

2011

## "Truth Systematised" : the changing debate over slavery and abolition, 1761-1916

Robert P. Forbes

*University of Connecticut - Torrington*, robert.forbes@uconn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://opencommons.uconn.edu/torr\\_articles](https://opencommons.uconn.edu/torr_articles)



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Forbes, Robert P, ""Truth Systematised" : the changing debate over slavery and abolition, 1761-1916" (2011). *Torrington Articles*. 1.  
[https://opencommons.uconn.edu/torr\\_articles/1](https://opencommons.uconn.edu/torr_articles/1)

“TRUTH SYSTEMATISED”: THE CHANGING DEBATE  
OVER SLAVERY AND ABOLITION,  
1761-1916

Robert P. Forbes  
Yale University

*“The study of historiography serves to remind us to accept our predecessors only after due criticism. We must ask, ‘Why was that problem investigated? Why was that method chosen?’ before we decide if the results are correct or incorrect, stimulating or barren. Similarly, the study of historiography reminds us (as historians) that we are part of the subject we profess, just as our predecessors have always been.”*

--F.G. Levy, “Foreward” to *The Theory and Practice of History* by Leopold von Ranke

It is obvious to every unprejudiced observer—and even to many prejudiced ones<sup>1</sup>—that the legacy of racial slavery persists on many levels. A growing movement in the United States and elsewhere is calling for reparations to compensate the descendants of slaves for the economic and other damages inflicted upon them by slavery. A wide range of studies has linked the continuing disparity in levels of health, economic well-being, and educational attainments between Americans of African ancestry and other Americans to factors originating in slavery, though whether the factor of enslavement is causative of the problem or secondary—i.e. the result of persisting stigmatization—is unclear.

As difficult as it may be to measure the empirical impact of slavery on contemporary descendants of slaves, the *ideological* legacy of the slavery controversy is

---

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., a recent column of Bill O’Reilly, host of the Fox News show “The O’Reilly Factor”: “[T]here is no question that the black family structure was devastated by slavery and that catastrophe continues to this day in some situations.” O’Reilly, “‘Honest life’ rewards black Americans, too,” *New Haven Register*, June 29, 2002. Another recent column of O’Reilly’s wrote off the entire continent of Africa as a worthwhile recipient of U.S. foreign aid.

far harder to assess. There is reason to believe, however, that its effects have been pervasive—perhaps more far-reaching than the effects of slavery itself.

The era of the struggle over slavery coincided with the emergence of Enlightenment thought, the advent of nationalism, the overthrow of aristocracy and the rise of democratization—those aspects of historical development regarded, collectively, as “modernity.” Yet as Scott Malcomson has noted, the concepts of an inherited racial basis of identity and of fixed racial bases of slavery and “savagery” are also products of modernity. “Whether modernity can exist as such without these blood notions remains an open question,” Malcomson observes. “But we can be certain that, for most of its life, it has not.”<sup>2</sup>

For a variety of reasons, the English society that colonized the eastern seaboard of North America regarded slavery in the abstract as a serious evil, antithetical to English (and later British) values. Few involved in the colonial enterprise permitted abstract scruples about slavery to interfere with the practical matter of profits. The growth of slavery in the English colonies provoked some concern, even consternation, and substantial disappointment—as when Oglethorpe’s colony of Georgia relented to the demands of its colonists and dispensed with its free-labor policy—but little in the way of outrage or soul-searching.

Before the rise of the antislavery movement, then, African slavery in the Americas neither needed nor received a formal defense. The patriots of the American Revolution, with their sweeping appropriation of the metaphor of slavery, unintentionally put the real thing on center stage. “Would anyone believe that I am master of Slave[s] of

---

<sup>2</sup> Scott Malcomson, *One Drop of Blood: The American Misadventure of Race* (New York: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 2000), 174.

my own purchase,” Patrick Henry wrote after the war. “I am drawn along by the general inconveniency of living without them, I will not, I cannot justify it.”<sup>3</sup> West India planters, unconstrained by the equalitarian assumptions of the Revolution, had no such compunctions, and quickly turned their hands to fashioning justifications for slavery. Although government ministers and trade officials found the West India lobby’s bribes and payoffs more influential, sensitive contemporaries regarded the attempt to defend slavery within a British context to be fundamentally alarming.

“It is impossible for the considerate and unprejudiced mind to think of slavery without horror,” asserted the Scottish philosopher James Beattie in 1793, adding: “If this be equitable, or excusable, or pardonable, it is vain to talk any longer of the eternal distinctions of right and wrong, truth and falsehood, good and evil.” The English abolitionist Granville Sharp amplified upon this view in 1797. “The terms *Slave Trade* and *Slavery*...comprehend systems of *oppression* and *injustice*, which are utterly *inconsistent with the fundamental principles of English Law*, and for Parliament to tolerate them was to “act as if there was no distinction to be observed between *good* and *evil*, *right* or *wrong*”—a condition that, he asserted on Biblical authority, threatened “the *natural foundations of the earth*.”<sup>4</sup>

In his *Address to the Colored People of the World*, the African American pamphleteer David Walker sounded a furious alarm to his people of the threat to their existence posed not merely by slavery, but by the marriage of Enlightenment principles of the rights of man to the nascent scientific racism of the era, which carried with it the

---

<sup>3</sup>Roger Bruns, ed., *Am I Not a Man and a Brother* (New York: Chelsea House, 1977), 221.

<sup>4</sup> Granville Sharp, *Serious Reflections on the Slave Trade and Slavery; wrote in March, 1797* (London 1805), 16-17.

imprimatur of Thomas Jefferson. It was precisely because of the greatness of Jefferson's "writings for the world, and public labours for the United States of America," the value of which Walker fully acknowledged, that he regarded Jefferson's tentative strictures on black inferiority as so dangerous. "Do you believe that the assertions of such a man, will pass away into oblivion unobserved by this people and the world?" he asked. "If you do you are much mistaken."<sup>5</sup> Like Sharp, Walker believed that the perversion of justice involved in the sanctioning of slavery by enlightened Anglo-Saxon Christians—of all the world's people the best-equipped to understand the true meaning of liberty—called into question the very nature of physical reality: if God failed to raise up a deliverer to punish the "Christians of America" for their gross impiety, "it is because the world in which we live does not exist, and we are deceived with regard to its existence." The possibility that injustice might be allowed to go unrequited does not provoke in Walker the typically modern doubt of the existence of God; rather, the entire ontological structure of the world is called into question.<sup>6</sup>

If the very project of modernity is itself implicated in the establishment of race as a fundamental category of experience, it is not surprising that the study of slavery and abolition should prove impervious to "objective" interpretation, since the analytical and descriptive tools of the social sciences were developed in tandem with the codification of racial principles—indeed, they were one of the chief vehicles for the transmission of such principles. At the same time, the subject has inevitably served as a signifier for larger questions about human nature and purpose. As Stanley Elkins observed in 1959, "How a

---

<sup>5</sup> David Walker, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; together with a Preamble to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America* (Boston, 1830), 18.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

person thinks about Negro slavery historically makes a great deal of difference here and now; it tends to locate him morally in relation to a whole range of very immediate political, social, and philosophical issues which in some way refer back to slavery.”<sup>7</sup>

Few fields of history have experienced greater advances in understanding, sophistication, methodology or sheer knowledge over the course of the last half century than slavery and abolition. There is thus a certain irony, and for many scholars much frustration, in the fact that the general public not only remains unreceptive to this new scholarship and holds adamantly to many long-disproved myths about slavery, it adopts new ones without any foundation in fact. Thus, for example, the still widely-held view that slavery was not a cause of the Civil War has been supplemented by the increasingly-accepted fiction that thousands of slaves bore arms for the Confederacy. Other debates over slavery, equally untethered to empirical evidence (though routinely garbed in the language and apparatus of academic scholarship) have raged over such issues as the number of Africans transported in the Middle Passage and the role of Jews in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, 3d ed. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 1.

<sup>8</sup> On Black Confederates, see, e.g., Richard Rollins, ed., *Black Southerners in Gray: Essays on Afro Americans in Confederate Armies* (Murfreesboro, TN: Southern Heritage Press, 1994) and Charles Kelly Barrow, et.al., *Forgotten Confederates: An Anthology About Black Southerners* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Heritage Press, 1995). For the controversy over slave trade demographics, see, e.g., J. E. Inikori, “Measuring the Atlantic Slave Trade: an assessment of Curtin and Anstey,” *Journal of African History* 17, (1976):197-223; Ralph A. Austen, “The Slave Trade as History and Memory: Confrontations of Slaving Voyage Documents and Communal Traditions,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, January 2001 <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/58.1/austen.html>> (26 Oct. 2002). The key polemical text arguing the centrality of Jews in the slave trade is *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews*, (Chicago: Nation of Islam Historical Research Dept., 1991).

