, Hopkins took up his pen to write *The Rights of Colonies Examined*. In this pamphlet, published in 1765, he asserted that ‘one who is bound to

¹⁰ Digest 1985, vol. 1, pp. 15–16.

obey the will of another, is as really a slave, though he may have a good master, as if he had a bad one'. Quoting Algernon Sidney, Hopkins maintained that 'liberty consists in an independency upon the will of another'.¹¹

This kind of reasoning was applied to the American colonies in relation to the taxes raised by the British metropole. In his *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, published in 1767–68, and one of the most influential pamphlets before Thomas Paine entered the scene, the Philadelphia lawyer John Dickinson stated that those 'who are taxed without their own consent, expressed by themselves, or their representatives, are slaves. We are taxed without our own consent, expressed by ourselves or our representatives. We are therefore ... slaves'.¹² Several years later, the Welsh-born radical publicist Richard Price, in his 1778 *Two Tracts on Civil Liberty*, stated that 'any country that is subject to the legislature of another country in which it has no voice, and over which it has no control, cannot be said to be governed by its own will. Such a country, therefore, is in a state of slavery'. In making this claim (as Skinner asserts), Price basically reiterated a republican conception of liberty. The American citizens can only be said to be free, according to this theory, if they are not dependent on the will of imperial Britain.¹³

An influential strand within the existing historiography on republican revolutionary ideology holds that the ideals of equality, rights, and liberty were slowly but gradually extended to other social groups. This process is sometimes referred to as the 'contagion of liberty' or the 'logic of rights'.¹⁴ A prominent example supporting such an interpretation is the patriot publicist James Otis Jr, who already in 1764 reasoned that 'Colonists are by the law of nature free born, as indeed all men are, white or black'.¹⁵ Authors who defended such racial egalitarianism strove to abolish slavery and extend republican liberty.

Such views were at the same time not exclusive to American varieties of revolutionary ideology. In pre-revolutionary France, where a multi-vocal and eclectic tradition of oppositional republicanism developed over the course of the eighteenth century, they were propounded too.¹⁶ The extent to which French republican publicists such as Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or Guillaume-Joseph Saige reflected on

¹¹ Hopkins 1765, p. 16.

¹² Dickinson 1768, pp. 74–76. Also cited in Bailyn 1992, pp. 232–33.

¹³ Price 1991, p. 30; Skinner 1998, pp. 12–13, 50.

¹⁴ Bailyn 1992, pp. 230–46; Wood 1992, pp. 186–87. Cf. Hunt 2007, pp. 146–75.

¹⁵ Otis 1764, p. 29.

¹⁶ On French eighteenth-century republicanism, see Baker 1990, 2001; Monnier 2006; Hammersley 2010.

chattel slavery was rather limited. But from the beginning of the 1780s onward, and into the French revolutionary decade, antislavery arguments based on republican reasoning and fused with claims concerning the equal natural rights of all human beings gained ground.¹⁷ A noteworthy example of a republican publicist who extended his analysis of equal republican liberty to the enslaved black population of the French empire is Jean-Paul Marat. Best known as the journalist and editor of the ‘most celebrated radical paper of the Revolution’, *Ami du peuple*, of which nearly 700 issues appeared between September 1789 and September 1792, Marat’s was one of France’s most radical republican voices between 1789 and 1793.¹⁸ He was also a member of the egalitarian Society of the Friends of the Rights of Man and Citizen, better known as the ‘Cordelier Club’. Earlier in his life, in the 1760s and the 1770s, Marat had lived in Britain. On the occasion of new elections for the British House of Commons in 1774, he published *The Chains of Slavery*, a pro-Wilkite tractate in which he sought to advise the British people how to elect their representatives. According to Rachel Hammersley, Marat’s work ‘falls within the tradition of republicanism as developed by the eighteenth-century British commonwealthmen’.¹⁹ The contrast between liberty and slavery, alluded to in the title, was a recurrent theme of the work. A little less than twenty years later, just after the proclamation of the French republic, it was republished in French translation as *Les chaînes de l’esclavage*.²⁰

