

DOMENICO LOSURDO

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# LIBERALISM

A COUNTER-HISTORY



*Liberalism*  
*A Counter-History*

DOMENICO LOSURDO  
TRANSLATED BY GREGORY ELLIOTT



London • New York

To Jean-Michel Goux, in friendship and gratitude

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## ***Liberalism***

## *A Short Methodological Introduction*

How does this book differ from existing histories of liberalism, which continue to appear in growing numbers? Does it really succeed in making the innovation promised by the title? Once they have finished it, readers will be able to give their own answer. For now, the author can limit himself to a statement of intent. In formulating it, a great example can aid us. About to embark on the history of the collapse of the *ancien régime* in France, de Tocqueville observed of studies of the eighteenth century:

[W]e imagine we know all about the French social order of that time, for the good reason that its surface glitter holds our gaze and we are familiar not only with the life stories of its outstanding figures but also, thanks to the many brilliant critical studies now available, with the works of the great writers who adorned that age. But we have only vague, often quite wrong conceptions of the manner in which public business was transacted and institutions functioned; of the exact relations between the various classes in the social hierarchy; of the situation and sentiments of that section of the population which as yet could neither make itself heard nor seen; and, by the same token, of the ideas and mores basic to the social structure of eighteenth-century France.<sup>1</sup>

There is no reason not to apply the methodology so brilliantly indicated by de Tocqueville to the movement and society of which he was an integral and influential part. Solely because he intends to draw attention to aspects that he believes have hitherto been largely and unjustly ignored, the author refers in the book's title to a 'counter-history'. Otherwise, it is a history, whose subject-matter alone remains to be specified: not liberal thought in its abstract purity, but liberalism, and hence the liberal movement and liberal society, in their

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1 Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert, London: Fontana, 1966, p. 24.

concrete reality. As with any other major historical movement, this involves investigating the conceptual developments, but also—and primarily—the political and social relations it found expression in, as well as the more or less contradictory link that was established between these two dimensions of social reality.

And so, in commencing the investigation, we are forced to pose a preliminary question concerning the subject whose history we intend to reconstruct: What is liberalism?

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *What Is Liberalism?*

#### **1. A series of embarrassing questions**

The usual answer to this question admits of no doubt: liberalism is the tradition of thought whose central concern is the liberty of the individual, which is ignored or ridden roughshod over by organicist philosophies of various kinds. But if that is the case, how should we situate John C. Calhoun? This eminent statesman, vice president of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, burst into an impassioned ode to individual liberty, which, appealing to Locke, he vigorously defended against any abuse of power and any unwarranted interference by the state. And that is not all. Along with ‘absolute governments’ and the ‘concentration of power’, he unstintingly criticized and condemned fanaticism<sup>1</sup> and the spirit of ‘crusade’,<sup>2</sup> to which he opposed ‘compromise’ as the guiding principle of genuine ‘constitutional governments’.<sup>3</sup> With equal eloquence Calhoun defended minority rights. It was not only a question of guaranteeing the alternation of the various parties in government through suffrage: unduly extensive power was unacceptable in any event, even if limited in duration and tempered by the promise or prospect of a periodic reversal of roles in the relationship between governors and governed.<sup>4</sup> Unquestionably, we seem to have all the characteristics of the most mature and attractive liberal thought. On the other hand, however, disdaining the half-measures and timidity or fear of those who restricted themselves to accepting it as a necessary ‘evil’, Calhoun declared slavery to be ‘a positive good’ that civilization could not possibly renounce. Calhoun repeatedly denounced intolerance and the

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1 John C. Calhoun, *Union and Liberty*, ed. R.M. Lence, Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1992, p. 529.

2 Ibid., pp. 528–31.

3 Ibid., pp. 30–1.

4 Ibid., pp. 30–3.



crusading spirit, not in order to challenge the enslavement of blacks or the ruthless hunting down of fugitive slaves, but exclusively to brand abolitionists as 'blind fanatics'<sup>5</sup> who 'consider themselves under the most sacred obligation to use every effort to destroy' slavery, a form of property legitimized and guaranteed by the Constitution.<sup>6</sup> Blacks were not among the minorities defended with such vigour and legal erudition. In fact, in their case, tolerance and the spirit of compromise seem to turn into their opposite: if fanaticism actually succeeded in its mad project of abolishing slavery, what would follow would be 'the extirpation of one or the other race'.<sup>7</sup> And, given the concrete balance of forces in the United States, it was not difficult to imagine which of the two would succumb: blacks could only survive on condition of being slaves.

