The European Conscience and the Black Slave Trade

An Ambiguous Protest

Yves Bénot

At the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, change was fast and furious: the exploration of coastal Africa by the Portuguese, the exploration of the West Indies by the Spanish, the extermination of the island Indians, the importation of black slaves to the Iberian peninsula, then the expansion of the slave trade to the American colonies – in short, the much-heralded inauguration of European colonization overseas, with all of its attendant horrors. All of this is adequately known, it seems; the purpose of the present article is not to rehearse this history, even in summary. But if chronology has any value here, it is in making clear that, while the massacre of the Arawaks and the Caribbean Indians quickly attracted attention, eliciting protests that were to be renewed in the following centuries, the black slave trade and black slavery began somewhat discreetly, as if it took quite some time for the *esprits libres* in Europe to take notice of it. Over the three centuries leading up to the French revolution, blacks were transferred from their native countries to the American colonies. In Europe, these three centuries saw the development of Enlightenment thought, the revolt against domination by the Church, the call for human rights, and the will to democracy. The parallel is superficial, but troubling nevertheless: four facts appear to be linked together, and not merely chronologically: the massacre or *de facto* subjugation of the Indians, the trade and enslavement of blacks, and colonization. Is the last of these not the cause of and the key to understanding the other three – as well as a number of other phenomena? Straightaway a question makes itself heard:

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

can any moral protest against or condemnation of the re-emergence of slavery be made without being framed first and foremost as a protest against European colonization? And conversely, can any generalized protest against colonization (such as does exist) exist without directly entailing a protest and a struggle against the trade in "ebony wood"? Yet these two aspects are not always considered in conjunction, and their separation is problematic.

Let us make clear that what we are talking about here is not results (whether realized or not), nor even the possibility of realizing them, but rather the conceptions that determine the positions that are adopted, and which are also liable to condition, at least in part, the impact and effectiveness of these positions. It behooves us to begin by emphasizing the marked ambiguity that has, since the Renaissance, shadowed two of the terms that continually recur in such discussion: these terms are *colony* and *slave*. The first, as it was understood by a culture pervaded with the tradition of Greek and Roman writers and thinkers, refers not so much to the business of colonizing and exploiting that we use it to mean today, but rather to the voluntary migration of European populations to the New World, and later to other overseas regions. It so happens that certain protests against the principle of colonialism have been nothing more than demands for independence on the part of "European" colonies whose white populations have locked horns with their metropolitan powers. During the Enlightenment, this was the meaning most often conveyed by the word *colonies*, which continued to be conceived as it was in ancient Greece, when metropolitan Greeks emigrated to colonies such as Marseilles and Nice.

With the word *slavery*, the ambiguity is perhaps even more profound. During the long period that saw the simultaneous advance of both the European conscience and the slave trade, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, a people was considered enslaved if it was subjected to the absolute power of a king or "despot"; an individual was a slave if he was forced to submit to such domination; soon, the word would come to be applied to a people possessing no constitution to guarantee its rights. In this sense, on the eve of 1789 in France – or of 1688 in England – there was only one enslaved people, besides the 700,000 or 800,000

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

slaves in the colonies. There was no shortage of defenders of the slave-based colonial system to argue that peasants in Europe, and particularly in France, were worse off than the slaves in the colonies. To this must be added the wildly varied meanings attributed to the word *nature*, which took on caricatural proportions when a certain colonist recognized that slavery was contrary to nature, but that the nature of things made it necessary in the islands … The discussion, when it was broached, was conducted with anything but clarity, and it was not always correctly understood by later generations.

The first abomination of European colonization, the "destruction" of the Indians of the island of Haiti, was completed within fifteen years, and knowledge of it spread rapidly more or less everywhere; the Indian question forthwith became an obligatory reference in all debates on colonization such as these were pursued in Europe. True, the Indians of Central and South America were not to become slaves, it was decided in Madrid, as well as in Rome in the Pope's name; in truth, they were to be exploited like slaves nonetheless wherever they could be put to use. And if the Indians of the continent were not completely wiped out as those of the islands had been, they were not indebted exclusively to the efforts of Las Casas and a few others for their survival, but also to the resistance efforts of the peoples of Mexico after the fall of the Aztec Empire, and probably as well to the conquerors' re-use of structures established by the Incas. In the end, the protests proved not to be useless: the total destruction carried out in Haiti, Cuba, and later in Martinique and Guadeloupe was not to be repeated on the same scale on the continent. But above all, the Indians were to become an indispensable point of reference for the reflections of European thinkers, who discovered stateless societies without any notion of private property; the first germs of socialist ideas and utopias were found here, somewhere among the Iroquois or the Algonquins. We have only to consult Amerigo Vespucci, whose few remarks on the Indians reported that they "have no possessions that belong to them, but rather all things are held in common; they live without a king, without any superior authority, and each one is his own master … They have no church, they have no laws, nor do they worship idols … There are no merchants