Neither in *The Chains of Slavery* nor in its French translation did Marat discuss chattel slavery. But on 12 December 1791, about four months after the outbreak of the major slave insurrection on the northern plain of the island of Saint-Domingue, Marat devoted an issue of *Ami du peuple* to the island’s upheaval. He began by asserting the republican argument that ‘the foundation of every free government is that no people is rightfully subjected to another people’, that a people must have ‘no other laws than those which it has given itself’, that it is ‘sovereign’ and ‘independent of every human power’. From this perspective, he deemed it ‘absurd and insensible’ that the French colonists in the Caribbean were governed

¹⁷ Of crucial importance for this stream of public opinion was the third – and most radical – edition of the Abbé G.-T. Raynal’s *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (1780), to which Denis Diderot made important contributions. In addition, see Nicolas Condorcet’s *Réflexions sur l’esclavage des nègres* (1781), published under the pseudonym of Joachim Schwartz. The *Société des amis des noirs* founded in 1788 by Jacques Pierre Brissot (among others) was the main platform for such thinking. See Curran 2011.

¹⁸ Popkin 1989, p. 162. After September 1792, *Ami du peuple* was renamed as *Le journal de la République française*.

¹⁹ Hammersley 2005, p. 644. ²⁰ Marat 1793.

by laws ‘emanating from a legislator residing at a distance of two thousand leagues’. But Marat considered it equally ‘inexcusable’ that the white colonists had ‘erected themselves as despotic masters of mulattoes and as tyrannical masters of blacks’. If the ‘rights of man are imprescriptible’, he reasoned, ‘those rights that the white colonists held with regard to the French nation, these same rights are equally held by blacks and mulattoes with regard to the white colonists’. This meant, ultimately, that in order to ‘shake off the cruel and shameful yoke’, blacks and mulattoes were ‘authorized’ to employ every available means, ‘even massacring their oppressors to the last one’.²¹ It was neither the first, nor would it be the last, time that Marat let his penchant for inciting revolutionary violence reign free on the pages of his journal. Many readers in revolutionary France at the time would have deemed Marat’s rhetoric outrageous. But his was also an unequivocal statement that mulattoes and blacks were equally entitled to the rights of republican self-government.

A final – and decidedly less radical – sign that contemporaries in the Atlantic world considered republican ideas of political liberty to be relevant to the question of chattel slavery was an antislavery tractate published in 1797 in the Dutch Republic. As the Dutch Batavian Revolution was in full swing, the Baptist minister Willem de Vos, under the pseudonym ‘Philalethes Eleutherus’, prefaced his indictment of slavery with a quote from (a French translation of) Sidney’s *Discourses on Government*: ‘Liberté est la mère des vertus, de l’ordre, et de la durée d’un état; l’esclavage au contraire n’enfante que des vices, de la lâcheté, et de la misère’ (Liberty is the mother of virtues, order, and the duration of a state; slavery on the contrary is nothing but the child of vices, cowardice, and misery).²² De Vos did not spell out the logic of extension explicitly. But his choice to insert this quote taken from the writings of one of the most principled republican authors of the English commonwealth tradition suggests that he wanted to convey the message that ideals of republican liberty cannot be separated from plantation slavery on the Dutch colonies.

These examples constitute only a very limited sample of what Bailyn has called the ‘contagion of liberty’. They were, moreover, minority views. The important point, nonetheless, is to see that this kind of reasoning was one of the available republican arguments against slavery. It was, however, not the only one. And by no means a decisive one.

²¹ *L’Ami du Peuple*, 12 December 1791. In Marat 1993, vol. vi, pp. 3787–89.

²² Philalethes Eleutherus [De Vos] 1797.

7.3 The Corruption of the Body Politic

To the argument that the theory of republican liberty must be extended and applied to those who are subjected to the domestic institution of chattel slavery was often added another element. The basic thought was that a free citizen who subjects other people to his arbitrary will loses his own liberty. Ultimately this will lead to the loss of liberty of the entire body politic. 'It is a clear truth', the Massachusetts lawyer and politician James Otis stated, 'that those who every day barter away other mens [*sic*] liberty, will soon care little for their own'.²³ Founding Father and physician Benjamin Rush, who joined the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society in 1787 and became its secretary and president, echoed this condemnation of slavery: 'The plant of liberty is of so tender a nature', he wrote in 1773, 'that it cannot thrive long in the neighbourhood of slavery'.²⁴ Patriot residents from the town of Darien in southern Georgia, in a set of resolutions drawn up in 1775, voiced a similar concern about the inherent danger for their own liberty of upholding a system of slavery. They declared their 'disapprobation and abhorrence of the unnatural practice of Slavery in America' which they considered 'highly dangerous to our liberties (as well as lives,) debasing part of our fellow creatures below men, and corrupting virtue and morals of the rest'. Such a practice, they claimed, would lay 'the basis of that liberty we contend for ... upon a very wrong foundation'.²⁵ The message was clear. Slavery corrupts the master's morals and virtues necessary to uphold a free republic; it hence imperils both his individual liberty and the collective liberty of the body politic.