So is Calhoun a liberal? No doubts on this score were harboured by Lord Acton, a prominent figure in liberalism in the second half of the nineteenth century, an advisor and friend of William Gladstone, one of the major figures in nineteenth-century England. In Acton's view, Calhoun was a champion of the cause of the struggle against any form of absolutism, including 'democratic absolutism'; the arguments he employed were 'the very perfection of political truth'. In short, we are dealing with one of the major authors and great minds in the liberal tradition and pantheon.<sup>8</sup>

Albeit in less emphatic language, the question has been answered in the affirmative by those who in our time celebrate Calhoun as 'a strong individualist',<sup>9</sup> as a champion of the 'defense of minority rights against the abuse of an overbearing majority',<sup>10</sup> or as a theorist of the sense of limits and the self-limitation that should characterize the majority.<sup>11</sup> In no doubt is one US publishing house, committed to republishing in a neo-liberal key 'Liberty Classics', among which the eminent statesman and ideologue of the slaveholding South features prominently.

The question we have posed does not only emerge from reconstructing the history of the United States. Prestigious scholars of the French Revolution, of firm liberal persuasion, have no hesitation in defining as 'liberal' those figures and

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5 Ibid., p. 474.

6 Ibid., p. 582.

7 Ibid., pp. 529, 473.

8 Lord Acton, *Selected Writings*, 3 vols, ed. J. Rufus Fears, Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, vol. 1, pp. 240, 250; vol. 3, p. 593.

9 C. Gordon Post, Introduction to John C. Calhoun, *A Disquisition on Government*, New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1953, p. vii.

10 Ross M. Lence, Foreword to Calhoun, *Union and Liberty*, p. xxiii.

11 Giovanni Sartori, *Democrazia e definizioni*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1976, p. 151; Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited*, Chatham (NJ): Chatham House Publishers, 1987, pp. 239, 252.

circles that had the merit of opposing the Jacobin diversion, but who were firmly committed to the defence of colonial slavery. The reference is to Pierre-Victor Malouet and members of the Massiac Club, who were 'all plantation-owners and slaveholders'.<sup>12</sup> Is it possible to be a liberal and slaveholder at the same time? Such was not the opinion of John Stuart Mill, judging at least from his polemic against the '*soi-disant*' British liberals (among them, perhaps, Acton and Gladstone), who, during the American Civil War, rallied en masse to 'a furious pro-Southern partisanship', or at any rate viewed the Union and Lincoln coolly and malevolently.<sup>13</sup>

We face a dilemma. If we answer the question formulated above (Is Calhoun a liberal?) in the affirmative, we can no longer maintain the traditional (and edifying) image of liberalism as the thought and volition of liberty. If, on the other hand, we answer in the negative, we find ourselves confronting a new problem and new question, which is no less embarrassing than the first: Why should we continue to dignify John Locke with the title of father of liberalism? Calhoun refers to black slavery as a 'positive good'. Yet without resorting to such brazen language, the English philosopher, to whom the US author explicitly appealed, regarded slavery in the colonies as self-evident and indisputable, and personally contributed to the legal formalization of the institution in Carolina. He took a hand in drafting the constitutional provision according to which '[e]very freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his Negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever.'<sup>14</sup> Locke was 'the last major philosopher to seek a justification for absolute and perpetual slavery'.<sup>15</sup> However, this did not prevent him from inveighing against the political 'slavery' that absolute monarchy sought to impose.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in Calhoun the theorization of black slavery as a 'positive good' went hand in hand with warnings against a concentration of power that risked transforming 'the governed' into 'the slaves of the rulers'.<sup>17</sup> Of course, the American statesman was a slave-owner, but the

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12 François Furet and Denis Richet, *La rivoluzione francese*, trans. Silvia Brilli Cattarini and Carla Patanè, Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1980, pp. 120–1, 160–1.