“There is a coerciveness to the debate over slavery,” complains Elkins: “it continues to be the same debate.”<sup>9</sup> The problem is, it is *not* the same. While the combatants in the “race question” have employed the same vocabulary for generations, the meanings and contexts of the language have shifted. Unless we are attentive to these shifts, we will indeed be forced to cover the same ground over and over again, with little to show for it.

There is no easy way out of this dilemma. Since, as F. J. Levy reminds us, as historians “we are part of the subject we profess,” we must approach the past with the awareness that we are the inheritors of biases of which we have no conscious knowledge; that our tools of analysis and investigation have a suspect heritage; that some of our most prized ideas may well be built on obsolete foundations of self-deception.

It will not do, moreover, to argue that the distorted viewpoint of modernity can be rectified by the salutary tonic of postmodernity. This facile approach merely adds another layer of obscurity; one that itself stands on the same foundation of accreted ideas, to the flawed intellectual structure it seeks to dismantle. Instead, we must attempt to understand earlier interpretations on their own terms, and to be attentive to the meaning of changes in perspective in the context of their own times.

It is with these ideas in view that I have sought to re-examine the extraordinary transformation which took place in the debate over slavery, abolition and race in British and American historical writing over the course of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. By no means is this essay intended to be a comprehensive overview of the

---

<sup>9</sup> Elkins, *Slavery*, 1.

available material. Rather, it attempts to recover a set of basic assumptions about human nature and destiny at the beginning of this period, and to chart the outline of a change in these assumptions by the end of it. This exercise is necessarily tentative, speculative and incomplete. I hope, however, that it will prove suggestive and stimulating to more thorough researches.

The debate over slavery and its abolition has undergone a profound and significant series of revisions since the first major work in the field, Thomas Clarkson's *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, appeared in 1808. Very broadly, the first three of these stages can be delineated as follows:<sup>10</sup>

1. The first generation to write about abolition—Clarkson, Granville Sharp, Zachary Macaulay, James Stephen—were themselves principals in the movement. Almost without exception, they were devout evangelical Christians. They viewed abolition primarily if not exclusively as a religious question, fought and won on religious grounds, and as a manifestation of God's Providence, in the strictest sense of the term. Thus I will refer to this group of writers as "Providentials," and the phase of historiography as "Providential."

2. The next stage witnessed a gradual shift from regarding abolition as the active intervention of divine Providence—an evangelical or "enthusiastic" interpretation that was by no means universally shared by contemporaries—to seeing it as a step in the

---

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of works on British abolition written after 1944, see Robert Anstey, "The historical debate on the abolition of the British slave trade," in R. Anstey and P.E.H. Hair, eds., *Liverpool, the African Slave Trade, and Abolition* (Liverpool: Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, 1976), 157ff. Also see David Brion Davis, "Slavery and the Post-World War II Historians," *Daedalus*, 103:2 (Spring 1974): 1-16. For a personal view of the controversy since U.B. Phillips, see Robert Fogel, *The Slavery Debates, 1952-1990: A Retrospective* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).



inexorable and impersonal march of Progress, as defined and driven by the Anglo-Saxon peoples.<sup>11</sup> By the latter part of the nineteenth century all subtlety about this view had evaporated: the dominant writers on abolition had adopted a thoroughgoing assertion of white and English superiority, based in large part on the fact of abolition itself, and employed it as an explicit rationale for colonialism and imperialism. The champions of this interpretation of slavery and emancipation can perhaps best be characterized as the “Racialist Progress” school of historiography.

3. The third shift, hinted at in W.E.B. DuBois’s pathbreaking study, *Black Reconstruction in America* and carried to fruition by the Trinidadian historian and statesman Eric Williams with his seminal *Capitalism and Slavery*, represented a strong reaction against the hypocrisy and self-serving attitude of the second-stage Anglo-Saxonists. First published in 1944, *Capitalism and Slavery* did not gain recognition until the early 1960s, when decolonization, the independence struggles of the third world, and the rise of the nonaligned movement lent an extraordinary relevance to its themes of imperialist colonial policy and economic change. To a great degree, however, exponents of this viewpoint failed to distinguish between the attitudes of the “Providentials” of the first generation and the “Racialist Progressives” of the later period—and indeed, they seem unconsciously to have absorbed much of the frame of reference of the latter, in particular, their historical determinism. While most of this third group of interpreters are materialists, Marxist or otherwise, certainly not all are, and for

---

<sup>11</sup> The distinction is not as cut-and-dried we might like, because many early writers continued to use the word “providence” as a loose substitute for “progress.” Cf. J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955) 219, 232-33.

the limited purposes of this paper they will be more broadly described as “modernist revisionists.”

Two important considerations should be kept in mind concerning the three stages of the abolition debate outlined above. First, these are intellectual categories, not chronological ones. Conflicting attitudes are regularly found in the same period—indeed, they often occur in the same individual. This is entirely to be expected. Just as Marc Bloch found the outlines of medieval fields still plainly distinguishable in the modern contours of French farms, so the imprints of earlier intellectual concepts may be traced in the thoughts of later writers.

Second, the categories outlined above are not to be viewed as anything more than general constructs, designed only to illuminate in very broad strokes certain major intellectual trends. They are in no way intended to be definitive, merely suggestive. Indeed, once the reader has grasped the argument they are intended to illustrate, they may properly be discarded as conscious, if perhaps useful, oversimplifications.

This essay will be primarily concerned with the transition from the Providential viewpoint on abolition and emancipation to the Racialist Progressive. The basic approach used here, of illustrating the chief points of conflict between the earlier and later phase and addressing the reasons for that conflict, can just as appropriately be applied to the later stages.

If it is now generally accepted that the origins of abolitionism were fundamentally religious, it is important to recognize that in the eighteenth century, religion was not viewed as conflicting with “science” in any important sense. The ideas of Newton and Locke (themselves believing Christians and serious biblical scholars) were the common

intellectual property of all Britons and Americans, explicitly including those who were strongly religiously inclined. The later-perceived conflict between “enlightened” ideas and religion, which was born on the continent, did not become especially relevant to British and American thought until later.

Indeed, far from creating a gulf between faith and reason, it appears that these Newtonian and Lockean concepts were closely tied to the religious explosion of the First Great Awakening. John Wesley, for example, felt that “a deep fear of God, and reverence for his word” was “discernable throughout the whole” of Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding*.<sup>12</sup> Perry Miller traced the even more remarkable effect of Locke’s psychology and Newton’s physics in shaping the religious views of Jonathan Edwards. Miller called Edwards’ discovery of Locke, at the age of fourteen, “the central and decisive event in his intellectual life,” and showed how Locke’s doctrine that the mind depends upon direct experience for its ideas was at the heart of Edwards’ insistence upon the direct experience of Christ’s light.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Miller argued, Edwards relied upon Newton’s elucidation of the principle of cause and effect for his own analysis of the relation between faith and salvation. The explicitly religious element in American revolutionary ideology is now generally recognized.<sup>14</sup> Certainly in the mind of an

---

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 87.

<sup>13</sup> Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1949), 52, 72, 88-99.

<sup>14</sup> The recent literature on this subject is voluminous. Three particularly useful older treatments are Robert A. Gross, *The Minuteman and Their World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); and Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War* (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981).

American patriot there was unlikely to be the slightest conflict between religious and political thought.

We need to be aware of this context when we consider that “the attack on slavery was formulated in religious terms and, from first to last, practicing Christians provided leadership for the cause.”<sup>15</sup> This fact provided an enormous stumbling block to later historians, particularly those of the “revisionist” tendency briefly sketched above. As Bernard Semmel noted, “most liberal, secular-minded historians have judged Methodism to be a reactionary movement, a protest against the Enlightenment and reason”;<sup>16</sup> they have tended to consider Evangelism as worse than Methodism. Inevitably, the outcome of such an assessment was to regard the abolitionists, at best as deluded do-gooders; as self-satisfied hypocrites at worst.

Much of the reason for this attitude towards the abolitionists can be found in twentieth-century revisionists’ marked ignorance of the theological consistency of the Evangelical position—an ignorance stemming from a general antipathy toward religious concerns.<sup>17</sup> Even historians sympathetic to the abolitionists often lack a clear understanding of the relevant issues.

