COMMENTARY

Colonizing citizenship

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'We are not the victims but the children of a crime against humanity.'[1]

Commemorations are important events in France. If, on the one hand, they offer the government the opportunity to reinforce a 'certain idea of France', on the other hand they give historians, researchers and activists the possibility to revise and counter the official discourse. Many thought, therefore, that the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the French colonies in 1998 would receive the kind of attention France likes to bestow on such events. Many among us hoped that it would provoke a major reassessment of the place of the trade slave and of slavery in the constitution of French identity. There was indeed attention. Speeches were made; exhibitions organized; streets were renamed; prizes and rewards were given to Creole writers; teachers were asked to teach on slavery and its abolition; the small village of Champagney became the centre of the commemoration – its inhabitants, simple peasants, had demanded the end of slavery during the French Revolution. Yet, there was a sense that the official commemoration was producing a narrative that masked rather than confronted the legacy of slavery.

I advance here some reflections inspired by the commemoration. Slavery, I argue, must be studied as an early system of 'bio-power', whereby every aspect of life of the slave is organized, defined, controlled. Slavery, I contend, is a form of human relations. It is not the embodiment of Evil, of irrationality, but an expression of a desire for limitless power over other human beings. It was not simply a system directed by greed or immorality. The forms of domination instituted by slavery constituted new ways of being whose exploration might open up interesting perspectives upon the *jouissance* of power and violence. It says something about predatory relations among human beings. Slavery and abolitionism must be studied as political systems, rather than being looked at from a humanitarian standpoint. Finally, a politics of reparation must become a central issue of debates in post-colonial theory. The denunciation of slavery in which culpability plays a role is a mask for the perpetuation of contempt. Descendants of slaves demand respect, not pity.

Slavery haunts the Republic

In 1998, the official discourse constructed a clear historical rupture. Monarchy had established slavery; the Republic had abolished it. It was a narrative of teleological progress, a struggle between good and evil, between *les forces du futur* and *les forces du passé.* The promise of the French Republic had been accomplished in 1848, when Robespierre had declared 'Périssent les colonies plutôt que nos principes.' The beautiful revolution had integrated the slaves in the family of French citizens. Abolition was a *gift* of republican France, and the emancipated became forever indebted to France. The debt had been honoured and it was now time to celebrate the creativity of Creole societies and their contribution to the culture of humanity.

In this narrative, slavery occupies the space of a radical otherness. It belongs to pre-history, to the world of tribalism, feudalism and pre-Enlightenment. If slavery still exists, it is in the elsewhere of Others, among those who have not yet been enlightened. The narrative operates a division between pre-modern (slavery) and modernity (abolition); between modern identity (unique root) and post-modern identity (*Créolité*, multiple identities). Our post-modern world, however, accommodates pockets of slavery and the celebration of *Créolité* might not threaten as much as it is wished the political and economic relations between France and its post-slavery societies (which are all French departments).

An analysis of the discourse of abolitionism reveals an intimate relationship with French imperialism. In 1848, the government which issued the decree of abolition declared Algeria to be a French department. French abolitionism was a doctrine which justified the colonization of Africa, Indochina and Madagascar. In Africa and Madagascar, the Arab slave-trader became the favourite villain of abolitionist propaganda. The 1848 motto could have been 'Périsse l'esclavage plutôt que nos colonies.' The images, representations and ideology of slavery contaminated the emancipation. Abjection and repulsion remained inscribed on the black body. In post-slavery societies, forced labour replaced the chains of bondage. New techniques of discipline, new laws, were enacted to transform the slave into a worker for the colonial state.[2] The abstract vocabulary of rights masked in the colony the permanency of colonial racism, colonial exploitation and the denial of democracy. The emancipated slave became the pedestal upon which the values and discourse of emancipation rested: family, work, subjection. In Réunion, the republican envoy declared: 'Owners and workers are now *one family*. … You have called me your father and I love you like my children; you will listen to my advice. Eternal recognition to the French Republic that made you free! And may your motto be: *God, France, and Work!*' (Sarda Garriga, 20 December 1848, my emphasis). In the Antilles, the motto was 'Marriage, Work, and France'. The Republican ideal of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* was transmogrified in the post-slavery colony, announcing a programme of disciplining and punishing whose goal was to transform the slave into an obedient colonized.