13 John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works*, 33 vols, ed. John M. Robson, Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press and Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963–91, vol. 21, p. 157; vol. 1, p. 267.

14 John Locke, *Political Writings*, ed. David Wooton, London and New York: Penguin, 1993, p. 230.

15 David B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975, p. 45.

16 See John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. William S. Carpenter, London and New York: Everyman's Library, 1924, bk 1, ch. 1.

17 Calhoun, *Union and Liberty*, p. 374.

English philosopher also had sound investments in the slave trade.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the latter's position proves even more compromising; for good or ill, in the slaveholding South of which Calhoun was the interpreter, there was no longer any place for the deportation of blacks from Africa, in a terrible voyage that condemned many of them to death before they landed in America.

Do we want to bring historical distance to bear in order to distinguish the positions of the two authors being compared here, and exclude from the liberal tradition only Calhoun, who continued to justify or celebrate the institution of slavery in the mid-nineteenth century? The southern statesman would have reacted indignantly to such inconsistency of treatment: as regards the English liberal philosopher, he would perhaps have repeated, in slightly different language, the thesis formulated by him in connection with George Washington: 'He was one of us—a slaveholder and a planter.'<sup>19</sup>

Contemporary with Calhoun was Francis Lieber, one of the most eminent intellectuals of his time. Sometimes saluted as a sort of Montesquieu redivivus, in correspondence and on respectful terms with de Tocqueville, he was doubtless a critic, if a cautious one, of the institution of slavery. He hoped it would wither away through its gradual transformation into a kind of servitude or semi-servitude on the autonomous initiative of the slaveholding states, whose right to self-government could not be questioned. That is why Lieber was also admired in the South, all the more so because he himself, albeit on a rather modest scale, owned and sometimes rented male and female slaves. When one of the latter died, following a mysterious pregnancy and subsequent abortion, he recorded in his diary the painful financial loss suffered: 'fully one thousand dollars—the hard labor of a year'.<sup>20</sup> New, painful economies were required to replace the deceased slave, because Lieber, unlike Calhoun, was not a planter and did not live off profits, but a university professor who essentially used slaves as domestic servants. Does this authorize us in including the first, rather than the second, in the liberal tradition? In any event, temporal distance plays no role here.

Let us now take a contemporary of Locke's. Andrew Fletcher was 'a champion of liberty' and, at the same time, 'a champion of slavery'.<sup>21</sup> Politically, he

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18 Maurice Cranston, *John Locke*, London: Longmans, 1959, pp. 114–15; Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997, pp. 199, 210.

19 Calhoun, *Union and Liberty*, p. 590.

20 Frank Freidel, *Francis Lieber*, Gloucester (MA): Peter Smith, 1968, pp. 278, 235–58.

21 Edmund S. Morgan, 'Slavery and Freedom: The American Paradox', *Journal of American History*, vol. LIX, no. 1, 1972, p. 11; cf. Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, p. 882 n. 9.

professed to be 'a republican on principle'<sup>22</sup> and culturally was 'a Scottish prophet of the Enlightenment'.<sup>23</sup> He too fled to Holland in the wake of the anti-Jacobite and anti-absolutist conspiracy, exactly like Locke, with whom he was in correspondence.<sup>24</sup> Fletcher's reputation crossed the Atlantic: Jefferson defined him as a 'patriot', whose merit was to have expressed the 'political principles' characteristic of 'the purest periods of the British Constitution'—those that subsequently caught on and prospered in free America.<sup>25</sup> Expressing positions rather similar to Fletcher's was his contemporary and fellow countryman James Burgh, who also enjoyed the respect of republican circles à la Jefferson,<sup>26</sup> and was mentioned favourably by Thomas Paine in the most celebrated opusculum of the American Revolution (*Common Sense*).<sup>27</sup>

Yet, in contrast to the other authors—though like them characterized by a peculiar tangle of love of liberty and legitimization or revindication of slavery—Fletcher and Burgh are virtually forgotten today, and no one seems to want to include them among exponents of the liberal tradition. The fact is that, in underlining the necessity of slavery, they were thinking primarily not of blacks in the colonies, but of the 'vagrants', the beggars, the odious, incorrigible rabble of the metropolis. Should they be regarded as illiberal for this reason? Were that to be the case, what would distinguish liberals from non-liberals would be not the condemnation of the institution of slavery, but only negative discrimination against peoples of colonial origin.