William Baker has suggested <sup>18</sup> that the abolitionists attacked the notion of black inferiority as part of their strategy to oppose slavery. In fact, it seems to be the other way

---

<sup>15</sup> Mary Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries* (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> An exception would be Ford K. Brown, who undertook in his influential *Fathers of the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961) to explicate Evangelical theology with some accuracy and to attack it on its own terms.

<sup>18</sup> In “William Wilberforce on the Idea of Negro Inferiority,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 31(1970):433-440.

around: the abolitionists' religiously-based sense of the blacks' equality was what led them to oppose slavery to begin with. If it is often difficult to assess exactly what the abolitionists' judgment of blacks' intellectual or other capacities were,<sup>19</sup> it is precisely because they considered such issues to be trivial in the light of the more fundamental question of the slaves' immortal souls.

No less so their own. John Wesley framed the issue in the strongest possible terms. He considered "men buyers" to be equally as guilty as "men stealers" and pleaded with slaveholders, "The blood of thy brothers crieth out against thee from the earth.... Instantly, at any price, were it half thy goods, deliver thyself from blood guiltiness."<sup>20</sup>

Questions of salvation and damnation had powerful repercussions in eighteenth-century English society, however remote they may appear from contemporary concerns. In 1761, at their London Yearly Meeting, the Quakers declared that the slave trade was immoral and that any Friend who participated in it would be disowned. "Within a decade," reports Mary Turner, "it was the received wisdom of the educated, including the political nation, that slavery was morally and philosophically condemned."<sup>21</sup>

An interesting confirmation of the strength of this position comes from the remarkable diary of Lady Maria Nugent, wife of the lieutenant-governor of Jamaica at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At no time does Lady Maria, whose "usual" day consisted of "driving out, reading, writing, and teaching the blackies,"<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> I have made an effort to do so in my essay, "A Man and a Brother": Racial Attitudes of the British Abolitionists" (unpublished, 1986).

<sup>20</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts on Slavery* (1774), 55.

<sup>21</sup> Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*., 5.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Cundall, ed. *Lady Nugent's Journal* (London: Institute of Jamaica, 1934), 75.

explicitly condemn slavery, but she clearly outlines the concerns of a devout, aristocratic Englishwoman of her day. “It is indeed melancholy, to see the general disregard of both religion and morality, throughout the whole island. Everyone seems solicitous to make money, and no one appears to regard the mode of acquiring it.... I have found much difficulty to persuade those great people and superior beings, our white domestics, that the blacks are human beings, or have souls.” Perhaps most interestingly for our sense of the scope of white West Indian concerns, Lady Nugent was a thoughtful reader of Wilberforce.<sup>23</sup>

If the religious revival of the eighteenth century was indeed an organic product of the age, one must acknowledge that it was not necessarily the century’s dominant attitude. As Winthrop Jordan reminds us:

It is from the final quarter of the eighteenth century that we may date the widespread interest in elucidating & characterizing [human] differences with scalpels and calipers. At the same time, men devoted to the ancient Christian ideal of human unity began to scent danger, partly because there was good reason to fear the effects of probing into physiological differences among men and partly because they rightly felt that the cause of revealed religion was otherwise undergoing challenge. In this age it was still possible for them to defend religion with the principles of science, a procedure which was to become in the nineteenth century rather more difficult.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 131-32, 57, 69.

<sup>24</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), xiii.

Significantly, John Wesley's fiery *Thoughts on Slavery*, published in 1774, employed language and arguments reminiscent of *Two Treatises of Government* and contained not a single explicit Biblical reference. "Liberty is the right of every human creature as soon as he breathes the vital air," Wesley wrote. "And no human law can deprive him of that right which he derived from a *law of nature*."<sup>25</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Many religious figures could, and did, see a conflict between an appeal to "natural law" and the moral imperatives of revealed religion; indeed, Wesley's colleague George Whitefield, who preached passionately to blacks in the West Indies and America, rejected the argument against slavery altogether as a temporal distraction from eternal concerns. Many of the abolitionists themselves, including their leader William Wilberforce, felt that the invocation of new-fangled "rights of man" in the anti-slavery cause was both religiously and intellectually unsound, and likely to cause a dangerous blurring of the issues; likewise with the slippery call of "progress," especially as it overlapped with the sense of Christian mission. An insight into Wilberforce's attitude can be gleaned from an argument which he had with Boswell, who supported slavery and claimed that the Negroes were far happier at work on West Indian plantations than they were in Africa. "Be it so," Wilberforce shot back; "but we have no right to make people happy against their will."<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, not surprisingly, many abolitionists were full adherents of the new gospel of Natural Rights, including many who were themselves very religious—as for example Wesley, as suggested above. Others, such as Granville Sharp, the Ordnance

---

<sup>25</sup> Wesley, *Thoughts on Slavery*, 55.

<sup>26</sup> Averell Mackenzie-Grieve, *The Last Years of the English Slave Trade* (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1968), 192.

Department clerk who taught himself Hebrew and Greek in order to argue the Bible and the law in order to combat slavery in the English courts, combined a fervent Christianity, an uncompromising republicanism, and a strong belief in human progress, with no evident sense of contradiction. Thomas Clarkson (whose sophisticated racial attitudes Eric William praised as “only... equalled by the best of modern sociology”[!]<sup>27</sup>), was a friend of Lafayette and a long-time correspondent of Toussaint L’Ouverture and Robespierre—as well as the founder of the “Providential” historiographical tradition.

If the empirical, mechanistic world view of Newton and Locke was not at odds with religion, as the Modernist Revisionists would have it, the union of the two systems was not as unproblematic as contemporaries believed. The principle of cause and effect imported into mainstream Christian thought a mechanistic understanding of natural phenomena that, combined with the Enlightenment search for order, endowed the traditional religious concept of rewards and punishments with the certitude of natural law.

In America, this view received encouragement from revolutionary leaders who viewed it as conducive to civic virtue. Even skeptical and freethinking patriots such as Benjamin Franklin tended to believe that the new American republic, constructed out of the volatile material of revolution, required the powerful moral reinforcement of a strong sense of eternal rewards and punishments to bolster the fragile prop of human reason, which neither experience nor the “approved authorities” regarded as sufficient in itself. “[T]here is no truth more thoroughly established,” George Washington asserted, “than that there exists in the economy and course of nature an indissoluble union between

---

<sup>27</sup> Eric Williams, *British Historians and the West Indies* (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1972), 23.



virtue and happiness; between duty and advantage; between ... an honest and magnanimous policy and the solid rewards of public prosperity and felicity.” Washington intended his words as an inducement to virtuous conduct, rather than as a vindication of present and future American prosperity.<sup>28</sup> Ominously, however, they could be interpreted in precisely that way.

On its face, there was nothing new about this American conception of moral economy. After all, Alexander Pope had claimed a kind of divine right-on-autopilot for the status quo in his celebrated *Essay on Man*: “in erring Reason’s spite, One truth is clear, ‘Whatever IS, is RIGHT.’”<sup>29</sup> This was a doctrine, however, better adapted to a static social order than to the kaleidoscopically-changing, economically-unfettered American experience.

But if many abolitionists held Enlightenment opinions, by no means all followers of the Enlightenment were abolitionists. The link between the thought of the *philosophes* and the eighteenth-century struggles for freedom is more ambiguous than is generally recognized. The Enlightenment, in the view of its most fervent champion, Voltaire, “was never intended for cobblers or servants.”<sup>30</sup> Voltaire “regularly made chilling value judgements, above all a Manichean distinction between whites and blacks,” notes Leon Poliakov. “He was a. polygynist *avant la lettre*, a fervent one and for reasons that were

---

<sup>28</sup> James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), 1:52.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Essay on Man*, I:10.

<sup>30</sup> “[O]n n’a jamais prétendu éclairer les cordonniers et les servants.” Cited in J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. London, 1920]), 182-83.

totally unscientific...driven on by an anticlerical passion.”<sup>31</sup> For Voltaire, as for many of the *philosophes*, the Church was the foremost enemy of human progress; attacking one of its key doctrines, the common descent of all people from Adam and Eve, was principally a tactic to undermine its authority. The injury done to Africans and other non-Europeans was basically collateral damage.