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

among them, nor any exchange of goods." Of course, if the political and religious authorities of Europe in 1504 recoiled in disgust from such backwardness, many others, from Montaigne to Lahontan or Diderot, found it food for thought.

Let us now return to the Africa of the slave-trading centuries – more precisely, to that part of Africa frequented by the European slave ships and agents. There, merchants and the exchange of goods were to be found, including the exchange of human beings; there also were kings and authorities with whom traders had to negotiate, and who also ensured the smooth operation of this "traffic." In short, there was far less difference between the European States and those of the Africa that furnished slave ships than there was between European culture and that of the Indians of North American, known as "Savages," with no pejorative connotation attached to the term. No doubt the men who trafficked along the African coasts were aware that stateless societies were also to be found in this region, but these traders were indifferent to such societies because they furnished no interlocutors of the sort needed to provide a steady supply of slaves. In any case it is striking that philosophers in France or elsewhere were at once quite attentive to the "Savages" of America or Tahiti, and uninterested in African cultures; at least, they did not find these cultures nearly as stimulating to reflection as were the Hurons. The latter, unlike the peoples of Africa, served (unbeknownst to them, most of the time, though not always) to fill a role in the social and political critique of despotism or absolute power in old Europe. Paradoxically, it might be that this lesser attention resulted not from a wider cultural gap but from a narrower one: all in all, the African States may have been considered barbaric, but the worst was that they had nothing new to teach us. The radical difference of Indian societies, on the other hand, could help in blazing new trails.

True, the political paths immediately taken in reaction to the event were apt to rattle convictions that remained confined to the level of intellectual abstractions. When the *Philosophes* saluted American independence, they could not have been ignorant of what was stated in the Declaration of Independence and what was carefully left unstated. Yet if the document makes no mention of black slaves living in rebel territory, thereby consigning them to

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

non-existence, it takes a vehement stance vis-à-vis the Indians, referred to as men who knew nothing but pillaging and killing and whom the English king had the audacity to support and protect. In fact, the crown was simply trying to solidify its direct control of the American West; perhaps this is the most profound reason for the schism. But what concerns us here is the fact that the *Philosophes* in turn were to remain silent, to act as if they had not read or heard this racist paragraph of the much-vaunted Declaration of Independence. As for the blacks, reassurance is sought in the idea that the question of their status was only suspended at most for twenty years, that slavery would be abolished in the northern states of the United States in the coming years, and so forth.

Even if the Indians began to lose their power of attraction during these years, and even more so during the French Revolution, they continued for a long time to fulfill another role entirely in European consciousness. With the extension and growing prosperity of the slave-owning colonies, the problem nevertheless became serious in the eighteenth century, at the time when the fortunes arising directly out of slaving-ship profits were swelling. It seems indeed that quite some time was necessary in order for the horrors of slavery in the islands to become fully appreciated in European intellectual circles, in contrast to what happened in the case of the Indians. Let us be clear: it would have been impossible to protest the slave trade alone, separately from the exploitation of African slaves in America, and from the return of any colonial produce to Europe. Even when a merchant from French or English ports was among those who engaged only in direct commerce and would not himself participate in the slave trade, he was just as implicated – as was also, it must be said, the European way of life, for which previously unknown colonial products became new needs. This was true not only for a privileged class, for in the course of the Enlightenment century, sugar, coffee, and tea gradually became products of mass consumption, for the urban masses in any case; these were precisely the products the African slaves were used to cultivate, since supposedly white men could not work in such climates. The pairing of the slave trade and slavery, on the one hand, with colonial production and colonization on the other does not make it easy for intellectuals. If the first term were

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to disappear, what would become of the other, of the material development of Europe? And it was not long before the Anglo-Americans of the thirteen colonies of North America had to be included among these Europeans. Material development was all the same the backdrop against which thinkers grappled with the ideas of freedom (religious freedom in particular) and equality, the framework in which these ideas took hold. Did development have to be sacrificed to morality? The question was indeed posed; and as the idea of such a sacrifice was generally rejected, a third path had to be sought. This difficult endeavor was to generate problems of its own. And yet, it happened that certain logical minds chose to condemn all colonization in general, and thus to cut the Gordian knot.