Liberal England presents us with another, different case. Francis Hutcheson, a moral philosopher of some significance (he was the 'never to be forgotten' master of Adam Smith),<sup>28</sup> on the one hand expressed criticisms and reservations about the slavery to which blacks were indiscriminately subjected. On the other hand, he stressed that, especially when dealing with the 'lower conditions' of society, slavery could be a 'useful punishment': it should be the 'ordinary

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22 Marx, *Capital: Volume One*, p. 882 n. 9.

23 Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, New York: Norton, 1995, p. 325.

24 Henry R. Fox Bourne, *The Life of John Locke*, 2 vols, Aalen: Scientia, 1969, vol. 1, p. 481; John Locke, *The Correspondence*, 8 vols, ed. Esmond S. De Beer, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976–89, vols 5–7, *passim*.

25 Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, New York: Library of America, 1984, p. 1134 (letter to the Earl of Buchan, 10 July 1803).

26 Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, p. 382; J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975, p. 528.

27 Thomas Paine, *Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner, New York: Library of America, 1995, p. 45 n.

28 Adam Smith, *Correspondence*, ed. Ernest Campbell Mossner and Ian Simpson Ross, Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987, p. 309 (letter to Archibald Davidson, 16 November 1787).

punishment of such idle vagrants as, after proper admonitions and tryals of temporary servitude, cannot be engaged to support themselves and their families by any useful labours'.<sup>29</sup> We are dealing with an author who, while evincing unease at hereditary, racial slavery, demanded a sort of penal slavery for those who, regardless of their skin colour, were guilty of vagrancy. Was Hutcheson a liberal?

Historically positioned between Locke and Calhoun, and with his focus precisely on the reality accepted by the two of them as obvious and indisputable, or even celebrated as a 'positive good', Adam Smith constructed an argument and expressed a position that warrants being cited at some length. Slavery could be more easily abolished under a 'despotic government' than a 'free government', with its representative bodies exclusively reserved in practice for white property-owners. In such circumstances, the condition of the black slaves was desperate: 'every law is made by their masters, who will never pass any thing prejudicial to themselves'. Hence '[t]he freedom of the free was the cause of the great oppression of the slaves ... And as they are the most numerous part of mankind, no human person will wish for liberty in a country where this institution is established.'<sup>30</sup> Can an author who, in at least one concrete instance, expressed his preference for 'despotic government' be regarded as liberal? Or, differently put, is Smith more liberal or are Locke and Calhoun, who, along with slavery, defended the representative bodies condemned by Smith as the prop, in a slaveholding society, of an infamous institution contrary to any sense of humanity?

In fact, as the great economist had foreseen, slavery was abolished in the United States not thanks to local self-government, but by the iron fist of the Union's army and the temporary military dictatorship imposed by it. For this Lincoln was accused by his opponents of despotism and Jacobinism. He resorted to 'military government' and 'military commissions' and interpreted 'the word "law"' as '[t]he will of the President' and habeas corpus as the 'power of the President to imprison whom he pleases, as long as he pleases'.<sup>31</sup> Together with representatives of the secessionist Confederacy, the drafters of this indictment were those who aspired to a compromise peace, for the purposes of returning to constitutional normality. And once again we are obliged to ask the

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29 David B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1966, pp. 374–9.

30 Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1982, pp. 452–3, 182.

31 Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, ed., *History of US Political Parties*, New York and London: Chelsea House and Bawker, 1973, pp. 915–21.

question: Is it Lincoln who is more liberal, or his adversaries in the South, or his opponents in the North who came out in favour of compromise?