The early French economists, or “physiocrats,” placed an equally low priority on the concerns of others than the European elites, but couched their prejudices in the quasi-objective terminology of the nascent social sciences, which they helped to coin. Starting from the assumption that the goal of society is to provide the greatest possible happiness for its members, the Physiocrat Mercier de la Rivière went on to define “happiness” in strict materialist terms: “The greatest happiness possible... consists in the greatest possible abundance of objects suitable to our enjoyment and in the greatest liberty to profit by them.”<sup>32</sup> “The practical inference” of the economists’ doctrines, writes J.B. Bury, “was that the chief function of government was to protect property and that complete freedom should be left to private enterprise to exploit the resources of the earth .... They held that inequality of condition was one of [society’s] immutable features, immutable because it is a consequence of the inequality of physical powers.”<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Leon Poliakov, “Racism from the Enlightenment to the Age of Imperialism,” in D. van Arkel and R. Ross, ed., *Racism and Colonialism: Essays on Ideology and Social Structure* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982), 55. The anticlerical motivation in later theories of polygenesis remains a dominant theme through first half of the nineteenth century, I believe.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Bury, *Progress*, 173.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 174-75. Bury also makes the point that “By liberty the Economists meant economic liberty. Neither they nor the philosophers nor Rousseau, the father of modern democracy, had any just conception of what political liberty means” (176).

Bernard Semmel has called attention to the ironic contrast between this strain of anti-humanism in much Enlightenment thought and the essentially more democratic views of the Methodists:

In the contemporary philosophical debate between liberty and necessity, it is curious to observe that David Hume, Lord Kames, David Hartley, and Joseph Priestly, all undeniably men of the Enlightenment, were to join Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and A. M. Toplady in a pessimistic fatalism, while John Wesley became a champion, under God, of that optimistic liberty which in the long-accepted simplistic stereotype typified the Enlightenment. Outright atheists or advanced Deists thus found themselves casting their lot as allies of a necessitarian Calvinism... while the freedom of the individual to work out his own salvation and destiny... was championed by a hellfire pietist, who, though he might have found ‘natural free will’ unacceptable, yet insisted that ‘every man has a measure of free-will restored to him by grace.’<sup>34</sup>

Semmel’s point is critical, and it is precisely this point with which it has been so difficult for later historians to come to terms. The “progressive” view, which began to crystallize in the mid-nineteenth century, saw in history the inevitable triumph of liberty, science and reason over barbarism, superstition, and obscurantism, with the Enlightenment representing the crucial turning-point. Of course, once the paradigm of Progress working through History began to replace the narrative of Providence working through individuals touched by grace, the abolitionists’ contribution was largely eclipsed, and the extinction

---

<sup>34</sup> Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution*, 90.

of slavery came to be seen as an economic and historical inevitability, the men of the Enlightenment its prophets.

The sharpest difficulty with this schema was precisely the case of America, the avatar of progress, where the rhetoric of freedom clashed with the reality of slavery. Everyone is familiar with Dr. Johnson's ironic query, "How is it that we hear the loudest *yelps* for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?" The challenge to the Progressives was to formulate an answer to this question, and to live by it. Thomas Jefferson bequeathed to history the classic testament in defense of liberty; by his elaborate rationalization of his own slaveholding, he also stands as the prototype of the Racialist Progressive in the abolitionist debate. Moreover, just as David Walker had feared, Jefferson's imprimatur on racialist ideas helped to further their acceptance by later advocates of progress—including the future architects of British imperialism.

It is instructive, if painful, to contrast John Wesley's statements on blacks with Jefferson's. "The African," said Wesley in 1774, "is in no respect inferior to the European." Any appearance to the contrary is the "natural effect" of slavery: "You kept them stupid and wicked, by cutting them off from all opportunities of improving either in knowledge or virtue: And now you assign their want of wisdom and goodness as the reason for using them worse than brute beasts!"<sup>35</sup>

Jefferson also pursued the question of environment: "It will be right to make great allowances for the difference of condition, of education, of conversation, of the sphere in which [blacks] move," he conceded. Nevertheless, he was able to conclude that while "in memory [blacks] are equal to the whites," they are "much inferior" in reason, "as I think

---

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 94-5.

one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid”; furthermore, “in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.”<sup>36</sup> But Jefferson went further—veering into quasi-metaphysical speculations on the Negroes’ blackness, groundless assertions of their sexual preference for whites, and fabulous, obscene digressions concerning the “Oran-ootan.”<sup>37</sup> According to Winthrop D. Jordan, in his masterful study of American racial attitudes, “Until well into the nineteenth century Jefferson’s judgment on [African intellectual ability] stood as the strongest suggestion of inferiority expressed by any native American.”<sup>38</sup>

The Marquis de Lafayette commented bitterly to Thomas Clarkson in later years, “I would never have drawn my sword in the cause of America if I could have conceived that thereby I was founding a land of slavery.”<sup>39</sup> Most Americans could not face this reality, and so resorted to a simple and invidious syllogism: America is a land of freedom/America maintains slavery/Therefore slavery is somehow not incompatible with freedom. Stated thus, one can readily see how much of Americans’ self-image was involved in either denying full humanity to the slaves, or erasing them from the narrative altogether. A major cause of our confusion on matters of racial history—as well as a significant component of our “American dilemma”—can perhaps be attributed to the

---

<sup>36</sup> Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 266.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 265. Jefferson here appears to be following the lead of the Scottish *philosophe*, Lord Monboddo; see his *Of the Origin and Progress of Language* (1773–92).

<sup>38</sup> Jefferson., 455.

<sup>39</sup> Ellen Gibson Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1976), 36.

efforts of six generations of our historians and philosophers to reconcile the picture of Jefferson the champion of liberty with that of Jefferson the slaveholder.<sup>40</sup>

In the light of the foregoing, we may perhaps have more sympathy with Wilberforce's deep-seated distrust of mixing Enlightenment principles of "natural rights" with the cause of abolition. What the Evangelicals wanted to stress, as Lord Wyndham notes, "was the equality of all men in the sight of God. . . . 'Mad-headed professors of liberty and equality' were dangers to the cause because they diverted attention from the moral issue, which was unimpugnable, to a doctrine which was highly controversial and inflammatory."<sup>41</sup>

The events of the Age of Revolutions—American, French, and Haitian—determined once and for all that the struggle against slavery would have to be fought on the battleground of natural rights, rather than on purely ethical or religious grounds. One effect this development, in the short term, was to tar abolition with the brush of the French Revolution and the Terror, and to set the cause back several years. In particular, the wars with France made antislavery seem somehow unpatriotic: planters and conservatives frequently charged abolitionists with treasonous relations with French anti-slavery groups (themselves later suppressed by Napoleon on the same pretext).

In addition, the "natural rights" position was not merely "highly controversial and inflammatory," it was distinctly double-edged. Caribbean and Virginian "*philosophes*" were quick to adopt the arguments (and the language) of the Declaration of Independence

---

<sup>40</sup> On Jefferson's view of blacks, see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Era of Revolution 1770-1823* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), 165ff. as well as Jordan's chapter, "Thomas Jefferson: Self and Society," in *White over Black*, 429ff.; but also see Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978),

<sup>41</sup> H. A. Wyndham, *The Atlantic and Emancipation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 5.

in defense of their right to hold slaves, pointedly reinserting the Lockean “inalienable right” of property in place of Jefferson’s less tangible “pursuit of happiness.”<sup>42</sup> Invoking the Revolutionary theme of “tyranny” and styling their provincial assemblies as Caribbean counterparts to the Continental Congress, West Indian planters loudly proclaimed their willingness—and their right—to renounce their allegiance to the Crown.<sup>43</sup> Naturally, however, no West Indian politicians were so rash as to permit their sense of principle to induce them to relinquish their seats in Parliament.

A common modern criticism of the standard early works on the British antislavery movement is their narrow and apparently elitist focus on parliamentary history. “This was in keeping,” as James Walvin notes, “with a British historical tradition which until relatively recently regarded parliamentary history and the details of high politics as the proper and main concern of the British historian.” Studies by Walvin, Roger Anstey, Seymour Drescher and others have treated other, more grass-root levels of the movement and have shown their enormous importance. “Yet in the last resort,” concludes Walvin, “it was Parliament which abolished the slave trade and slavery.”<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps more importantly, as this recent work has demonstrated, the battle for abolition had been won everywhere else in Britain but in Westminster; this was the final battleground. As Mary Turner points out, the West Indian Party’s power within the-

---

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Davis, *Problem of Slavery in the Era of Revolution*, 148-49, 168, 195.

<sup>43</sup> Both sides in the American Civil War were to quote Jefferson in their defense; and the Southerners appear to have held the trump card: Jefferson held slaves.