Let us take the example of Swift, who, speaking through Gulliver upon his definitive return from his travels, denounces all the European annexations in terms that the elder Mirabeau and Diderot were to echo later on:

> they see an harmless People, are entertained with Kindness, they give the Country a new Name, they take formal Possession of it for the King, they set up a rotten Plank or a Stone for a Memorial, they murder two or three Dozen of the Natives, bring away a Couple more by Force for a Sample, return home, and get their Pardon. Here commences a new Dominion acquired with a Title by *Divine Right.* Ships are sent with the first Opportunity; the Natives driven out or destroyed, their Princes tortured to discover their Gold; a free Licence given to all Acts of Inhumanity and Lust; the Earth reeking with the Blood of its Inhabitants: And this execrable Crew of Butchers employed in so pious an Expedition, is a *modern Colony* sent to convert and civilize an idolatrous and barbarous People.[1]

It is true that Swift exempts English colonization from this tableau, which appears to refer quite directly to the Spanish conquest, but we have every reason to read the passage with a grain of salt – all the more so because in a later passage, Gulliver remarks that the countries he has visited "do not appear to have a Desire of being conquered, and enslaved, murdered or driven out by Colonies; nor abound either in Gold, Silver, Sugar, or Tobacco" (p. 265) – a description that seems to apply as well to English colonization. Nothing in Swift's text explicitly refers to the black slave trade; at most it is implied. But this radical condemnation, which many authors were to echo in the eighteenth century, offers no alterna-

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tive; it records and deplores, it waxes indignant as well, it might even at the outside lead readers to demand that no further colonies be conquered. But even this intended result is not expressly avowed; perhaps it is thought to be pointless, since all of South and Central America, as well as all of the West Indies, were already occupied at the time. But despite the dominant Enlightenment trend of principled opposition to conquests, the eighteenth century was also a period of colonial expansion, in both the Indian Ocean and in the Pacific. In sum, positions that might appear to be among the most radical ones can be faulted not simply for not being followed through – Swift was after all as much a politician as he was a man of letters – but also for being reducible in the end to a record of the *fait accompli*, or perhaps better the *mal accompli*. More precisely, in this case the specific question of the traffic of black slaves and of slavery is in some sense lost in the universalizing rigor of moral judgment.

If the logic of protest against all colonization on grounds of principal had been followed through to its logical endpoint, it ought to have led to advocating that the occupied colonies be restored to independence. But in the case of the slave-owning colonies of the Caribbean – where, as Eric Williams has recently observed, the entire population was made up of immigrants, whatever their color, whether victims of forcible transfer or not – this is not the conclusion that was drawn. For there was every indication that independence at the time meant the independence of white colonists pitted against the metropolitan power, of course, but also against the black slaves. "White" revolts were not unknown, without even mentioning the victorious rebellion of the United States. It is highly likely that when Turgot, already in December 1750, declared in a lecture at the Sorbonne that all the European colonies would separate from their metropolitan countries, he was thinking of the future independence movements of the whites of North America. But then, if we apply the anachronistic term "anti-colonialist" to this tendency, illustrated once again by Bonald in 1797, it is in actual fact a slave-based anti-colonialism. In England, however, Granville Sharp indeed asked, in around 1772, whether it would be fair to support the demands of the English colonists of North America when they sought for themselves the very freedom

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that they denied the black slaves. Confronted with this grave dilemma, Sharp and all those who shared his viewpoint were forced by immediate political necessity to uphold both the liberty of the American colonists and by the same token that of the English against the claims of royal power; only later did they resume their defense of blacks. This was a profound contradiction which, although perceived at the time, persisted throughout the entire history of the black question in the United States.