Such denunciations of slavery sometimes explicitly invoked the bodily person as metaphor for the state. One prominent example is a pamphlet with a title that is worth quoting at length: *A Serious Address to the Rulers of America on the Inconsistency of their Conduct Respecting Slavery: Forming a Contrast between the Encroachments of England on American liberty, and American injustice in Tolerating Slavery*. It was authored by David Cooper, a Quaker abolitionist from New Jersey and published anonymously in 1783. In collaboration with other prominent Quakers, Cooper sent the pamphlet to the president of the American congress for distribution to its members as well as to the New Jersey legislature. It appears in both Washington's and Jefferson's libraries.²⁶

Cooper compared the independent American colonies to a child. A child who 'with many severe pangs, struggled into birth, and is now

²³ Otis 1764, p. 43. ²⁴ Rush 1947, p. 17. ²⁵ As quoted in Wood 2007, p. 201.

²⁶ Furstenberg 2011.

arrived to the state of manhood, and thrown off the restraints of an unwise parent', thus becoming a 'master of his own will'. Cooper was deeply appreciative of America's struggle for independence, portraying it in a republican vocabulary: 'It was a claim of freedom unfettered from the arbitrary control of others, so essential to free agents'. But he urged that 'Now is the time to demonstrate to Europe, to the whole world, that America was in earnest, and meant what she said ... that *all mankind* came from the hand of their Creator *equally free*.' Cooper pointed out the hypocrisy of 'every American slave-holder, who has complained of the treatment we have received from Britain'. They claim their 'own rights as freemen' but subject others to their 'arbitrary will and pleasure', Cooper went on, asking: 'Have we a better right to enslave them and their posterity, than Great-Britain had to demand Three-pence per pound for an article of luxury we could do very well without?' Cooper praised the Declaration of Independence, various state declarations of rights, and the American congress. The 'constitution' of the American body, he concluded, was 'good and strong'. But a 'sound body' requires a 'sound mind' otherwise the body's 'health and constitution' turn for the worse. This reasoning not only applied to someone's individual body but 'holds good politically'. Subjecting others to slavery, in short, is not only 'inconsistent'; it corrupts the body politic and will result in the decline of liberty and the destruction of a free state.

Cooper was not alone in uttering such concerns. Delegate to the Constitutional Convention and attorney general of Maryland, Luther Martin in January 1788 likewise argued 'That *slavery is inconsistent* with the *genius of republicanism*, and has a tendency to *destroy* those *principles* on which it is *supported*, as it *lessens the sense* of the *equal rights* of *mankind*, and habituates us to *tyranny* and *oppression*.'²⁷ Reverend David Rice, a Presbyterian minister based in Kentucky, although unable to outlaw slavery in his home state, in a 1792 pamphlet drew explicit attention to the corrupting effects of slavery for a free state. 'Slavery naturally tends to sap the foundations of political virtues', Rice argued, while 'virtue is absolutely necessary for the happiness and prosperity of a free people'.²⁸

The argument for extension of republican liberty to enslaved people of African descent was thus often combined with the warning that the institution of slavery corrupts slaveholding free citizens. But whereas the first line reasoning was premised on the natural equality of human

²⁷ Kaminski et al. 2009. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/RNCN-02-11-02-0003-0045>.

²⁸ Philanthropos [Rice] 1792, p. 10.

beings, the second one was essentially concerned with the corruption of those virtues that were considered to be necessary to uphold a free state.