<sup>44</sup> “The Propaganda of Anti-Slavery,” in James Walvin, ed., *Slavery and British Society 1776-1846* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 51.

government derived fundamentally “from their recognition that, increasingly, political influence was their only strength.”<sup>45</sup>

Because of their strong inclination to regard religious activity as intrinsically conservative, Revisionist historians misjudged the character of the abolitionist movement and downplayed its social radicalism (though not its fanaticism). The campaign against slavery launched a public involvement in politics not seen before in British history. Lecture tours and mass meetings reached millions of citizens. Church pulpits across the nation echoed with calls to political action. Religious organizations, anti-slavery associations and private individuals engaged in what Walvin calls “tract warfare” with the West Indian interests, the Anti-Slavery Society alone printing 2,802,773 tracts between 1823 and 1831.<sup>46</sup> Activists forcefully pressured political candidates into signing abolitionist pledges, and the accusation of “gradualism” (support for anything less than immediate and total emancipation) was, by 1830, a damaging political indictment. One of the most visible elements of the struggle was the great outpouring of abolitionist petitions to Parliament from every part of the British Isles. A careful historian has estimated that “more than one British male in five over the age of fifteen probably signed the anti-slavery petitions of 1814 and 1833.”<sup>47</sup> Perhaps most importantly, the abolition

---

<sup>45</sup> Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 19.

<sup>46</sup> Walvin, “Propaganda,” 60.

<sup>47</sup> Drescher, “Public Opinion and the Destruction of Slavery” in Walvin, ed., *Slavery and British Society*, 26, 29.



crusade was the first political movement in Britain in which women, the lower classes, and the young were all vitally engaged.<sup>48</sup>

The parallel antislavery movement in the United States during the period from the closing of the slave trade to the publication of Garrison's *Liberator* has been drastically understudied and overlooked (as the title of what is arguably still the major work on the subject, Alice Dana Adams' nearly century-old *The Neglected Period of Anti-Slavery in America: 1808-1831*, makes clear).<sup>49</sup> This neglect derives in part from the coercive power of the Garrisonian narrative, and also from the widespread related perception that the colonization movement, with which most early antislavery activity was linked, constituted a stalking horse for proslavery. In reality, however, the pre-Garrisonian antislavery movement in the United States paralleled, in many aspects, both the elite and popular dimensions of the British movement of the same period. The major difference, of course, stemmed from the enormous political, economic and social constraints that resulted from the presence of over a million slaves.

All of this unprecedented political activism over abolition and emancipation was bound to create a backlash. A number of factors actors guaranteed that the reaction, when it came, would be particularly ugly. First, it would be naive not to recognize that a political movement as broad as abolitionism was unlikely to be particularly deep. In Britain, abolition "had become the one harmless reform cause," C. Duncan Rice

---

<sup>48</sup> For interesting explorations of this theme, see James Walvin, "The rise of British popular sentiment for abolition, 1878-1832", in Bolt and Drescher, ed., *Anti-Slavery. Religion, and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey* (Folkestone: Wm Dawson & Sons Ltd, 1980), 149-162; and Brian Harrison, "A genealogy of reform in modern Britain," in *ibid.*, 119-148.

<sup>49</sup> Boston: Ginn & Co., 1908.

observed, “an anodyne commitment which carried no ideological risk.”<sup>50</sup> The hard core of supporters had weathered setbacks and fought disillusionment for years, but by the late 1820s many people had joined the movement simply because it was no longer socially or politically acceptable not to. Similarly, many opponents of slavery in the Northern United States espoused the cause in large measure out of a knee-jerk reflex of following English cultural trends, in this as in most other fashions. These “fair weather abolitionists” were likely to desert at the first sign of trouble.

Second, as suggested above, defenders of abolition had negligently permitted “Providential” and “Rights of Man” arguments against slavery to become illogically intertwined, hence vulnerable to effective rhetorical attack on grounds of hypocrisy and inconsistency. “Humanity is in fashion—it’s Popular... the Subject is sublime,” wrote one disgusted observer, and a later historian of the Progressive school seemed to document an early manifestation of the “liberal guilt syndrome:” “It was said that in London the fashionable way to quiet one’s conscience was by subscription to a missionary society or signing a petition against slavery.”<sup>51</sup>

Third, the religious revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had a genuinely transformative effect on society in both Britain and the U.S.—one by no means pleasing to all of its members. British conservatives who had long charged Dissenters and Evangelicals with promoting “disorder” and “fanaticism” felt themselves vindicated by the great wave of political activity culminating in abolition and

---

<sup>50</sup> “Literary Sources and the Revolution in British Attitudes to Slavery,” in Bolt and Drescher, ed., *Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform*, 329.

<sup>51</sup> Mackenzie-Grieve, *English Slave Trade*, 295; Frank J. Klingberg, *The Anti-Slavery Movement in England* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1926), 202-03.

emancipation, Chartism, religious toleration legislation, and the Reform Bill. American conservatives, some of whom had welcomed the Revival and chided the British for their hostility to “heart religion,” now looked on aghast as women, children, and even slaves preached to “promiscuous” congregations in fervid camp meetings. The Reverend Calvin Colton, a New England Presbyterian, traveled to England in 1831 as a correspondent for the *New York Observer* and wrote a defense of American revivals a year later; when he returned to the U.S. in 1835, the emotional, political and racial upheaval of the evangelical movement so shocked him that he repudiated both the Revival and reformed Protestantism, converting to the Episcopal church and becoming a full-time crusader against the excesses of democracy.<sup>52</sup> On a national scale, what had once appeared to be a genteel, elite effort to fine-tune the social order now assumed the aspect of an uncontrolled radical movement whose eventual outcome no one could begin to guess.

In the Caribbean, the slaves’ heightened political awareness had even more fundamental effects upon society, as well as even more explicitly religious origins. A major slave revolt in Jamaica in 1831, abetted if not inspired by white Baptist missionaries, underlined the deadly seriousness of the struggle and of the blacks’ determination to be free—and showed the potential for cataclysmic, Haitian-scale violence.

Finally, the conviction of liberal economic theorists that free labor would prove more efficient than slave labor—adopted enthusiastically by pragmatic abolitionists—turned out to be dead wrong. When in the years after emancipation the promised

---

<sup>52</sup> Alfred A. Cave, *An American Conservative in the Age of Jackson: The Political and Social Thought of Calvin Colton* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1969); Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Harvest Books, 1970), Part I: The Evangelical Basis.

economic renewal of the islands under a system of “free” labor failed to materialize and the British sugar colonies plunged into stagnation, opponents of emancipation outlook gained powerful new ammunition.<sup>53</sup>

If it is true that in religion, as the late Harvard professor A. D. Nock used to say, “nothing fails like success,” then perhaps the same can often be said of movements for social change. Simply put, after emancipation became a reality, it was no longer necessary to fight for it. When the apprenticeship period came to an end in 1838, British public interest in the fate of the blacks fell off precipitously. The generation which had fought the battle for slaves in England, which had been willing to risk life and honor to confront the powerful plantocracy, had given way to a younger generation that took all of these victories for granted.<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, now that the battle had been won, its supporters set about attempting to minimize its radicalism and back off from its extremism. In their laudatory 1838 biography, Wilberforce’s sons provided a distinctly watered-down version of their famous father. Missing, for example, from a letter Wilberforce wrote at the height of the French Terror was the following sentence: “If I thought the immediate Abolition of the Slave Trade would cause an insurrection in our islands, I should not for an instant remit my most strenuous endeavours.”<sup>55</sup> Sadly, the saintly, tepid portraits painted by the second generation stuck to the abolitionists for over a century.

---

<sup>53</sup> The effect on the reform movement in Britain of the economic failure (from the exporters’ point of view) of emancipation is traced in Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 158-230.

<sup>54</sup> For an overview of the shift as seen in literature, see C. Duncan Rice, “Literary Sources and the Revolution in British Attitudes to Slavery,” 21

<sup>55</sup> Robert Isaac and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce* (5 vols. London, 1838), II:22; John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (New York: St., Martin's Press, 1977), 123.

While the British navy continued to interdict the slave trade after public interest in the task declined, it seemed only to perform the function because the bureaucracy set up to do so had become fully entrenched.<sup>56</sup> “The British humanitarian impulse, its immediate objectives accomplished, seemed to ossify into complacent sentimentality and a sanctimonious belief in England’s civilizing mission.”<sup>57</sup>

In effect, Britain decided that it had a kind of moral “manifest destiny.” As David Brion Davis summarized: “For two centuries the British had enslaved countless Africans but had now resolved...to force, cajole, persuade and prevent other people from slavery. Having imposed their slaving systems on vast tracts of Africa and the New World, the British with an almost evangelical zeal hawked their abolitionist conscience around the world and, in a no less imperious manner, obliged others to accept their revulsion and reject slavery.”<sup>58</sup>

What made this attitude particularly obnoxious was that a movement which had been founded on an appeal to conscience was now grounded upon an assertion of superiority. Sir Robert Peel, a particularly belated convert to the gospel of anti-slavery, called in 1840 for the colonization of Africa in order to convince the Africans of the moral superiority of their European fellow men, to “rescue Africa from debasing superstitions, and to put an end to her miseries by the introduction of the arts of civilization and peace.”<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Pollock, *ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>57</sup> Anstey, “Pattern,” 32-33. See also David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 111-12, 207-22.