After Foucault, Giorgo Agamben has analysed the moment when the human species and the individual as 'simple living bodies' become pawns in political strategies.[3] The 'animalization' of the human being is accomplished through extremely sophisticated political techniques. Agamben, who argues that the 'production of the biopolitical body is the original act of a sovereign power', contends that the 'state of exception, in which the "naked life" (*la vie nue*) was at the same time excluded and captured by the juridical-political power, constituted the hidden foundation upon which the entire political system rested.' To Agamben and many others, slavery does not represent a moment during which a biopolitical body is produced. Yet a series of laws legalized for two centuries a regime of exception for an entire group of people. Not only was the slave forced to work but his/her entire life was codified. France was the first country to decree a body of laws, the Code Noir.[4] Its first article enjoined the colonial governors to expel Jews from the colonies. Marriage, death, circulation, meetings, food, alcohol, clothes, illness, property, legal responsibility, rebellion, punishment – from birth to death, the slave's life was minutely governed. This desire to master the slave's life went beyond the desire to extract the maximum out of the slaves' workforce. It spoke for the wish to have another human being under one's entire control. The Code Noir was abolished in 1848, but could we affirm that its effects did not live on?

Slaves and abolitionists denounced the limitless power of the masters in the colonies. It was a world in which there were few boundaries. In *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave*, Mary Prince described how her master and his wife constantly beat her for reasons she could not surmise. It was not that Prince thought that she deserved in any way to be beaten, but the fact that it was entirely and systematically uncalled-for, baseless, gratuitous, gave the beating a deeply disturbing quality. 'I have done no wrong at

The Freed Slave. Sheet music cover, Paris, 1849.

all to my owners, neither here nor in the West Indies', she wrote. 'I have always worked very hard to please them, both by night and day; but there was no giving satisfaction, for my mistress could never be satisfied with reasonable service.'[5] Prince understood that there were no limits, no borders to the kind of pleasure, of *jouissance*, that her owners were seeking. It went beyond a desire for economic benefit, beyond a desire to be served. The unnecessary excesses of violence testified to the obscene quality of enjoyment experienced by the masters. As a little girl, Prince 'was licked and flogged, and pinched by [...] pitiless fingers in the neck and arms'. Her mistress 'often robbed [her] of the few hours that belong to sleep'. Prince spoke of a world in which beating, violence, was addictive, in which terror was the order of things. Yet it would be wrong to think that it was exceptional behaviour. Abolitionists liked to oppose colonial to metropolitan behaviour, but was not the colony another name for the metropole? They wanted to shame the masters, to remind them of their duty to be moral and just. Masters embodied an aspect of human desire that should be seen outside of the boundaries of European attitudes. They showed how it was difficult to resist in a world in which power seemed to have no boundaries.[6] The compulsion to subjugate was justified – the enslaved were inferior beings, they needed to be flogged. The viciousness of slavery was a mix of racial ideologies and the desire for limitless power. Masters had come from Europe and they often visited Europe; they were received in the European salons; they were trusted clients of the banks; they were the friends of politicians. They had built small totalitarian societies, with the help of France.

The masters offered a distorted mirror of the progressive ideals of Europe, but it was better to indict them than to reflect on the place of slavery at the heart of Europe. It was better to affirm that slavery was occurring in faraway places where 'civilized' behaviour was forgotten. Slavery corrupted the masters and the slaves, abolitionists argued, and abolition would prevent the corruption from invading the body of the Republic. The denunciation of slavery was the *mise en scène* of the struggle between virtue (the metropole) and corruption (the colony). The abolition of slavery became the triumph of the movement for social reform. It was the condition for a reconciliation of races and classes in the colony. In France, the 1848 republicans had wished to erase the fears provoked by the memory of revolutionary conflicts. The beautiful revolution would be the accomplishment of a fraternal reconciliation. 'No more classes', the republicans cried. To Victor Schoelcher, the leading French abolitionist, slavery should be replaced by a 'generous system which would endanger neither the life nor the income of the masters'.