Yet the French colonists in the West Indies or in the Indian Ocean also had claims to defend against royal power; it is noteworthy that the *Philosophes,* in their struggle against absolutism and the lack of liberties in France, were able to lend a sympathetic ear to those colonists who chose to portray themselves as oppressed by the same royal power. The *Philosophes* played the same script again at the dawn of the French Revolution and through the time of the French constitutional assembly. Thus when Diderot writes in the *Histoire des deux Indes,* signed by Raynal, "Destiny has pronounced her decree upon your colonies: either you will give them up, or they will renounce you" (Bk. XIII, ch. I), what he is addressing is the question of white independence, such as that of Saint-Domingue. With the word "colony" used as it is here, this declaration does not refer explicitly to the liberation of slaves. And yet at the same time and in the same work, in a famous passage rewritten from an earlier text by Pechméja, Diderot also predicts the victorious insurrection of the slaves. It would naturally be easy to supply rational explanations for these blatant contradictions, which are not the exclusive province of Diderot alone. It may be rather disingenuous to use the colonists' resistance to the centralized power of Paris in order to more effectively criticize absolutism and to undermine it, while declaring one's support elsewhere for the freedom of the slaves themselves. It has even been asked whether such tirades, which in the 1774 edition of Raynal were addressed to a future black Spartacus, were not simply rhetorical exercises, rather than the result of deliberate reflection; in fact, the same work also offered a plan for gradual abolition spread out over several generations. At least as far as Diderot is concerned, his position in favor of abolition – even at the cost of a bloody insurrection – can be confirmed in his

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, a study that was published at the same time as the third edition of Raynal's work.

Leaving aside the murky perspectives on both white independence and victorious black insurrection, it remains that those who desire the end of slavery and the slave trade must conceive abolition in terms of a strange future coexistence between masters and slaves. More accurately, what concerned the abolitionist movement was continuity in the supply of colonial products, above all sugar, which figured at the top of the list. Helvetius' oft-quoted remark of 1758 – "Not a cask of sugar arrives in Europe untainted by human blood" (*De l'esprit*, first discourse, chapter 3) – offered no concrete solution to the problem, but in its own way distilled the moral protests against a production process that indeed depended on a disciplinary labor regime that ranked among the most stringent and taxing. But black slavery was first used by Spaniards in the gold mines; even in the eighteenth century, when European intellectuals were beginning to perceive it as scandalous, it was no less crucial to the production of coffee, indigo, and cotton, not to mention cacao, than it was to sugar production. We hardly need dwell on the role cotton played in the Industrial Revolution in Europe, especially at the end of the century when technical progress had increased the productivity of slaves used in the cultivation of cotton in the southern United States.

Here again, the real horrors of the slave economy could be held up against an apparently radical decision to renounce the consumption of such goods, to boycott them in a sense. This response was to have its day; perhaps opponents of slavery found this line of action all the more attractive because the moral conscience had been much slower to react to the slave trade than it had to the massacre of the Caribbean Indians, and moral objections to the slave trade emerged only at a time when the entire complex system of triangular trade was well established and flourishing. To put an end to the horrors of this system, was it not enough for Europe to choose to do without sugar – as it had always done previously? And indeed, this is the solution to which Helvetius' anger led him: "What man ... would not give up a pleasure purchased by the tears and deaths of so many wretched souls?" The suggestion, repeated by Voltaire later on, and renewed once again during the

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Revolution at a pathetic meeting of the Club of Jacobins, never even began to be translated into action. If the twentieth century has witnessed successful boycotts, generally in the context of struggles for national liberation, these took place in the Third World, not in the developed countries of Europe or in its extensions. Beyond the sentimentality of this riposte, which in the end never went outside the realm of language, what was called for was a firm "no" to development itself – not only to the luxury that was so much discussed and that depended so heavily on the highly touted colonial products, but also to the material progress that characterized Enlightenment Europe. But even Jean-Jacques Rousseau did no go that far, although he was most likely aware of an aporia in his own political and cultural logic. Moreover, if everything in his thinking points to the incompatibility of the State of the Social Contract with the existence of slavery, and therefore with the slave trade, in whatever region of the State the practice may appear, this logical consequence is only implicit in Rousseau.