We have seen Mill adopt a position in favour of the Union and condemn the '*soi-disant*' liberals who cried scandal over the energy with which it conducted the war against the South and kept at bay those who, in the North itself, were inclined to tolerate the slaveholders' secession. However, we shall see that, when he turned his attention to the colonies, the English liberal justified the West's 'despotism' over 'races' that were still 'under age', and who were obliged to observe an 'absolute obedience' in order to be set on the path of progress. This is a formulation that would not have displeased Calhoun, who likewise legitimized slavery by reference to the backwardness and nonage of populations of African origin. It was only in America, and thanks to the paternal care of white masters, that the 'black race' succeeded in progressing and making the transition from its previous 'low, degraded and savage condition' to 'its present comparatively civilized condition'.<sup>32</sup> In Mill's view, 'any means' were licit for those who took on the task of educating 'savage tribes'; 'slavery' was sometimes a mandatory stage for inducing them to work and making them useful to civilization and progress (see below, Chapter 7, §3). But this was also the opinion of Calhoun, for whom slavery was an unavoidable means if one wished to achieve the end of civilizing blacks. Certainly, by contrast with the permanent slavery which, according to the US theorist and politician, blacks must be subjected to, the pedagogical dictatorship Mill refers to was destined to disappear in the distant, uncertain future. But the other side of the coin is that now explicitly subjected to this condition of unfreedom was not a particular ethnic group (the fragment of Africa located at the heart of the United States), but all the peoples invested by the West's colonial expansion and forced to endure political 'despotism' and servile or semi-servile forms of labour. Is demanding 'absolute obedience', for an indeterminate period of time, from the overwhelming majority of humanity compatible with the liberal profession of faith? Or is it synonymous with '*soi-disant*' liberalism?

## **2. The American Revolution and the revelation of an embarrassing truth**

It is now clear that what primarily divides the authors mentioned up to this point is the problem of slavery. In one way or another, they all refer to the Britain deriving from the Glorious Revolution or the United States. These are

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32 Calhoun, *Union and Liberty*, p. 473.

two countries that for around a century were a single state entity and formed, as it were, a single political party. Prior to the crisis that led to the American Revolution, the British on both sides of the Atlantic felt themselves to be proud subjects or citizens of '[a] land, perhaps the only one in the universe, in which political or civil liberty is the very end and scope of the constitution'.<sup>33</sup> Thus Blackstone. To confirm his thesis, he referred to Montesquieu, who spoke of England as the 'one nation in the world whose constitution has political liberty for its direct purpose'.<sup>34</sup> Not even the French liberal doubted the fact that 'England is currently the freest country in the world, not discounting any republic': the 'free nation', the 'free people' par excellence.<sup>35</sup>

At this time, no dark clouds seemed to threaten relations between the two shores of the Atlantic. There were no conflicts and, according to Montesquieu at least, there could not be, because even in its relationship with the colonies what characterized England was its love of liberty:

If this nation sent colonies abroad, it would do so to extend its commerce more than its domination.

As one likes to establish elsewhere what is established at home, it would give the form of its own government to the people of its colonies; and as this government would carry prosperity with it, one would see the formation of great peoples, even in the forests to which it had sent inhabitants.<sup>36</sup>

In these years, the English colonists in America proudly identified with Blackstone's thesis that 'our free constitution', which 'falls little short of perfection', differed markedly 'from the modern constitutions of other states', from the political order of 'the continent of Europe' as a whole.<sup>37</sup>

This was the ideology with which the Seven Years' War was fought by the British Empire. The English colonists in America were the most determined in interpreting it as a clash between the 'supporters of freedom in the world'—the British 'sons of noble liberty', or defenders of Protestantism—and a 'cruel and oppressive' France—despotic politically, and follower of 'Roman bigotry'

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33 William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4 vols, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, vol. 1, p. 6.

34 Charles-Louis Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller and Harold Samuel Stone, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 156.

35 Charles-Louis Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Roger Caillois, Paris: Gallimard, 1949–51, vol. 1, p. 884; Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, pp. 243, 325.

36 Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, pp. 328–9.

37 Blackstone, *Commentaries*, vol. 1, pp. 122–3.

and Popery religiously. At the time, even the British Crown's transatlantic subjects liked to repeat with Locke that 'slavery' was 'directly opposite to the generous temper and courage of our nation'; it was utterly inconceivable for an 'Englishman'.<sup>38</sup> The French allegedly wanted to reduce the American colonists to a 'slavish subjection'. Fortunately, however, arriving to foil this attempt was Great Britain, '[t]he Mistress of the Nations—the grand Support of Liberty, the Scourge of Oppression and Tyranny!'<sup>39</sup>