'The slave made the social game possible,' Pierre Vidal-Naquet has written about slavery in the ancient world, 'not because he provided the totality of manual labour (this was never true) but because his status of anti-citizen, of absolute stranger, gave to the status of citizen a space within which to develop.'[7] The slave made the idea of the French citizen possible. When slavery was abolished, the colonial status remained. The emancipated was a 'colonized citizen'. Republican democracy had found its limits. Slavery had been the first economic system on a global order. It shaped the relations among human beings; it had defined the ways in which manual work, social status and wealth were viewed.[8] Globalization meant then the deportation and the selling of human beings.

The 1848 policies revealed a dialectics of loss and lack which bespoke the inherent limits of republican abolitionism. The masters were financially compensated for what was

conceived as a *loss*. The nation, through the state, acknowledged its complicity in the slave trade and slavery. The masters had complained. 'We were encouraged to have slaves', they said. They were right. They had received loans and had been given preferential tariffs for their products. They continued to benefit from them even after emancipation. For the slaves, the state recognized a *lack*, the lack of a patronymic name. Their status changed, from slaves to colonized citizens. They acquired a name. However, the patronymic name reinscribed them as slaves. Names were given by civil servants, who often played a joke on the freed women and men.[9] The loss of the slaves – of country, of property, of family ties – was not identified. To be sure, they created a new culture, a new language, a new political community. However, it would be wrong to deny the continuous effect of a history of loss and lack.

The politics of reparation

At the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon declared: 'I am not the slave of slavery which dehumanized my ancestors.' In 1998, the French Ministry of Culture made Fanon's remark the foundation of its discourse. It was repeated during the debate in the National Assembly on 18 February 1999 about the proposal to 'recognize slave trade and slavery as crimes against humanity'. Fanon sought to elaborate a new humanism, in which the burden of the past would not weigh on the present. There was no reason, he argued, for him to carry the legacy of colonial racism. He wished neither to 'avenge the Negro of the seventeenth century' nor to assuage the guilt of the Europeans. He aspired to be a man among other men, defined by his actions and not by a past over which he had no control.

The adoption of Fanon's declaration by the French socialist government appeared as the recognition of an important Black thinker of race and identity in the French post-colonial empire. Yet there was a sense of disjunction between Fanon's discourse and the French government's. Fanon's text was a violent indictment of French racism and of its effects upon the Antilleans' psyche. It was also a manifesto for a Sartrean emancipation. Fanon did not fight for racial reconciliation. He wanted to go beyond racial determination in order to join those who struggled for human emancipation.

At the National Assembly during the February debate, Christiane Taubira-Delannon, a representative of French Guiana, affirmed that the proposal would respect the 'founding values of the Republic'. She wanted a symbolic, a moral, and a cultural reparation. She concluded with this sentence: 'Les couleurs sont dans la vie, la vie dans les couleurs'; in other words, 'Vive les différences.' The Minister of Justice, Elizabeth Guigou, declared that the government supported the proposal because it fulfilled a *devoir de mémoire*, a duty that the French Republic accepted it had. 'Racism,' she argued, 'which is the blind and imbecile certitude that there are superior races entitled to dominate inferior races, constitutes the origin of slavery.' The law should represent a symbolic gesture, a moral reparation but there were no grounds for asking for other forms of reparation. The socialist Louis Mermaz asserted that it was the Republic, and always the Republic, which had denounced injustices like slavery. We heard about the 'courageous Republicans' who had abolished slavery, about France 'le pays des Droits de l'Homme', about the tradition, the values, the fortitude of the Republic. There were some dissenting voices, but what the debate disclosed was the deep commitment to save the Republic from any complicity with bondage. Granted, discussions at the National Assembly are rarely the space to reflect upon history, race and citizenship. Granted, the impact of the 1848 abolition cannot be diminished, and republicans fought, along with liberals like Benjamin Constant, for the end of the slave trade. However, race as a marker of French national identity and race at the heart of the constitution of the French nation remain marginalized issues.