<sup>58</sup> David B. Davis, “Slavery and ‘progress,’” in Bolt and Drescher, eds., *Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform*, 363-64.

<sup>59</sup> Walvin, *Slavery and British Society*, 18.

David Brion Davis has attempted to make sense of this extraordinary development. “Ironically,” he writes, “it was because Europeans had long associated black Africans with slavery and because they increasingly associated slavery with the primitive stages of human development, that they so easily concluded that Africans were a ‘backward race’ or a ‘child race’ needing tutelage from the world’s most progressive peoples. The British... were by self-definition the people best equipped to assume such a burden.”<sup>60</sup>

British evangelism underwent institutionalization during this period as well. Missionary training became increasingly preprofessional, following a general trend in both British and American society.<sup>61</sup> The relationship between missionaries and planters had grown steadily warmer since the end of disabilities against the Dissenting churches in the early nineteenth century, and slaveowners had discovered that, if certain precautions were taken, preachers could even be constructive allies. “I have a bad set of people,” Jamaica planter and newspaperman Richard Barrett told a Presbyterian missionary requesting permission to preach to his slaves. “They steal enormously, run away, get drunk, fight... the women take no care of their children and there is no increase on the property. Now, if you can bring them under fear of God, or a judgment to come, or something of that sort, you may be doing both them and me a service.”<sup>62</sup> After about 1815, the Kingston magistrates did not find it necessary to deny to any missionaries the

---

<sup>60</sup> Davis, “Slavery and ‘progress,’” 363.

<sup>61</sup> Walvin, *Slavery and British Society*, 20. For parallel developments in the United States, see Donald Scott, *From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry, 1750-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “Conscience and Career: Young Abolitionists and Missionaries,” in Bolt and Drescher, eds. *Anti-Slavery. Religion, and Reform*, 183-203.

<sup>62</sup> Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 20.

permits required to preach to slaves. “The missionaries demonstrated their ‘liberal spirit’ by conforming as far as possible to the conventions of the ruling class.... Retrospectively a Moravian missionary commented that the position of estate missionaries was that of ‘a spiritual police officer sent out to care for the interests of the proprietor.’”<sup>63</sup>

In fact, after almost a century of rocky relations, Christianity and the “liberal spirit” were largely reconciled to one another. The English clergy ranked themselves just as completely on the side of “progress” as any secular-minded Utilitarian. Furthermore, the churches felt an evangelical imperative to bring this “Progress,” along with salvation, to every part of the human race. Wilberforce’s assertion that “we have no right to make people happy against their will,” would have been incomprehensible to a Victorian missionary.

Parallel developments in the United States had even more portentous implications, marking the rise of race as an analytical category and as a basis for exemption from norms of morality and justice for members of the group encompassed within the embrace of “whiteness” in their dealings with members of the “inferior races.” It is highly significant that the “mulatto” co-editor of *Freedom’s Journal*, John Russwurm, after a career spent defending the equal rights to citizenship of African Americans, decided within days of Andrew Jackson’s accession to the presidency in 1829 to leave the country for Liberia.<sup>64</sup> In short order thereafter, officials of Georgia moved to evict the Cherokee from their tribal lands within the state, in defiance of the U.S. Supreme Court but with full confidence of their vindication by the “higher law” of

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 18, 21, 26, 25.

<sup>64</sup> See Sandra Sandiford Young, “John Brown Russwurm’s Dilemma: Citizenship or Emigration?” in Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer, eds., *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism* (Boston: New Press, 2006), 90-113 .

Jacksonian Providence. A mob in Cincinnati applied the same racial principle later that year when, under the premise of enforcing the state's 1805 black code, they evicted hundreds of blacks from their homes—among them descendants of early black settlers occupying land that had become some of the most valuable real estate in the West.<sup>65</sup>

The following year, in his annual address, Jackson rejoiced that the “benevolent” policy of Indian removal was nearing “a happy consummation.” “Humanity has often wept over the fate of the aborigines of this country,” the President mused, “and Philanthropy has been long busily employed in devising means to avert it, but its progress has never for a moment been arrested, and one by one have many powerful tribes disappeared from the earth. To follow to the tomb the last of his race and to tread on the graves of extinct nations excite melancholy reflections,” Jackson reflected in a Cooperesque mode. Jackson rhetorically transmuted the illegal dispossession of the Indians—and by extension, crimes against other “savage” races—from the category of present-day injustice to that of inexorable historic process. While the process of destruction might be tragic to those races falling victim to it, “true philanthropy reconciles the mind to these vicissitudes as it does to the extinction of one generation to make room for another.” Viewed from the broad perspective “of the general interests of the human race,” white Americans, the victors in this struggle of races, had nothing to apologize for—they were merely the beneficiaries of a just but impersonal cosmic process of rewards and punishments.

Once the idea of Racial Progress had become thoroughly disseminated throughout the society, an attack on African institutions and culture became inevitable. A true

---

<sup>65</sup> See Carter G. Woodson, “The Negroes of Cincinnati Before the Civil War,” *The Journal of Negro History* 1 (Jan. 1916), 1-22, and Wendell Phillips Dabney, *Cincinnati's Colored Citizens: Historical, Sociological And Biographical* (Cincinnati: Dabney, 1926).



conservative of the older generation, such as Burke, could condemn non-Europeans for their barbarism, yet admire them for fidelity to their traditions, even approve of the strength of their “prejudices”; a modern conservative wedded to progress, such as Sir Robert Peel, would display no such restraint, and his attack on Africans would be utterly without compunction.

This historical period—the 1840s and 1850s—is the crucial point for the transition between the Providential and Progressive ideologies in the slavery debate. The period’s true significance is difficult to grasp without paying rather close attention to theological nuances, because it is at this time that social conservatives begin to employ the form and language of religion for strictly secular purposes of control, either without even paying lip-service to a higher power, or by redefining God as Nature, the “Spirit of History”, or an impersonal, universal Will. Our modern categories of religious versus secular, right versus left, conservative versus liberal can only be sources of confusion here. The events surrounding the revolutions of 1848 and their aftermath provide a case in point: It would be difficult to find a single appropriate “*ism*” to characterize a Richard Wagner, a Pius IX or a Louis Napoleon.

For our purposes, Thomas Carlyle is an exceptionally interesting representative of the period. More clearly than most of his contemporaries, Carlyle recognized how drastically the world had changed since the French Revolution, which he characterized as “[a] huge explosion, bursting through all formulas and customs; confounding into wreck and chaos the ordered arrangements of earthly life; blotting-out, one may say, the very firmament and skyey loadstars...”<sup>66</sup> A close reading of Carlyle shows that for him, as

---

<sup>66</sup> *The Works of Thomas Carlyle* (centenary edition, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons [1898]), vol. 29, 1.

certainly as for Nietzsche, the Christian God was one of the casualties of the explosion. Indeed, Carlyle's choice of a replacement for God is the same as Nietzsche's: a Hero, an "Ableman."

Carlyle's religious vision has no place in it for mercy; his definition of Justice turns the Biblical concept on its head. "What is injustice?" asks Carlyle. "Another name for disorder .... As disorder, insane by the nature of it, is the hatefulest of things to man ... so injustice is the worst evil, some call it the only evil, in this world." For a moment he sounds like a conventional Christian preacher of salvation: "All men submit to toil, to disappointment, to unhappiness; it is their lot here; but in all hearts, inextinguishable by sceptic logic, by sorrow, perversion or despair itself, there is a small still voice intimating that it is not the final lot; that wild, waste, incoherent as it looks, a God presides over it;"—so far so good, but now this—"that it is not an injustice, but a justice."<sup>67</sup> Hope, it seems, lies not in the contemplation of the world to come beyond this veil of tears, but in the apotheosis of this-worldly oppression.

