

The Radicalization Trap: Political-Economic Extremism and the Derailment of France's and Haiti's Revolutions

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Abstract. In revolutionary France, Maximilien Robespierre's fusion of virtue and terror justified massive purges that undermined liberty and public debate. Likewise, in Haiti, Jean-Jacques Dessalines's radical nationalism and economic policies (embodied in the 1804 Declaration of Independence) invoked the revolutionary slogan "liberty or death" while repudiating commerce and white property ownership. Both leaders adopted an absolute approach, which constrained the development of political pluralism. Drawing on primary texts (Robespierre's speeches and the Haitian Declaration), this paper uses comparative analysis to examine radicalization in the French and Haitian Revolutions and its effect on realization of the revolutions' core goals. The study demonstrates that this ideological extremism (political in France, economic in Haiti) produces social fragmentation, international isolation, and the betrayal of the original goals. This paper argues that revolutionary radicalization created a "trap", in which the stated aspirations of liberty and equality were compromised, leading both revolutions away from stable constitutional democracy toward authoritarian outcomes.

Keywords: French Revolution, Haitian Revolution, Radicalization

1. Introduction

The French Revolution (1789–1799) and the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) were concurrent historical upheavals that initially pursued ideals of freedom and equality, yet culminated in outcomes far from their original aims. Each initially appealed to broad liberal principles: the French revolutionaries overthrew absolute monarchy to establish popular sovereignty, while the Haitian revolutionaries (primarily enslaved Africans and free people of color) sought personal emancipation and racial justice. However, each revolution became "eaten by its own children," as George Orwell wryly observed—meaning that the revolutions drifted from their original aims, producing outcomes far removed from the founders' ideal intentions.

This paper contends that both revolutions were derailed by radicalization: in France, the revolution's turn toward political extremism (Robespierre's Jacobin Terror) stripped away civil liberties and crushed pluralism; in Haiti, economic radicalism (land reform, anti-commerce edicts, and militant anti-colonial nationalism) isolated the new nation and undercut sustainable development. By comparing Robespierre's ideological doctrine of "virtue-and-terror" with

Dessalines's militant anti-colonialism and agrarian vision, this paper demonstrates that the absolutist interpretations of liberty eventually undermined both republics.

Due to the current lack of comparative studies of extremism across these two revolutions, this research proceeds by reviewing relevant literature on revolutionary extremism, analyzing the French case (focused on "virtue and terror"), and the Haitian case (centered on economic radicalism and anti-colonialism), and discussing their common dynamics of radicalization, concluding with an exploration of the implications of this "trap."

2. Literature review

2.1. Theories of revolutionary radicalism

Revolutions inherently entail tension between ideals and violence; classic and contemporary scholarship converges on two intertwined questions: the reason of revolutionary leaders adopt increasingly extreme strategies and the revolutions tend to evolve toward extremism over time. Many theorists argue that this stems from fragile conditions that compel leaders to deploy hardline rhetoric and measures to prevent defections.

As Crane Brinton stated in his comparative anatomy of revolutions, a recurrent shift from moderate reformers to radical regimes as revolutionary crises deepen [1]. Charles Tilly and Jack A. Goldstone similarly stress the logic of selecting coercive measures under conditions of state breakdown and war [2,3]. During that time, revolutionary movements risk devolving into authoritarianism or chaos as leaders act in the name of higher principles. Some scholars highlight the paradox that revolutionary equality can drive factional purges. Robespierre himself argued that "virtue" alone could not sustain the revolution, which requires "terror" to suppress its enemies [4]. Others emphasize socioeconomic forces. Haitianists such as Laurent Dubois note that Haiti's 1804 independence boldly asserted freedom from slavery, but also threatened slaveholding regimes elsewhere [5]. In fact, the ideological frames help leaders justify the extreme methods in philosophical logic.

2.2. Advanced in the study of French Revolution and Haitian Revolution

For the French Revolution, Hannah Arendt traces how commitments to virtue and the "social question" virtue and the social question in the French context turned political emancipation into a project of moral purification and emergency justice [6]. François Furet argues that Jacobin political culture encoded a Manichean vision of the people versus the anti-people, making terror appear as "justice" [7].

In the Haitian Revolution, scholars analyze Toussaint Louverture's coercive plantation regime aimed at maintaining exports, versus Dessalines's turns toward land redistribution, peasant proprietorship, and restrictions on white ownership and foreign capital [5, 8].

While Robespierre's Republic of Virtue ideal (drawing on Rousseau's general will) legitimized terror as "justice," whereas Dessalines's proclamation fused liberty with racial vengeance and economic autarky, it is clear that revolutionary leaders, consumed by moral absolutism, lost sight of pragmatic pluralism and long-term stability.