A politics of reparation would address the issue of integrating the loss and the lack inherited from slavery and colonialism. Psychoanalysis talks of the 'structuring lack', the acknowledgement that there is no possibility of completeness. Reparation in the

post-slavery communities could mean learning to live with the loss of an irremediable loss. It does not have to be worded in the discourse of inflated celebration: 'We do not have a unique root therefore we can avoid the pitfalls of European identity.' The process of creolization represents one response to oppression; it cannot represent the answer to the burning issue of post-colonial identities. The related structures of fantasy and identifications in post-slavery communities reveal more than an emphasis on hybridity and mutability.

Reparation concerns the individual and the group, and in each case the processes may differ. To repair oneself means neither enjoying the melancholic repetition of the loss nor constructing an artificial narcissistic self, but being engaged in *faire*. The loss becomes a privilege when what is lost is the illusion of mastery. Certain things cannot be retrieved and some of us cannot repair ourselves. If the human being has proved its resistance to extreme forms of destruction, it has also shown itself to be open to irreparable psychic wounds. Survivors of catastrophes, witnesses of terrible crimes, whose friends, communities, worlds have disappeared sometimes survive, but they are forever alien in the world. Or they may not want to be reminded of the catastrophe. In Réunion, a memorial to the slaves was built in 1998. Names of slaves were carved on stones. One night, some people came to erase names that were theirs. Why should there be an inscription of their shame? How to be proud of this history? It is a history not just of resistance and creativity but of degradation and infamy. One must live with the ruins of an inaccessible past that implicate the present and the future.

To repair the community means to engage in a political struggle that redefines the ties between the post-slavery society and France. It signifies a continual struggle against marginalization and denial, against pity and republican paternalism. The legacy of slavery contaminated republican democracy; it instituted a culture of demonization and violence with which we still live today. Its predatory character has not disappeared from human relations and we must confront that reality.

Notes

1. Huguette Bello, representative of Réunion Island, National Assembly, 18 February 1999.
2. Post-emancipation policies in the United States and British colonies reveal similar concerns: how to maintain a cheap labour force? See, for instance, Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776–1848*, Verso, London, 1997 and Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997.
3. Giorgo Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Le pouvoir souverain et la vie nue*, Seuil, Paris, 1997.
4. Spain had its own laws. See Manuel Lucena Slamoral, *Los Códigos Negros de la América Espanola*, Ediciones UNESCO, Universidad de Alcalá, 1996. It would be interesting to compare the Codes enacted by European powers with those enacted by non-European states like Madagascar, where in 1828 the monarchs promulguated the *Didim-panjakana*, ordinances which defined the status of the slave. See Ignace Rakoto, 'Etre ou ne pas être: L'Andevo esclave, un sujet de non-droit', in *L'Esclavage à Madagascar: Aspects historiques et résurgences contemporaines*, Actes du colloque sur l'esclavage, Antananarivo, 1997, pp. 65–84. On the Code Noir, see Luis Sala-Molins, *Le Code Noir ou le calvaire de Canaan*, PUF, Paris, 1987.
5. Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave*, in *Six Women Slave Narratives*, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988.
6. See Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998) for an example of the enjoyment of power without limits in post-abolition days.
7. Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Travail et esclavage dans la Grèce antique*, Complexe, Brussels, 1988, p. 89.
8. Christiane Rakotolahy has studied the contempary traces of such constructions in Madagascar. She argues that present studies about regional relations, the economic life and ethnic relations in Madagascar must include the history of slave trade and slavery. 'Empreintes de l'esclavage dans les relations internationales', in *Esclavage et Colonisation*, CCT, Le Port, Réunion Island, 1998, pp. 45–78.
9. See, for instance, the study of the historian Sudel Fuma on the 1848–49 registers on Réunion Island.