It was an ideology that Edmund Burke sought to breathe new life into as late as 1775, in a desperate attempt to avoid the impending rupture. Presenting his motion of conciliation, he called upon people not to lose sight of, and not to sever, the ties that bound the American colonists to the mother country: what was at stake was a single 'nation' that shared 'the sacred temple consecrated to our common faith', the faith in 'liberty'. Largely unchallenged in countries like Spain or Prussia, slavery was 'a weed that grows in every soil' except the English. Accordingly, it was absurd to try to subdue the rebel colonists by force: 'An Englishman is the unfittest person on earth to argue another Englishman into slavery.'<sup>40</sup>

Obviously, the slavery referred to here is the one of which the absolute monarch is guilty. The other slavery, which shackles blacks, is passed over in silence. With the increasing inevitability of the revolution, or 'civil war' with all its 'horrors'<sup>41</sup>—as loyalists faithful to the Crown and British politicians in favour of compromise and preserving the unity of the English 'nation' and 'race'<sup>42</sup> preferred to call it—the picture changed markedly. The element of continuity is clear. Each of the two contending parties accused the other of wanting to reintroduce despotism, or political 'slavery'. The rebel colonists' charges are well known: they tirelessly denounced the tyranny of the British Crown and parliament, and their mad project of subjecting residents in America to a condition of 'perpetual bondage and slavery'.<sup>43</sup> But the response was not slow in coming. As early as 1773, a loyalist from New York had issued a warning: hitherto they had been 'watchful against *external* attacks on our freedom' (the

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38 Locke, *Two Treatises*, p. 3.

39 Janice Potter-Mackinnon, *The Liberty We Seek*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1983, pp. 115–16.

40 Edmund Burke, *The Works: A New Edition*, 16 vols, London: Rivington, 1826, vol. 3, pp. 123–4, 66.

41 Boucher, quoted in Anne Y. Zimmer, *Jonathan Boucher*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978, p. 153.

42 Burke, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 135.

43 Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 290.



reference is to the Seven Years' War), but now a much more insidious danger had emerged—that of 'becom[ing] *enslaved* by tyrants within'. Again in New York, another loyalist repeated the point two years later: the rebels aspired 'to make us worse than slaves'.<sup>44</sup> In polemicizing against one another, the two branches the liberal party had divided into adopted the ideology and rhetoric that had presided over the self-celebration of the English nation in its entirety, as the sworn enemy of political slavery.

The novel factor was that, in the wake of the exchange of accusations, the other slavery—the one both branches had repressed as a disruptive element in their proud self-consciousness as members of the people and party of liberty—burst into the polemics alongside political slavery. In the rebel colonists' view, the London government, which in sovereign fashion imposed taxation on citizens or subjects not represented in the House of Commons, was behaving like a master towards his slaves. But—objected the others—if slavery is the issue, why not start to discuss the slavery that is manifested in brutal, unequivocal form precisely where liberty is so passionately lauded? As early as 1764, Benjamin Franklin, in London at the time to plead the colonists' cause, had to face the sarcastic comments of his interlocutors:

You Americans make a great Clamour upon every little imaginary infringement of what you take to be your Liberties; and yet there are no People upon Earth such Enemies to Liberty, such absolute Tyrants, where you have the Opportunity, as you yourselves are.<sup>45</sup>

The self-styled champions of liberty branded taxation imposed without their explicit consent as synonymous with despotism and slavery. But they had no scruples about exercising the most absolute and arbitrary power over their slaves. This was a paradox: 'How is it', Samuel Johnson asked, 'that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from the drivers of negroes?' Across the Atlantic, those who sought to contest the secession ironized in similar fashion. Thomas Hutchinson, royal governor of Massachusetts, rebuked the rebels for their inconsistency or hypocrisy: they denied Africans those rights that they claimed to be 'absolutely inalienable' in the most radical way imaginable.<sup>46</sup> Echoing him was an American loyalist (Jonathan Boucher), who, having taken refuge in England, revisited the events that forced him into exile and observed: 'the most

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44 Potter-Mackinnon, *The Liberty We Seek*, p. 16.

45 Benjamin Franklin, *Writings*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay, New York: Library of America, 1987, pp. 646–7.

46 Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, London: Picador, 1999, p. 32.