Is it necessary to distinguish here between an idealistic protest against the slave trade or slavery that is based solely on moral necessity, and a utilitarian form of opposition that condemns the system because it is economically inefficient, backward, or inimical to the new demands of industrial capitalism? But the two types of protest are closely related. In the section devoted to slavery in *The Spirit of the Laws* after the famous tirade of chapter 5 Montesquieu slips in a little statement proposing a solution to the perennial issue facing colonists: how can colonial commodities be produced without slavery? "Possibly", writes Montesquieu, "there is not that climate upon earth where the most laborious services might not with proper encouragement be performed by freeman."[2] But first the slaves brought from Africa would have to be made into free men. Moreover, supposing they were free, would they work the land as hired hands, or rather as small farmers? This question, which Montesquieu does not broach, was to take on all the more importance as the abolitionist movement spread, that is, in the latter part of the century, around 1780. And the very thinkers who did entertain the question could not hide their preference for the first solution, which in fact has the advantage of preserving the production system of large-scale plantations and the future interests of landowners …

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Montesquieu had contrasted the reality of the slave trade and slavery with Christian morality proclaimed by the European powers. In the Anglo-Saxon countries, it was precisely in the name of Christianity that an entire movement, essentially propelled by the Quakers, was to arise to combat the treatment of Africans and call for the abolition of slavery. Already, the protest against the slave trade that appears in Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, signed by the Protestant de Jaucourt, is the translation of a text from the *Treatise on the Laws of Scotland* by the Scotsman Wallace. Thus, toward the middle of the century, there emerged a whole abolitionist movement founded on this Christian morality, an abolitionism that could be termed secular and that had already emphasized the necessity of prohibiting slavery; in contrast, the Roman Church, while it had intervened to some degree on behalf of the Indians, condoned the enslavement of blacks by evincing a remarkable silence on the subject. But whatever the case with the existence of two strands of abolitionism differing radically in their theoretical foundations – natural law on one side, the Gospel and the Bible on the other (a difference that did not escape the anonymous French translator of Ottabah Cuguano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* in 1788), abolitionists of both tendencies were to come face to face with the problem of finding economic alternatives to slavery. For as long as there is no broad-based insurrection that succeeds in overturning the basic realities, we cannot but keep returning to this crucial and difficult question.

It would be pointless here to dwell on each of the various texts that materialize the moral protest against the slave trade, slavery, and even colonization itself, and which are most often variations on the same themes derived from Montesquieu or Helvetius, or from Bénézet in the case of the Christian movement. It is sufficient to recall that *The Spirit of the Laws*, published in 1748, was followed by the above-cited passage from Helvetius, a few lines by Voltaire in *Candide* and in the *Essai sur les Moeurs*, the article on "The Slave Trade" in the Encyclopedia, and the *Voyage à l'Ile de France* by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. This last author, unlike most of the abolitionist thinkers, was actually an eyewitness; moreover, he was soon to propose a radical solution – as impracticable as a sugar boycott – which was to ship to the colonies all the indigents of

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

France, whose labor (forced?) would take the place of slave labor. Belonging to a different category is Sébastien Mercier, whose *L'an 2440* inaugurated the prophecy of a black Spartacus, followed by the *Histoire des Deux Indes* in the editions of 1774 (by Pechméjà) and 1780 (by Diderot), which predicted the mass black insurrection that threatened to erupt if nothing were changed. Condorcet's *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des Noirs,* which figures little in Raynal's "declamations," proposed a plan for abolishing slavery gradually over a period of seventy years in such a way as to safeguard the economic equilibrium of the slave-owning colonies. The Physiocrats endeavored to propagate the idea that servile labor is far less productive than free labor, and thus to fulfill Montesquieu's incidental claim by advocating a mode of abolition that would transform the slaves into paid workers. But both the island colonists, despite their debts, and the merchants and shipowners of the slave-trading ports, all continued to conduct a healthy business which left its trace in the villas they had built, such as the sumptuous manor erected in England by Beckford, the son of a slave-trader who was none other than the Lord Mayor of London.