Carlyle's most vitriolic essay, "Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question," was aimed at the blacks and their deliverers, the "Broad-brimmed Christian sentimentalists" of Exeter Hall. Beyond his crude racist outpourings, perhaps the strongest in British letters to that time, the particular cause of Carlyle's rage was the thought "That the Negroes are all very happy and doing well. A fact very comfortable indeed." Carlyle's purpose in writing was to lay down the law:

That no Black man who will not work according to what ability the gods have given him for working, has the smallest right to eat pumpkin, or to

---

<sup>67</sup> *Carlyle: Selected Works, Reminiscences and Letters*, ed. by Julian Symons (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 271.

any fraction of land that will grow pumpkin, however plentiful such land may be; but has an indisputable and perpetual *right* to be compelled, by the real proprietors of said land, to do competent work for his living. This is the everlasting duty of all men, black or white, who are born into this world. To do competent work, to labour honestly according to the ability given them; for that and for no other purpose was each one of us sent into this world...<sup>68</sup>

Here, then, is Carlyle's prescription for the human race: that all men have "the divine right of being compelled... to do what work they are appointed for, in a life which is so short, and where idleness so soon runs to putrescence! Alas, we had then a perfect world; and the Millennium, and true 'Organization of Labour,' and reign of complete blessedness..."<sup>69</sup>

If professed conservatives such as Carlyle had no trouble impugning the humanity of blacks, those who had adopted "advanced," Progressive, heterodox beliefs were now encouraged in their racism by scholarly opinion, particularly scientific. The "comparative study of the races of mankind" was, alas, no longer "in its infancy." Coming on the heels of Mobile physician Josiah Nott's self-described "Nigger hallucinations" and his English colleague George Gliddon's researches into the "Antiquity of Niggers,"<sup>70</sup> Count Gobineau's influential work, *The Inequality of Human Races*, had set the tone for future investigations.

---

<sup>68</sup> *Works of Carlyle.*, 351, 349, 355.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>70</sup> Reginald Horsman, *Josiah Nott of Mobile: Southerner, Physician and Racial Theorist* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 101, 95. In their influential *Types of Mankind* (1854), Nott and Gliddon wrote that in ancient Egypt, "de same ole Nigger" of Southern plantations could spend his Nilotic sabbaths in saltatory recreations and "Turn about, and wheel about, and *Jump Jim Crow*." Quoted in Richard B. Erno, "Dominant Images of the Negro in the Ante-Bellum South: A Study in the Development of Southern Attitudes Toward the Negro as Reflected in Ante-bellum Diaries" (Ph. D. dissert., University of Minnesota, 1961), 222.

Of far greater significance was the work of Charles Darwin. Darwin's concepts of "Natural Selection" and "the Struggle for Existence" undoubtedly owed as much to social theorists as to earlier scientists such as Saint-Hilaire, Lamarck, and Darwin's grandfather Erasmus; indeed, Darwin himself says of it, "This is the doctrine of Malthus, applied throughout the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms." Darwin returned from his voyages laden with suggestive data on plants and animals which social scientists eagerly applied to the conditions of industrial Britain, clearly with his acquiescence if not encouragement. "In the future I see open fields for far more important researches," he predicted. "Psychology will be securely based on the foundation already well laid by Mr. Herbert Spencer."<sup>71</sup> Like Carlyle, who saw life as "wild, waste, incoherent," and concluded that "a God presides over it... it is not an injustice, but a justice," so Darwin helped to create a new vision of the Divine through his evolutionary theory:

Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely the production of the higher animals, directly follows. *There is grandeur in this view of life*, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved.<sup>72</sup> (Emphasis added)

Grandeur, perhaps, if one has the good fortune to be one of the "exalted" individuals rather than one of the "unfit" casualties of natural selection's tangled bank. Truly, the

---

<sup>71</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, 373. Herbert Spencer has been effectively discredited by historians and sociologists, for generations (see especially Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1955]), while Darwin has been, for the most part, a subject of reverent hagiography. William Irvine's excellent *Apes, Angels and Victorians* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1955) is still useful, but badly out of date. Mary Midgley's *Evolution as a Religion* (London & New York: Methuen, 1985) continues the tradition of exculpating Darwin while excoriating his disciples. A critical examination of *The Origin of Species* in the context of nineteenth-century natural history and philosophy is long overdue; the biologists have been left to carry out the task of revising Darwinism with very little assistance from historians.

<sup>72</sup> *Origin of Species*, 429.

one-time candidate for the ministry turned evangelist of evolution had produced a theology that turned predation into a sacrament.

The role which the ideals of Social Darwinism played in justifying colonization is well known. It was an easy matter to exhume all of the myths of black inferiority created over the centuries to justify slavery, and, with only minimal modification, to graft them to the new justification of colonial exploitation. Researchers such as Francis Galton, who tied heredity to intelligence, and Cesare Lombroso, who did the same for criminality, received widespread intellectual acceptance and were considered among the most advanced minds of their day; work such as theirs is termed “pseudoscience” only in retrospect. Two important parallel developments of modern western history—the “liberation” of science from religious influences and the exaltation of man as the master of nature—permitted, justified and even decreed enormous crimes against non-Europeans. The elimination of an operative belief in a transcendent, absolute reality—God—suggested that the progress of the human race was in human hands. Secondly, it ensured that people’s values would be ultimately self-referencing; no principle existed to offset the common tendency to regard one’s own kind as superior.<sup>73</sup> Drawing support from Darwin’s theory of evolution, activist nineteenth-century neo-Malthusian doctrines took the debate one step further: Subjugation of the “inferior” races was no longer viewed as just a matter of self-interest, or even as a noble step toward progress; it was now an inexorable process of “natural law.”

---

<sup>73</sup> A striking example of this attitude may be found in Darwin's comments on the differences between the sexes: “It is generally admitted that with woman the powers of intuition, of rapid perception, and perhaps of imitation, are more strongly marked than in man; but some, at least, of these faculties are characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilization.” (*The Descent of Man*, 873.)

This high-blown theorizing fit neatly with less theoretical, more impressionistic popular attitudes. “Convincing as natural and evolutionary theories of race may have been to certain intellectuals and *litterateurs* of the day, it is doubtful if they moved the common man very much,” notes Kenneth Little.

The general public never had much patience with abstract notions of race and racial superiority. It is likely that the general belief in ‘Civilization’ and the whole philosophy of ‘Progress’—was far more conclusive in justifying... what the racialists claimed in less understandable language.<sup>74</sup>

This analysis points to an important fact: that racism in its most highly developed form was the creation of intellectuals. Whether it welled up from the masses, or was imposed on them from above, is a more difficult question; but in no way can it be considered strictly as a popular or populist response fundamentally alien to the *intelligentsia*, as much post-war scholarship has implied.

This essay is not the place to discuss in any detail such matters as phrenology, “germ plasm,” or early I.Q. testing.<sup>75</sup> The scientific bankruptcy of these movements is here taken for granted. In their day, however, these theories were accepted as scientific fact—to the chagrin of the world’s non-Northern European population. One of the most significant characteristics of the nineteenth-century scientific attitude was its almost willful abandonment of earlier knowledge. Basil Davidson has followed this transformation in the history of European relations with the Congo. “The connection undoubtedly began with something of a golden age of peace and friendship,” he noted.

---

<sup>74</sup> Kenneth L. Little, *Negroes in Britain: A Study of Racial Relations* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Truebner & Co., 1947), 214.

<sup>75</sup> Allan Chase has passionately exposed these concepts and their modern intellectual descendants in *The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism* (New York: Knopf, 1977). 30

It just as surely degenerated into violence, hatred and distrust. .So complete was this decay that when the nineteenth century finally brought colonial conquest, the conquerors, seemed to have utterly forgotten the experience and accumulated knowledge of earlier Europeans.<sup>76</sup>

As van den Boogaart has pointed out, “whatever scientific precision these [racial] ideas had at the beginning were soon lost. The race concept became very elastic; racial theories frequently developed into metaphysics and myth, and amalgamated all kinds of political ideologies.”<sup>77</sup> Echoing the assertion of the president of the Universal Races Congress that “the underlying cause” of nearly all wars had been “the existence of race antipathies,” many writers before and after the First World War ominously prophesied a great racial conflagration—and decried the Great War as an internecine feud within the “white race” which would only weaken it for its inevitable struggle with the “black, brown, and yellow races of mankind.”<sup>78</sup>

One of the most sophisticated and extreme of these writers was Bertram Lenox Simpson, writing under the pseudonym of “Putnam Weale.” No writer better illustrates the extreme Racialist Progressive attitude toward science and religion:

In the last analysis, it is due to science, and to the spread of scientific thought throughout the world, that such phenomenal progress has lately been made in ethical and general principles.... The ferment of to-day is then due to the spread of *truth—since science is only truth systematised*.... No longer will men, no matter of what colour they may be, believe in the old superstitious beliefs: no longer will they bow down to authority.... They demand... that such monkish—nay, slavish—ideas be shattered, and

---

<sup>76</sup> Basil Davidson, *The African Slave Trade* (Boston: Atlantic-Little Brown, 1961), 120.