7.4 **Black Republican Virtue and Sacrifice**

African American publicists had no need to be reminded by white abolitionists of the uneasy relationship between the rhetoric of republican liberty and the institution of slavery in a free state. The free black American community did not passively endure the civil and political inequality between free African Americans and white Americans. In a petition signed 10 February 1780 to the revolutionary legislature of their state, seven free African Americans from Dartmouth, Massachusetts, wrote that

we apprehend ourselves to be Aggrieved [*sic*], in that while we are not allowed the Privilege [*sic*] of freemen of the State having no vote or Influence in the Election of those that Tax us yet many of our Colour (as is well known) have cheerfully Entered the field of Battle in the defence of the Common Cause and that (as we conceive) against a similar Exertion of Power (in Regard to taxation) too well Known to need a recital in this place.²⁹

Notably, these black petitioners pointed out that despite their role in the revolutionary War of Independence, they were denied the right of ‘freemen of the State’ to freely choose their representatives. Just as the white American revolutionaries had protested taxation without representation, so did they. Likewise, in a sermon ‘written by a black Whig’ in September 1781 and printed the year after, the author took ‘the liberty of a citizen’ to call upon his ‘virtuous fellow citizens’ to ‘also emancipate those who have been all their life time subject to bondage’.³⁰ Such black petitioners and orators drew an explicit connection between military service, their sacrifice for the ‘Common Cause’, and their claim to liberty. No doubt a fair bit of calculated rhetoric was involved in drawing this connection. African American war veterans had reason to expect that such appeals would resonate with a white population who were fighting a bloody war.

Other black publicists went beyond this appeal to black republican virtue and military sacrifice, pointing out that the condition of slavery leads to forms of subservient behaviour comparable to the behaviour displayed by subjects of a monarch. Lemuel Haynes, the first black Congregationalist minister, made this parallel explicit in a sermon, *The Nature and Importance of True Republicanism*, published in 1801 on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of American independence.

²⁹ Aptheker 1951, p. 15. ³⁰ *A Sermon* 1782, p. 9.

Haynes, born to a black father and white mother, had served as minuteman and militia soldier during the American Revolutionary War. Already during the American Revolution, he had formed a strong opinion against slavery. In an unpublished manuscript entitled 'Liberty Further Extended', he argued that 'an *African ... may Justly Challenge [sic], and has an undeniable right to his Liberty: Consequently, the practice of Slave-keeping, which so much abounds in this Land is illicit*'.³¹

Twenty-five years later, Haynes claimed that 'a free republican government' is to be preferred above all other forms of government, as 'it tends to destroy those distinctions among men that ought never to exist'. Under monarchical governments 'people are commonly ignorant; they know little more than to bow to despots, and crouch to them for a piece of bread'. This was exactly the kind of behaviour that could be detected among 'poor Africans'. Not God but their 'being subjected to slavery' had reduced them to this 'pitiful, abject state'. This 'unhappy division' in society could have dire consequences, Haynes warned. The historical examples of the 'noble republic of Rome' and the republican 'interregnum of eleven years and four months in England', had clearly shown that 'such a precious diamond may lose its lustre, and undergo a total extinction'.³² Combining appeals to the republican virtue of black soldiers with the detrimental consequences of upholding the institution of slavery for a free republican government, and the equal rights of all human beings, Haynes made a powerful case for a 'true' free republican state. Black publicists thus moved beyond the logic of extension and beyond the corrupting influence of slavery on both master and slave. Black soldiers put forth the argument that they *deserved* their liberty as free citizens of a republic because of the military and political virtue they had displayed in battle.

The notion that enslaved blacks should be able to acquire liberty and republican citizenship by fighting for the republic was also central to the rhetoric of the slave emancipation decree promulgated in Saint-Domingue by the French civil commissioner Léger Félicité Sonthonax in August 1793. Louis Dufay, a French-born white planter, one of three members of a remarkable delegation of black, coloured, and white representatives, on 3 February 1794 delivered a powerful speech to the National Convention to abolish slavery. He reported of black insurgents who had offered their services to the French republican army on Saint Domingue. They had presented themselves as 'negroes, and French We will fight for France, but in return we want our freedom'. They even

³¹ Bogin 1983, p. 95. ³² Haynes 1801, pp. 9–12.

added: ‘our *Droits de l’Homme*’. Thus, Dufay urged the National Convention to make them ‘new citizens of the Republic’. The day after, on February 4, 1794, the Convention declared that ‘the slavery of negroes is abolished in all colonies’ and decreed ‘that all men living in the colonies, without distinction of colour, are French citizens and enjoy all the rights guaranteed by the constitution’.³³ Historians have rightfully pointed out that this monumental decision was ideologically muddled, partly opportunistic, limited in practice, and short-lasting. But the kind of reasoning behind this decision as articulated in the National Convention was informed by a republican vocabulary of liberty and citizenship.³⁴