2.3. Research gap

Despite the extensive scholarship on both the Haitian and French Revolutions, comparative studies often treat French political radicalization and Haitian economic radicalization in parallel but rarely

analyze their shared mechanisms within a single explanatory frame. Theories of radicalization typically generalize about violence and ideology, while case-specific works provide detail without a cross-domain (politics–economy) comparison. This paper tries to put Robespierre’s political extremism and Dessalines’s economic extremism into a common “radicalization trap” model, analyzing the dilemmas and tragedy of the Haitian and French Revolutions under extremism and radicalization.

3. French Revolution

3.1. Background

The French Revolution began in 1789 as a popular uprising against the absolutist Bourbon monarchy and the privileges of the ancien régime. It was driven by Enlightenment ideals of individual liberty, equality before the law, and popular sovereignty. In the Revolution’s early phase, moderates revolutionaries abolished feudal privileges, adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and established a constitutional monarchy. By 1792 the Bourbon absolutist order had collapsed: the republic was proclaimed and King Louis XVI was executed, fulfilling the Revolution aspiration to redefine the nature of political power. These liberal gains, however, occurred amid chaos that set the stage for radicalization due to internal unrest.

3.2. Manifestations of political radicalization

3.2.1. Concept of “virtue and terror”

In 1789–1792, the early revolution set out to limit monarchy and establish constitutional rights. However, by 1793–94 the Revolution had become radicalized. Under Jacobin rule, Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety justified extraordinary repressive measures to defend the Republic. In his February 1794 speech *On the Principles of Political Morality*, Robespierre explicitly linked virtue to terror in revolutionary times: “If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, at the time of revolution it is at the same time virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless” [4].

In Robespierre’s reasoning, terror was not an aberration but a logical extension of the Revolution’s original moral purpose. Virtue, as understood in the Rousseauvian public sense of public virtue or love of the republic, was demanded to root out internal enemies (alleged counter-revolutionaries) by any means. Thus, “what is immoral is impolitic, what is corrupting is counterrevolutionary” [4].

3.2.2. Coercive governance and suppression of political pluralism

This vision rapidly constricted political space: moderates and even fellow revolutionaries were denounced as traitors if they challenged Robespierre’s definition of the public good. Indeed, Robespierre declared that “the government of the revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny” [4]. Under his leadership, the Revolutionary Tribunal executed over 16,000 people via guillotine during the Reign of Terror. Dissent was equated with counterrevolution, even prominent revolutionaries like Georges Danton and Hébert fell victim to the Terror.

This ideological intransigence produced social fragmentation. By proclaiming others as enemies of the people, the regime suppressed pluralism. Liberties of the press, debate, and religion were curtailed, undermining the Enlightenment ideals that had launched the Revolution. Economic

distress (due to war and instability) exacerbated tensions, but Robespierre's response was to further centralize control (e.g., the Law of the Maximum, which imposed price controls) rather than compromise. Ultimately, the Terror's extremism backfired: Robespierre's faction fractured under paranoia, leading to his arrest and execution in Thermidor 1794.

4. Haitian Revolution

4.1. Background

The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) erupted in Saint-Domingue, which was France's wealthiest colony. It was unique as the first successful slave revolt, culminating in 1804 with Dessalines's declaration of independence. Home to nearly half a million enslaved Africans working on sugar plantations, the colony produced extraordinary wealth for French elites while maintaining a brutal racial hierarchy. Inspired by both Enlightenment ideals and the success of the French Revolution, enslaved leaders such as Toussaint Louverture mobilized against both white planters and French royal authority. The Revolution's aims included not only political independence but total emancipation and protection of the black nation's economic interests. By 1793, the uprising pressured the French National Convention to abolish slavery in Haiti, marking an unprecedented expansion of universal liberty.

4.2. Manifestations of revolutionary radicalization

4.2.1. Racial sovereignty and vengeance

Yet the Revolution's radicalization did not stop at emancipation. As power shifted from Toussaint Louverture to Jean-Jacques Dessalines after 1802, the Haitian Revolution fused the pursuit of independence with militant nationalism and economic extremism. Dessalines's Haitian Declaration of Independence proclaimed not only political sovereignty but also vengeance against former colonizers: "We have rendered to these true cannibals war for war, crime for crime, outrage for outrage".

4.2.2. Economic radicalism

Under Dessalines, economic policy veered toward autarky: large estates were subdivided into small peasant holdings; restrictions were imposed on foreign trade and white landownership; forced labor systems gave way to subsistence agriculture [9]. While Toussaint Louverture had maintained coerced plantation labor to sustain exports flowing, Dessalines turned away from that model, inspiring later leaders (Pétion) to continue breaking up plantations. As a result, these measures, designed to prevent recolonization and preserve liberty, also dismantled the plantation economy that had sustained the colony's prosperity.