What did eventually bring about the passage from theoretical protest to political action to achieve abolition was the series of more concrete campaigns pursued in England. But the combined efforts of Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, and later Wilberforce caused an about-turn in the way in which the issue was conceived. Previously the slave trade and slavery had always been considered indissolubly joined, with the implication that abolitionist efforts would first have to target slavery itself, since from its abolition the elimination of the slave trade would necessarily follow; earlier thinkers had always focused on the crime of slavery. The English, however, maintained that it was first necessary to tackle the slave trade, and that in order to succeed, the two terms had to be separated; the attack on slavery itself would have to wait. If the slave trade were made sufficiently unpopular, if enough people could be interested in campaigning for its abolition, the slave-owners would be forced to treat their human "property" more humanely, if only out of self-interest. Though this approach would gradually lead to the abolition of slavery, it was considered not merely pointless but actually harmful to directly address the issue

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of slavery itself at this time. It was on this passably pragmatic basis that the English Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was founded in 1787; hard on the heels of the Committee's petitions and meetings came the *Société des Amis des Noirs* in France, founded in 1788. Because of the political regime, the latter group was unable to accomplish anything until the *Etats Généraux* had paved the way for an initial period of freedom of the press in 1789. Whatever they might think, the *Société*'s founders – Brissot, Clavière, Condorcet – were forced to adopt the combat plan of their English friends. A third society, in Philadelphia in the United States, fought as much for the abolition of the slave trade as for that of slavery, which was little by little being eliminated in the northern United States. These groups formed a sort of embryonic *Internationale*, mobilized around a specific objective.

Circumstances appeared favorable. And yet, compared to the program of the 1780s, results were obtained slowly and with difficulty. The abolition of the slave trade – for this was the exclusive goal in view – took effect in 1802 in Denmark, in 1808 in England and the United States; France officially abolished the practice in 1815 but tolerated it for a long time, so that it was not until 1832 that the slave trade was ended in France, and illicit slave trading continued until the 1870s. Only the final abolition of slavery on the American continent, in Brazil in 1888, spelled the definitive end of the slave trade.

Yet, even before the slave trade had been outlawed, even before the end of slavery could be glimpsed, a promising solution had been proposed to the problem of how to continue the production of colonial commodities. Instead of engaging in immoral trade on the coast of Africa, instead of exploiting blacks reduced to slavery in America, making a mockery of all the principles of natural law that supposedly prevailed in Europe, it was in Africa itself that colonial produce should be cultivated, using the manpower of free laborers: Dupont de Nemours came to this conclusion around 1770. Let us juxtapose this date with those of the abolition of slavery: 1794 in France, with its re-establishment in 1802 and a second abolition in 1848; 1833-34 in England; 1864 in the United States; 1888 in Brazil ... The Physiocrats, on this point in any case, were ahead of their time. Not only did the idea, in various forms, attract

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

attention, but it elicited serious reflection, and various plans for implementing it were drawn up. One such plan was applied when English abolitionists founded in Sierra Leone a free establishment with ex-slaves who, freed for having fought with the English in the war for American independence, were unhappy in Acadia where they had been sent; along with these ex-slaves were a number of "poor blacks" from London. At its founding, it was not an English colony, but rather a sort of small black state with a democratic constitution, which was to be devoted to the cultivation of cotton or other products.

But Sierra Leone was to become a colony of the crown in 1808, and, by a complex concatenation of circumstances, a bridgehead for the English colonization of West Africa.

However, the aspect of this venture that was seized upon by the abolitionists of the revolutionary period was rather the long sought-after solution that would make it possible to leave the shameful legacy of slavery behind. For Abbé Grégoire, as for Mirabeau, such European establishments in Africa represented the future: they would help to "civilize" the Africans, making them participants in the full range of European progress, material and otherwise; they would usher in new relations of equality, even emulated, between Europe and Africa. Apparently, for these thinkers it was not an issue that this type of cultural exchange required an armed presence, a degree of military intervention; it does not seem to have occurred to Abbé Grégoire in the slightest that this type of exchange – with free labor in Africa supplying colonial produce that was no longer to be extracted from servile labor, and the Africans' newly created needs to be met by exports of European manufactured products – was in itself a form of inequality from the outset.

Naturally, we read or reread history after the fact, and we know that Abbé Grégoire and his friends could not predict that Europeans would indeed turn to Africa, but would use armed force to impose labor according to other models – all of which amounted to forced labor in the end. Nevertheless, by these strange detours, the anti-slavery movement of the eighteenth century contained the germ of Europe's colonization of Africa in the nineteenth century – unbeknownst to the abolitionists who, at a time when the

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

only contacts between Europe and Africa had to do with the slave trade, were eager to see human knowledge increased and points of contact among the members of the human race multiplied. For others, such as the founders of the African Society of London, but also for certain French revolutionaries (Rabaut Saint-Etienne, for example), nationalist pride played a role.