The three arguments against slavery – the extension of liberty grounded in notions of (natural) equality, the corrupting influence of slavery on free citizens (masters), and liberty as a reward for military and civic sacrifice in battle – were informed by republican ways of thinking. Various historians have consequently argued that slavery was a deviation from revolutionary republican ideology, that slavery contradicted such ideals, but that these ideals in the long run provided a ‘movement of thought’ that was ‘irreversible’ and ‘irresistible’. But what is so striking is that, despite the antislavery arguments discussed so far, slavery *survived* the revolutionary era. In fact, it increased considerably between the 1790s and 1820s. The economic interests of the slaveholding classes must undoubtedly form an important part of the explanation of the post-revolutionary survival and growth of slavery.³⁵ But what I want to focus on next is how revolutionary elites reconciled their republican ideas of liberty with slavery, and even sought to justify slavery – or the postponement of abolition – in republican terms.

7.5 The Property Argument

A particularly insightful episode that illustrates one important line of reasoning that was invoked and applied to *exclude* enslaved African Americans from the body politic is the modification of the draft declaration of rights in the revolutionary Convention of Virginia in the Spring of 1776. The prominent Virginian planter and slave-owner George Mason was the leading member of the committee that was assigned to draft a declaration of rights. Under his chairmanship, the committee submitted its eighteen-article draft to the Convention on 27 May 1776. The opening line of the draft reads: ‘That all men are by nature equally

³³ As cited in Dubois 2004, p. 160.

³⁴ Popkin 2010, pp. 327–75; Geggus 2014, pp. 107–8. ³⁵ See Drescher 2009.

free and independent, and have certain inherent rights, of which they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity' (among them the 'enjoyment of life and liberty'). The particular formulation of this first article was immediately criticized by slaveholders in the Virginia Convention on the ground that it might imply the dismantling of the institution of slavery, the economic mainstay of Virginia. After some debate, the Convention decided upon a slightly different formulation: 'That all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights, of which, *when they enter into a state of society*, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity.' The implication was clear: slaves had not entered 'into a state of society' and therefore could not lay claim on their 'inherent rights'.³⁶ The amended Virginia Declaration of Rights was adopted in Williamsburg on 12 June 1776, and would come to serve as a model for other states.

The general reasoning behind the contention that slaves had not entered into a state of society was because they were seen as *property*.³⁷ Again, the 'property argument' was not exclusively used by North American revolutionaries. During the opening acts of the Dutch Batavian Revolution in early 1795, it was put forth by a 'former Planter' from Demerara, a Dutch colony on the northern coast of South America (today's Guyana). Although no genuine antislavery society emerged in the Dutch Republic, antislavery opinion was widespread. By the mid-1790s, slave-owners were on the defensive and they had reason to fear that the Batavian Revolution would not be to their advantage. The anonymous planter, perhaps opportunistically, made clear that he regarded the Batavian Revolution as a 'blessed upheaval' and that he was delighted that the air was 'cleared from the toxic fume of despotism'. He was willing to admit that men were born with equal rights, but immediately brought up the issue of the slaves' status as property: '[A]re the Negroes not the property of Planters who bought and paid for them? Are they not property, the possession of which is authorised by law and guaranteed by the sovereign?'³⁸ The planter raised the question whether the 'freedom of the Negroes was inseparable from the freedom of our Republic'. Not quite, he suggested, how else could it be explained 'that the Americans in founding their Republic excluded the Negroes of Virginia and Maryland'? By invoking the examples of independent American states in which republican liberty was reconciled with the

³⁶ Rakove 1998, p. 77.

³⁷ In practice, the property status of enslaved people was contested and utilized strategically. See Finkelman 2012, pp. 105–34.

³⁸ Vrymoedige gedachten 1795, pp. vii–viii.

institution of chattel slavery, the author conveyed the message that republican government was compatible with slavery, and that in a well-ordered republican state, slaveholders were entitled to the protection of their property.