Specifically, according to Figure 1, Haiti's GDP remained nearly stagnant or in a declining direction during the 1790s to the 1820s.. It would take nearly a century for Haiti to regain the agricultural production level of 1790. The decrease of GDP was mainly due to the fact that the complete halt of the export sector during the end of slavery and revolutions. Most ironically, the rapid growth between 1760 and 1790 is because of the the importation of Africans slaves. Moreover, back to GDP per capita, it is apparent that there was a huge drop between 1790 and 1805, meaning the increasing of GDP could not counteract the increase of populations. Even the modest growth of GDP per capita from consumption domestic consumption rather than export. In general, it can see

that the Haitian economy had not escaped the Malthusian trap as most agrarian economies of that time.

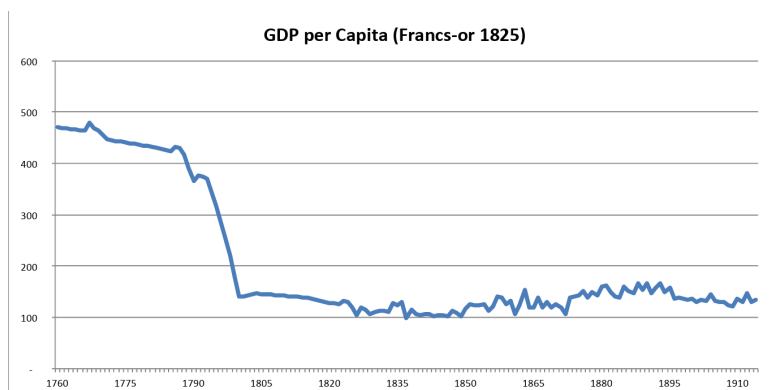


Figure 1. GDP per Capita of Haiti (1760–1915), in Francs-or (1825) [10]

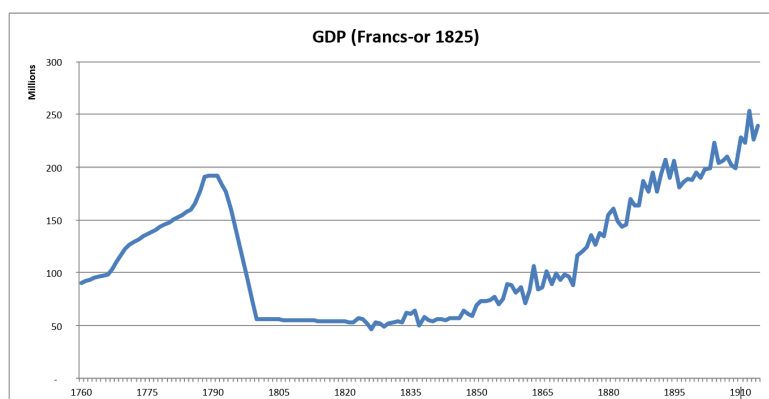


Figure 2. Total GDP of Haiti (1760–1915), in Millions of Francs-or (1825) [10]

Ideologically, Dessalines integrated economic independence into a militant vision of liberty [11]. The Declaration of Independence is suffused with denunciations of commerce and avarice: one passage pleads for a nation “that will no longer be subjected to the bondage of avarice and commerce,” reflecting a moral critique of capitalist exploitation. In practice, this translated into restrictive economic control and land policy. The result was a repudiation of the very trade networks that had made Saint-Domingue wealthy .

4.2.3. Coercive rule and exclusion

With the white planter class eliminated in the 1804 expulsion and related violence, Dessalines’s government became militaristic and personalistic: he styled himself Emperor (1805–1806) and ruled by decree. Thus, like Robespierre, Dessalines narrowed the revolutionary coalition to a single group (black Haitians) and used violence (and the law) to exclude others [11]. His extreme program — championing revenge as a virtue—motivated European isolation and seeded ongoing internal strife. In sum, Haitian radicalism was economic as well as racial: it rejected compromise with the old regime’s market and insisted on a holistically new order, even at the cost of stability.

5. A comparative dynamics of the revolutions

5.1. A common pathway of radicalization

Comparing the French and Haitian cases highlights a common pattern: initial liberal goals gave way to absolutist ideologies that justified repression. Both revolutions framed equality and freedom as foundation due to their traumatic pasts, yet each leadership equated freedom with uniformity of belief and practice, rather than pluralistic liberty. In France, Robespierre deified “public virtue” and saw terror as its enforcement. In Haiti, Dessalines deified Black liberty and saw exorcising colonial influence (economic and cultural) as its enforcement. Each leader thus fell into what might be called a radicalization trap: by demanding moral or economic purity, they ostracized moderate factions and escalation followed.