<sup>77</sup> Ernst van den Boogaart, “Color prejudice and the yardstick of civility,” in R. Ross, ed., *Racism and Colonialism*, 35.

<sup>78</sup> The American, Madison Grant, was a notable promoter of this view. The literature of this kind is plentiful. Besides the work of Grant and “Putnam Weale” referred to herein, Seth K. Humphrey’s *The Racial Prospect* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920) is representative.

that henceforth mankind be governed as nearly as possible on scientific principles.<sup>79</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

However, Weale believed, there was one place where “the old superstitious beliefs” still had a place: Africa.

Africa indeed is the one remaining region in the world where the spread of Christianity is to be heartily desired on every possible ground.... If the Negro... is Christianized his destructive strength is stripped from him, much as was Samson’s strength when his locks were cut. The part the white man is politically called upon to play in Africa is, then, the part of Delilah and no other.<sup>80</sup>

This attitude, which would have so shocked a Wilberforce or a Stephen (not to mention a Richard Allen or David Walker), was by the early twentieth century very widely accepted. Frank Klingberg, the historian of abolition, makes much the same point, in milder language, when he quotes an early Portuguese chronicler’s statement description of Africans as “loyal and obedient servants, without malice,” who “turned themselves with a good will into the path of the true faith, in which after they had entered, they received true belief, and in this same they died.” Klingberg finds in this statement “the combination of traits which so long delighted the white man: an equal facility on the part of the Negro in becoming a good servant and a good Christian. And for the benefits of religion he was to enter a life of servitude.”<sup>81</sup> Once the identification had been made

---

<sup>79</sup> B.L. Putnam Weale [Bertram Lenox Simpson], *The Conflict of Colour: The Threatened Upheaval Throughout the World* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1910), 15.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>81</sup> Klingberg, *The Anti-Slavery Movement*, 20-21. In his novel *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1959), the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe has the following exchange, set at the turn of the century, between an Ibo and a Christian missionary. Explaining his people’s apparent polytheism, the Ibo says, “We appear to pay greater attention to the little gods but that is not so. We worry about them more because we are afraid to worry their Master.” The missionary responds, “You are afraid of Chukwu [the Ibo high God]. In my religion Chukwu is a loving father and need not be feared by those who do his will”[!](164-65).



between Christianity and submission, Africans (and other non-Europeans) were effectively stripped of one of their most potent means of cultural self-defense other than force. Africa had received Christianity with ambivalence, it is true, and its effect on indigenous culture could be destructive; but at the very least it had provided a common ground of humanity between Europeans and blacks (as Frank Tannenbaum and Stanley Elkins liked to point out); and even at its most culturally biased, the religion of the missionaries was closer to African beliefs than the secularism of the imperialists.<sup>82</sup> The people of Sierra Leone, a nation founded by freed slaves with the help of British abolitionists, had always taken great pride in their ties to Britain—they were taught in school to sing “Rule, Britannia.” “We did not feel strange about these songs. We were British, if not Britons.... And slavery had meant a lot to our race.”<sup>83</sup> With sadness and incomprehension, Sierra Leoneans saw the British lapse, over the decades, into racial estrangement and callousness. An editorial in a Sierra Leone newspaper of 1916 lamented the tragic new attitude:

A day came when white thought began to be changed, white feeling began to be altered, and white action began to be fitted to the thought and feeling. The commencement of the period coincided with the rise of imperialistic ideas and of the rediscovery of Africa. Those who had been fathers now rose to arms, and in many and strange ways proclaimed that Arcady was gone, and the idyllic must be superseded by a reality which

---

While the episode is fictional, it seems that Achebe has caught the essence of nineteenth-century Progressive theology with deadly accuracy. For a scholarly exploration of the conjunction of Christianity and antislavery in Africa, see Lamin Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>82</sup> See, e.g., M. Herskovits and F. Herskovits, “An outline of Dahomean religious belief,” *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association*, No. 41 (1934), 11.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Wesley Cole, *Kossoh Town Boy* (Cambridge, London, Ibadan, Accra: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 19-21.

must go hand in hand with sternness. Segregation was the first blast of the trumpet; then other things, and other things.<sup>84</sup>

Inevitably, later generations of blacks would forget, just as the whites had, that conditions had ever been different. Like their European adversaries, many Africans and West Indians would come to regard “the conflict of colour” as a permanent feature of human existence (although it should be stressed that this attitude remained far less common among blacks than among whites).<sup>85</sup> Additionally, many members of the subject peoples came to internalize the racism felt for them by the Europeans and turn it against themselves.

For whites as well as blacks, the process of recovering the past has been beset with interpretive obstacles, the more imposing in that they have been largely invisible. We are burdened in our attempt to see the past clearly with presuppositions and assumptions whose origins, if we recognized them, would repel us. Most daunting of all, we are hobbled by our understandable need to cling to the belief, in spite of our postmodern sophistication, that knowledge and conditions advance—that “progress” always marches forward. If contemporary scholars have abandoned the naïve optimism and triumphalism of the progressive view, we have retained its debilitating core: the conviction that we know more, and understand more clearly, than our ancestors. “The modern world tends to be skeptical about everything that makes demands on man’s higher faculties,” wrote E. F. Schumacher. “But it is not at all skeptical about skepticism,

---

<sup>84</sup> *Sierra Leone Weekly News*, 8 April 1916, quoted by Spitzer, “Sierra Leone creoles,” in Curtin, ed., *Africa and The West*, 100. A dramatic demonstration of the persistence of this willful ignorance of history was displayed in Senator John F. Kerry’s remarks to the Yale Political Union on [##date] explaining that the United States intervened to stop the slaughter in Kosovo but did nothing in Sierra Leone because Americans shared a common culture and heritage with the Albanians but not with the people of Sierra Leone.

<sup>85</sup> See Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind*, ##.

which demands hardly anything.”<sup>86</sup> There is evidence that historians of the abolition debate are beginning to heed this criticism. David Brion Davis has warned against holding onto assumptions which “lead easily into a crude reductionism in which ‘sin,’ for example, means something other than sin and in which religious motivation is explained in terms of various secular interests.”<sup>87</sup> The late Roger Anstey, from an avowed position of Christian faith, had no difficulty in avoiding this pitfall; more recent scholars, including Christopher Brown, are pursuing the more challenging road of doing so as secular academics.

A character in Tom Stoppard’s *Jumpers* states that he hopes that his speech will “set British moral philosophy back forty years, which is roughly when it went off the rails.”<sup>88</sup> If the secular intellectual culture to which we are heir does indeed have the deadly antinomy of race imbedded in its basic fabric, perhaps we need to take seriously the thought of those pioneers of antislavery, all of them wedded to assumptions we have long rejected, who acted on principles formulated before Western civilization “went off the rails.” To do so will not be easy. Americans of all races have been “reluctant to yield their privileges and their protections against each other, however strangely conceived those privileges and protections may have been,” Scott Malcomsen observed. Discussing the civil rights demonstrations of 1963, in which fire hoses and police dogs were turned upon children, Malcomsen argued that its truly disturbing effect was to reveal

[t]hat race really was an arbitrary matter of skin tone and that the nation had been living upside down. The adult mind sped to register this notion, so...deeply disturbing to a grown-up for whom the past was meant to be something other than

---

<sup>86</sup> *A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), 61.

<sup>87</sup> Davis, “Anstey,” 13.

<sup>88</sup> Tom Stoppard, *Jumpers* (London: Grove Press, 1972), 46.

an accumulation of shame and error. Adults tend to understand social relations in terms of justified power. In the fight against the power category of race, [the Reverend Martin Luther] King had imagined that power came only from God, who has no race—therefore race had no power. To understand this would be like suddenly awakening after the sleep of one’s life, to be like a child again.<sup>89</sup>

It is a pattern of American life to suppress or rewrite the past when it is ugly or inconvenient. On some level, many Americans seem willing, at last, to accept the reality of the profound role that slavery has played in our history. Unless we are willing to work our way back, and to look at the effects of slavery on all of our institutions, and to be changed by what we find, we are unlikely to find an exit any time soon from our continuing dilemma of race. If we are willing to do this, however, and to truly listen to the past, we may find that change—if not “progress”—is indeed possible.

---

<sup>89</sup> Malcomsen, *One Drop of Blx`ood*, 250.