7.6 Visions of Inferiority

Slaves were not just argued to be a form of property and hence unable to enjoy republican liberty in a free state. They were also deemed to lack the necessary capacities to responsibly enjoy and exercise their rights and liberties. Roughly, three varieties of such a claim can be distinguished. The first variant was grounded in what could be called a family of Enlightenment theories of the historical progress of civilizations.³⁹ According to such theories, several ‘stages’ of civilization could be distinguished within the unfolding process of history. People living in an early, primitive stage of society were, quite literally, mentally and morally ‘infantile’, comparable to children. In an elaborate French antislavery tractate *La cause des esclaves nègres*, published in 1788, the Lyon protestant pastor Benjamin Frossard suggested that ‘negroes are still in the infancy of civilization’. Only by teaching them the ‘required religious and moral obligations’, Frossard held, could they be sufficiently prepared ‘to bear the respectable title of citizen’.⁴⁰ In one of the Dutch Republic’s most widely read spectatorial magazines of the late 1780s and early 1790s, the *Bijdragen tot het menschelijk geluk* (*Contributions to Human Happiness*), the Dutch journalist, remonstrant professor of theology, and prominent future Batavian revolutionary Jan Konijnenburg similarly posited that ‘negroes’ still resided quite literally in an age of civilizational infancy. Konijnenburg, who would later edit the revolutionary political journal *De republikein* (*The Republican*) between 1795 and 1797, put forth an exemplary articulation of gradual emancipation. As he put it: ‘the stage of freedom’ to be allowed to the ‘negroes’, ‘had to be proportional to their degree of enlightenment and civilization’.⁴¹ On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, Samuel Stanhope Smith, professor of moral philosophy at the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University), in 1787 published one of the most important scientific treatises on what he took to be the essential unity of the human species, *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*. Smith vehemently rejected polygenist theories of racial difference. But this did not imply that he deemed African Americans fit for republican

³⁹ This paragraph draws on Koekkoek 2019, pp. 82–91. ⁴⁰ Frossard 1789, pp. 22–23.

⁴¹ [Konijnenburg] *Bijdragen tot het menschelijk geluk* 1790, pp. 86–87.

liberty: the 'emancipation of the African race in the United States ... must necessarily be the slow and gradual work of time'.⁴²

Frossard, Konijnenburg, Smith, and many others who held a strong aversion against slavery were not making an argument in favour of the extension of republican liberty. They argued for the gradual abolition of slavery. Yet liberation from (chattel) slavery did not imply republican liberty and full-fledged citizenship in a free republic. Instead, they postponed the question of the conferral of republican liberty to formerly enslaved blacks to the indeterminate future. The case for (gradual) abolition was not necessarily a case for equal citizenship.

A second, related reason why white publicists deemed both freed and enslaved people from African descent unfit for republican liberty was that the very subordination to slavery degraded one's morals, mental capacities, and thereby one's potential to exercise political virtues. St George Tucker's *A Dissertation on Slavery: With a Proposal for the Gradual Abolition of It in the State of Virginia* published in 1796 made this point explicitly. Tucker was a prominent Virginia lawyer, law professor at the College of William and Mary, and judge of the Virginia General Court and later the Supreme Court of Appeals. Black slaves who were 'accustomed to be ruled with a rod of iron', will not 'easily submit to milder restraints', he surmised. Immediate emancipation would turn them into 'hordes of vagabonds, robbers, and murderers'. This should come as no surprise Tucker said, for '[w]ithout the aids of an enlightened policy, morality, or religion, what else could be expected from their still savage state, and debased condition?'⁴³ Being subordinated as a slave for a certain length of time, such reasoning went, does not make one fit for exercising republican liberty.

Finally, the second half of the eighteenth century witnessed the rise of theories of racial difference. Schemes of racial classification, as elaborated most prominently by the French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, count of Buffon and the German anatomist, anthropologist, and professor of medicine, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, were initially part of a broader investigation into the history of nature and humanity's place within this natural history. Their theories were neither intended to posit the superiority of one race over another nor were they meant to legitimate slavery.⁴⁴ Yet prominent revolutionary elites, such as Thomas Jefferson, a slave-holding Virginian, and Moreau de Saint-Méry, a Martinique-born colonial *philosophe* and administrator at Saint-Domingue, capitalized upon this emerging field of racial theory to suggest that black people

⁴² Stanhope Smith 1812, vol. II, p. 173.

⁴³ Tucker 1796, p. 86.