If the absolutely necessary condemnation of the slave trade in tandem with slavery did not, in the history of the great powers, lead in actual practice to the desired outcome of human liberation, if colonialism and forced labor under a variety of names ended up tainting the outcome of abolition when it finally came about, beyond the ambiguity of a morally based protest that was not indifferent to economic contingencies, it is nonetheless indispensable to examine the content and motivations of those who protested. Indeed, what was at stake in the debate between the advocates and the opponents of slavery had to do with the foundations of every democracy in general, and in Europe alone of every government according to natural law. It may seem superfluous to return to a very old aspect of these debates, the argument put forward by Savary's *Dictionnaire du Commerce* at the end of the seventeenth century, which, addressed to unnamed protesters who have not been identified, maintains that the slave trade enabled Africans to know the true God and was therefore good for the salvation of their souls. This conception of Christian religion was rejected by Bénézet as well as Abbé Grégoire or Montesquieu, as skeptical as he may be. Ripostes to Savary's argument took quite divergent tacks: in a well-known and much-discussed text in the *Histoire des Deux Indes*, Diderot vehemently denounced a church that had always protected and essentially condoned the monstrous trade in human commodities and the re-emergence of slavery; others emphasized the true meaning of the Gospels and the word of love. Can it really be said that this debate is completely over in our day?

What is clearly perceived in both cases – whether the protesters are believers or not – is that the notion of the unity of the human race is at stake. To accept slavery, to condone the traffic of human beings, is to accept that certain human beings are less human than others; however poignantly one laments the unfair "nature of

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

things," or the infelicities of climate or soil quality, in order to explain the use of black slaves in the West Indies, one cannot avoid evaluating in some measure those men and women whose right to freedom is denied. Thus the eighteenth century already boasted a philosopher who deemed blacks inferior because, it seemed to him, they could not point to any great men of their race: this philosopher was David Hume. Two centuries later, Jules Romains was to echo him. But for most of the Enlightenment thinkers, intent on developing a theory of natural law as the basis for a universal conception of human nature – whether in the domain of religious freedom, the freedom of expression, political freedom, or the necessity of free participation by citizens in the determination of state politics – discrimination against blacks constituted a threat to all human societies, an attack on the unity of the human race that was to give rise to racist theories later on; this form of discrimination not only served to rationalize other forms but generated new ones. The abolition of slavery is not merely a matter of sensitivity; it is not simply a "humanitarian" impulse, as contemporary jargon would call it, but rather one of the necessary conditions of democracy, not just in the islands but in general, throughout the world. From the perspective of the Christian anti-slavery movement, it was not possible to accept that the universal fraternity of human creatures, all equal in the eyes of God, could be subjected to such an infraction, which in their eyes was tantamount to a revolt against divine will. Thus the two currents that advanced the struggle against the slave trade and slavery were both inspired by a fundamental concern for universalism and consequently for the equality of all men, whatever their origins or their colors.

Beyond the historical vicissitudes, the difficulties and resistances encountered in the course of these struggles, which led to the abolition of slavery (on 29 August 1793, with ratification by the Convention on 4 February 1794), it is perhaps useful to conclude by turning our attention to a passage by C. L. R. James, the author of *Black Jacobins,* in a letter to the journal *Temps modernes* in June 1950: "The revolution of Saint-Domingue was sparked by the French Revolution and could not have been accomplished without the latter, but conversely the struggle of the blacks contributed

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press

significantly to the defeat of the counter-revolution in France. Thus the slave revolutions had not only an immediate justification, but also a historical justification."[3] What we have here is an exceptional case of the convergence of ideas and struggles.

Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage.

Notes

1. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Christopher Fox (Boston/New York, 1995), p. 264 (Part IV, "A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms", Ch. XII).
2. Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent, Book XV, chapter VIII (New York, 1949), p. 241.
3. C. L. R. James, letter to the editor, 27 February 1950, *Les Temps modernes*, vol. 5, no. 56 (June 1950): 2290-2292.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219704517908 Published online by Cambridge University Press