5.2. Ideological background of leaders

The philosophical dimensions reveal that while Robespierre, influenced by Rousseau, believed the people’s general will was inviolable and any dissent betrayed the republic. Hence, terror became an ethical imperative rather than a temporary expedient. On the other hand, Dessalines, shaped by anti-colonial resistance to Eurocentric thought, defined liberty in exclusionary racial terms. He famously asked Haitians “Quand nous laisserons-nous de respirer le même air qu’eux ?” – “when will we grow weary of breathing the same air as [the French]?” This reveals a mindset in which complete severance from the “avarice and commerce” of the colonial old world was seen as a prerequisite for true independence. Ironically, in pursuing these purist visions the revolutionaries undermined their own stated aims: French revolutionaries suppressed critics of centralized authority, while Haiti isolated itself from global markets that might have brought prosperity.

5.3. Causes of revolutionary radicalization

Another parallel lies in the causes of radicalization. Each revolution confronted simultaneous external and internal threats. These situations foster a pervasive siege mentality. In France, the Vendée uprising and federalist revolts were all fueling paranoia about royalist conspiracies and foreign agents. As historian Timothy Tackett notes, political violence escalated when revolutionaries saw themselves surrounded by “internal enemies” threatening the Republic’s very survival [12]. Externally, France’s 1792 declaration of war on Austria and Prussia brought foreign armies to its borders, creating a climate of fear for both for revolution leaders and peasants. This atmosphere convinced Jacobin leaders that “the homeland was in danger,” and Robespierre famously justified extraordinary measures by declaring that “the government of the revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny” [13]. Thus, political terror was necessary instead of temporal expedients.

Haiti faced a parallel trajectory. Napoleon’s 1802 attempt to restore slavery made recolonization appear imminent, pushing Dessalines to equate independence with uncompromising exclusion [5]. The 1804 violence against French settlers—justified as vengeance for centuries of enslavement—reflected his conviction that coexistence with former masters was impossible [13]. At the same time, laborers rejected the plantation system, which was the colonial economic engine, to adopt small-scale farming. This undermined export revenues and long-term growth [12]. In his proclamation, Dessalines insisted Haitians must “live independent or die”, casting economic rupture as essential to liberty [11].

Under these circumstances, revolutionary leaders saw compromises betrayals and framed radical policies as the only way to survival. France resorted to political terror, Haiti to racial vengeance and economic autarky; tragically, both revolutions fell into the same radicalization trap: under the pressures of foreign invasion, internal revolt, and moral absolutism, their emancipatory projects turned into regimes of repression or isolation.

5.4. The trajectory of freedom

Moreover, most notably, both revolutions radicalized under the banner of liberty itself. In France, Jacobins equated dissent with counterrevolution, claiming that “virtue” demanded the elimination of corruption and factionalism [10]. In Haiti, emancipated laborers rejected the plantation system—the colony’s economic backbone—preferring small-scale subsistence farming over any return to coerced plantation work [11]. What began as a defense of liberty thus evolved into authoritarian terror in France and economic isolation in Haiti, as revolutionary leaders embraced absolutist visions of liberty that left no room for pluralism or pragmatic compromise. This convergence suggests that external war, internal unrest, and moral idealism created a “radicalization trap” that consumed both revolutions’ emancipatory ideals.

6. Conclusion

In the comparison between the French Revolution and the Haitian Revolution, this essay reveals how radicalism led both to deviate from their original ideals in becoming failure eventually. In France, Robespierre’s theory of “virtue and terror” legitimized violence as a means to protect the republic. This notion led to internal purges, mass executions and disastrous political collapse ultimately. On the other hand, in Haiti, Dessalines’s Declaration of Independence not only rejected colonial rule but also destroyed the plantation-based economic system, defining freedom as inseparable from retaliation and economic isolation. Although in some respects, this radical stance seems morally powerful, it has caused long-term instability and isolation. Both of these revolutions fell into the “trap of radicalization”, as external threats and internal divisions forced leaders to head towards despotism in the name of freedom and equality. Contrast shows that when revolutions define freedom and equality as strict absolute principles rather than inclusive processes that require compromise, they undermine their own goals and run the risk of sliding towards authoritarianism or isolation.

However, this essay is mainly based on the textual analysis of revolutionary documents in France and Haiti, with a focus on political and economic radicalization. It did not fully address the broader social, cultural or international dynamics and also shaped the outcome of the revolution. Furthermore, this study did not employ quantitative data or cross-case comparisons outside the two revolutions, which limited the universality of its research results in other revolutionary contexts. Future research can expand to compare the radicalization in other revolution. At the same time, exploring the history of thought and international relations are also advisable approach since they can help to gain a deeper understanding of how external pressures and internal ideologies interact to push revolutions towards extremism. Ultimately, the fates of France and Haiti illustrate the paradox of revolution: the more absolute the pursuit of freedom is, the more fragile it becomes in practice.

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