⁴⁴ Vartija 2018.

belonged to a race which had certain innate inferior physical, mental, and moral characteristics. Their conceptions of 'blackness' were more fixed and leaned toward biological explanations of racial inferiority. Unlike most of their contemporaries who left open the possibility of education, enlightenment, and progress of people who were deemed 'uncivilized', their more deterministic variants of racism essentially denied this possibility.⁴⁵

Common to all these visions of the inferiority of people of African descent, grounded either in civilizational backwardness, the effects of slavery itself, or racial theories, was that they were not – or not yet – considered fit for republican liberty and citizenship. Antislavery publicists who advocated gradual emancipation, too, by and large subscribed to the exclusivity of republican liberty. In Nicholas Guyatt's apt summary, people from African descent were seen by them as '[t]emporarily and reversibly inferior, perhaps, and degraded through no fault of their own, but inferior nonetheless'.⁴⁶ To responsibly enjoy and exercise one's republican liberty, they essentially argued, one has to be civilized and enlightened.

7.7 Liberty or Death

The third and final way in which republican liberty was reconciled with the institution of chattel slavery supposed that those who are in a state of slavery and are not willing to fight for their freedom (tacitly) consent to their condition. In a seminal article, François Furstenberg has drawn attention to this understanding of liberty that was central to the American founding: freedom results from resistance and struggle grounded in a mix of liberal, republican, and Protestant notions of human agency and autonomy. This understanding of freedom was confirmed by a particular narrative of the American Revolution that emphasized the seizure of liberty through the hardships of resisting tyranny. Human agency, heroic acts, and virtuous deeds stood at the basis of this understanding of liberty.⁴⁷ This is a considerably different conception of liberty than the one that is usually associated with the universalistic revolutionary declarations of liberty and freedom. According to the logic of freedom as a universal entitlement – a natural right – freedom does not have to be earned. Instead, some publicists in the late eighteenth century, as we have seen, argued that this logic should simply be 'extended' to enslaved

⁴⁵ On Moreau de Saint-Méry, see Davis 1975, pp. 184–95; Garrigus 2006, pp. 156–59. On Jefferson, see Jordan 1968, pp. 429–81; Egerton 2009, pp. 73–82.

⁴⁶ Guyatt 2016, p. 38. ⁴⁷ Furstenberg 2003.

people of African descent. Yet this extension of freedom was not conditional on an act of (violent) resistance.

The argument that liberty must be earned through struggle is different – and we have seen that some black publicists actually premised their claim to liberty on precisely this point. But the sinister corollary of this argument is that people who submit to slavery are seen as unworthy of freedom; in other words, those who are not willing to die for their freedom *deserve* slavery. (In May 2018, the African American superstar rapper Kanye West, in what many commentators considered a rather bizarre and shocking statement, said: ‘When you hear about slavery for 400 years For 400 years? That sounds like a choice.’ West was most likely unaware that he was repeating an eighteenth-century argument invoked by proslavery advocates to make slavery morally acceptable.)⁴⁸ The only virtuous choice left, then, as American Founding Father Patrick Henry famously summarized, was ‘give me liberty or give me death’. Submission to slavery was a sign of weakness. This way of reasoning was readily combined with both racialized and gender-based ascriptions of a certain lack of character. Enslaved men were portrayed as feminine, as lacking virtue, and as displaying submissive behaviour – the antimodel of virtuous and republican virility.⁴⁹

Given this discourse, it might be expected that revolutionary republicans throughout the Atlantic world would hail the major slave insurrection on Saint-Domingue as an act of heroic resistance and display of virtue on the side of the black enslaved population. Some exceptions notwithstanding, this was far from the case. First, observers on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean denied that the insurrection was an instance of autonomous black agency. Consider the British colonial politician and historian Bryan Edwards’s account of the Haitian Revolution in his book entitled *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*. It was widely read throughout the United States and translated in multiple languages. Like many French planters, Edwards primarily targeted the Paris anti-slavery society Société des Amis des noirs for inciting the rebellion:

It was not the strong and irresistible impulse of human nature, groaning under oppression, that excited either of those classes to plunge their daggers into the bosoms of unoffending women and helpless infants. They were driven into those

⁴⁸ ‘Kanye West just said 400 years of slavery was a choice’, CNN, 4 May 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/01/entertainment/kanye-west-slavery-choice-trnd/index.html>.

⁴⁹ Harris 2004, pp. 97–100. Compare Sandrine Bergès’s chapter in this volume (Chapter 6).

excesses – reluctantly driven – by the vile machinations of men calling themselves philosophers.⁵⁰

Slave resistance was not virtuous but barbarous; the act of resistance was not an individual act of will, but the result of utopian French philosophy.

A similar kind of reasoning can be found in the Batavian Republic. Take the 1797 advisory report of a committee on colonial affairs in the Dutch Republic. In 1796 and 1797, Batavian revolutionaries were eagerly debating a new constitution, including the laws that should govern their colonial empire. A committee was installed by the Batavian National Assembly to provide advice on colonial affairs. The report the committee came up with observed about the Saint-Domingue slave revolt:

[T]he French nation at the dawn of her revolution, heated by the mesmerizing and conjuring notions of universal freedom and equality of rights, by their mistaken and premature application ... and by proclaiming these general philosophical principles in her distant and extended colonies, quickly occasioned the destruction of all social order.⁵¹

Again, the revolting slaves were denied agency: the revolt was the result of the ‘mistaken’ application of principles of equality and freedom by naïve French revolutionaries.⁵²

Enslaved people from African descent were thus trapped in a sinister catch-22: by not resisting, they were held to be consenting to their slavery and lacking republican virtue; but once they resisted, their resistance was seen as barbarous, and as the result of the ideas of French *philosophes*, instead of their own individual and virtuous act of will.

7.8 Concluding Remarks

What are the implications of my account of the relationship between republican liberty and chattel slavery in the late eighteenth-century age of Atlantic revolutions for how to understand the nature of early modern republicanism? First, it might be objected that the authors I have discussed (or at least a portion of them) did not put forth conceptions of liberty that can be qualified as belonging to the early modern theory of republican liberty as reconstructed by Skinner. Such an objection raises, of course, broader questions concerning the internal stability, the

⁵⁰ Edwards 1797, pp. xx–xxi.

⁵¹ *Dagverhaal* 5, no. 491, April 27, 1797 (session 22 April), p. 716.

⁵² For the broader context of the transformation of the Dutch colonial empire in the Age of Revolutions, see Koekkoek 2019b.

variations, as well as fragmentation and historical transformation of intellectual traditions. Clearly, late eighteenth-century debates about slavery and liberty were informed by both social, cultural, and political contexts, as well as intellectual sources and parameters that were not present in, say, the mid-seventeenth century. Many historians have shown, rightly I think, that late eighteenth-century revolutionary political thinkers drew on a range of political languages and traditions. Republican arguments about liberty merged and intersected with arguments taken from political economy, natural rights theory, philosophical (or conjectural) history, and Enlightened Protestantism.⁵³

My point is that, even if not all of the authors I have discussed may qualify as authentic republicans, some of the arguments they put forth are sufficiently recognizable as expressing republican lines of reasoning. Accordingly, what I have tried to show is that eighteenth-century republican arguments about liberty did not *necessarily* contradict chattel slavery but could also form part of the *legitimization* of slavery. The re-emergence of republican political thinking about liberty from the 1760s onward shows that the republican theory of free states was conceptually insufficiently equipped to rule out the exploitation and enslavement of black Africans. Put differently, republican theories of liberty could be complemented both by universalistic notions of the natural equality of all human beings – and by theories of inferiority (whether racial or in terms of civilization). The fact that some authors argued that by advocating the abolition of slavery, they were defending ‘true’ republicanism, indicates that they recognized other variants of republicanism at the time that accepted slavery.

Lastly, it is in my view imperative to recognize that the arguments I have outlined that sought to legitimize slavery (or withhold freed slaves from partaking in genuine republican liberty) do not somehow fall ‘outside’ of the revolutionary discourse of republican liberty. The suggestion that the American founders and French and Dutch revolutionaries suffered from a ‘blind spot’, or that their refusal to abolish slavery immediately was an unfortunate accident is unconvincing and fundamentally wrongheaded. It seems equally misleading to suggest that they did not ‘live up to their own ideals’. Instead, they drew on available conceptual resources about consent to slavery versus resistance against oppression, and about exclusionary notions of a minimum baseline of civilization and enlightenment, so as to render their own ideological position consistent.

⁵³ Kloppenberg 1987; Baker 1990; Whatmore 2000; Rosendaal 2003; Jainchill 2008; Kalyvas and Katznelson 2008; Sonenscher 2009.

